

Your worst nightmare: 'no more water'

by Leslee Jaquette

■ Affected profoundly by a drought plaguing the Pacific Northwest, Washington state's top-rated golf course suffered at the hands of the El Niño weather pattern over the past two years.

Enduring a second hot summer in succession, Semiahmoo Golf and Country Club, located near the Canadian/U.S. border in Blaine, Wash., has had to pull the plug on watering. Beyond implementing a carefully orchestrated hand-watering campaign, Semiahmoo—rated three years in succession best course in Washington State and the 18th best resort course in the country by *Golf Digest*—has few major problems.

Superintendent Vance Much explains that last summer's drought was so severe that the City of Blaine turned the taps off for more than 30 days. The longest dry spell lasted 15 days, during which the city could spare no water for golf course maintenance.

While the Inn at Semiahmoo and its contiguous development own a three million gallon reservoir, the course still had to ration its allotment throughout the worst of the drought.

"We were forced to irrigate just the greens," says Much, who sighs when he recalls the over-abundant standing water during last February's rains. "We hand-

watered first the greens, then the tees and lastly the fairways."

While he admits to a certain level of

stress. Fortunately, he learned that while little rain may leave the course ravaged, the grass makes a sound comeback given



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anxiety over the health of the ever-browning course, Much notes that he was in an even greater sweat the preceding summer. During his first year as superintendent, the drought of 1994 produced tremendous

the moderating temperatures and inevitable rains of fall. In the end, Semiahmoo lost little turf.

Dry conditions give the ball more roll, and—as Much observes—"thirsty grass



tries harder." Forced into dormancy early, the grass sent down some deep roots that have served well for survival again this year.

Still, "it's been a labor intensive situation but good because we only put water where its needed," says Much. "Spot watering forces us to be practical."

Less is better—When water isn't the issue, Much's golf course maintenance team of 20 focuses on the care of a basically healthy course. Few pests prowl the rolling fairways and roughs, though crews spot-treat for the European crane fly in January and February on two of the resort's 150 acres.

Disease is also minimal, so the staff does not apply preventive controls. Instead, they prefer to scout test greens daily. If fusarium shows up in the fall, they will spray in order to prevent it from flourishing in the cool, wet weather. However, if it gets spotted in dry weather during the spring, the maintenance crew pretty much ignores the fusarium, preferring to let the sun run its course.

The crew uses organic fertilizers on demand as opposed to a schedule. "A calendar doesn't dictate when we spray," says Much. "We use slow-release fertilizers when our test sites indicate the need." Even then, Semiahmoo's crew restricts itself to light, frequent applications on greens, using 1 lb. of nitrogen every two weeks, supplementing with organics to reduce leaching.

In keeping with the course's status as a member of the Audubon Society Cooperative Sanctuary Program, crews spray no closer than 10 feet from all waterways.

Back to nature—Probably the biggest success of the Arnold Palmer-designed course is its commitment to returning land to the wild. Several years ago—before the course was Audubon certified—it demanded wall-to-wall maintenance. It was a labor-intensive, manicured course. Since then, approximately 1/10th of the course's area has been returned to natural grasses, wildflowers and reforestation.

In addition to attracting increased wildlife, this change decreases maintenance in terms of mowing and watering. Following program guidelines, Much saves up to 40 percent in chemical costs because they only spray once in the spring.

"The wild areas lend maturity to the course," he adds. "In some areas it looks like its been here 100 years."

Much notes more deer wander the



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course as well as increased numbers of bald eagle nest in course trees. Canada geese, great blue herons and skunks continue to maintain habitats in the wild sections of the course.

Over the past few years, the maintenance crew as well as landowners have put in about 50 birdhouses. Bats living in bat houses placed under the eaves of the pump station on hole No. 6 eat 3,000 mosquitos per hour, according to Much.

Interestingly, it wasn't the geese, skunks or bats that caused problems this spring. No...it was a lone mother redwing blackbird. Much says the female reportedly attacked several golfers when they approached her nest near the 18th green. "Someone said she even drew blood," reports Much.

Observing the birds' territoriality, Much called the Audubon Society for advice. Experts suggested the mother needed about a month to raise her young. Lo and behold, right on schedule, she desisted her aggression.

"We just sat it out and hoped no one got hurt," says Much with a smile.

More than 300 native trees including western cedar, western hemlock, Douglas fir and assorted maples have been planted to replace those removed for development and to augment the natural surroundings. These trees plus wildflowers and sequoias work well in this climatic area that receives 20 percent less rain than Seattle.

Despite the fact that Much's energies are focused around 70 percent administrative and 30 percent on the course, he inspects the course every day. In keeping

with his philosophy to be visible and involved, he mows occasionally, even on rainy days.

"I like to be out there working," reflects Much. "In fact, I'd love to be out there all the time!"

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