

Hills, weather play havoc with mowers

by LESLEE JAQUETTE

A J. Pratt finds that having all new equipment can be a problem: it wears out at the same time. He also says the difficult, hilly terrain of Chateau Whistler Golf Course puts much greater stress on the mowers and utility vehicles than if they were used on a flat course.

Pratt estimates the extra wear caused by hills decreases equipment lifespan by about a third. This year, he is looking at an investment of about \$300,000 in equipment through a combination lease/buy plan. About \$8,000 is earmarked to rebuild two fairway mowers and \$48,000 for two additional mowers while leasing two more.

Pratt hopes to reduce equipment wear by planting three acres of unplayable land with wildflowers.

He will also beautify out-of-play areas with rocks and native plants.

Unpredictable weather

The very elements that shape Chateau Whistler into one of Canada's premier courses—Pacific climate, mile-high mountains and unpredictable weather—are also the source of many other challenges.

Whistler is located at the base of Blackcomb Mountain in the resort town of Whistler, British Columbia. It was designed by Robert Trent Jones, Jr., who could do nothing about the Alpine-type weather.

"The winters are different every year, and the summers are volatile," says Pratt. "The weather can change in five minutes, so we have to be prepared."



As a result of annual and radical spring run-off, the course was built with drainage in mind. Beyond thousands of feet of underground pipe, two major creeks run through the course. Still, every year new drains are built to accommodate millions of gallons of water from rainfall and melting snow. And sub-surface drainage was extended on two holes last fall.

Pratt is looking at a new Rainbird Freedom irrigation system. A 300-foot change in elevation complicates irrigation, creating different weather patterns at varying points on the course. A comprehensive system with different weather stations, if it weren't too expensive, would have been nice. However, the Freedom System will give Pratt the expanded ability to adapt to abrupt changes in the weather.

"This way I will be able to call the computer and tell it we have a dry spot on one hole, so pull up the sprinkler heads and start the water," says Pratt. "At the same time, it may be snowing on number four and irrigation is unnecessary."

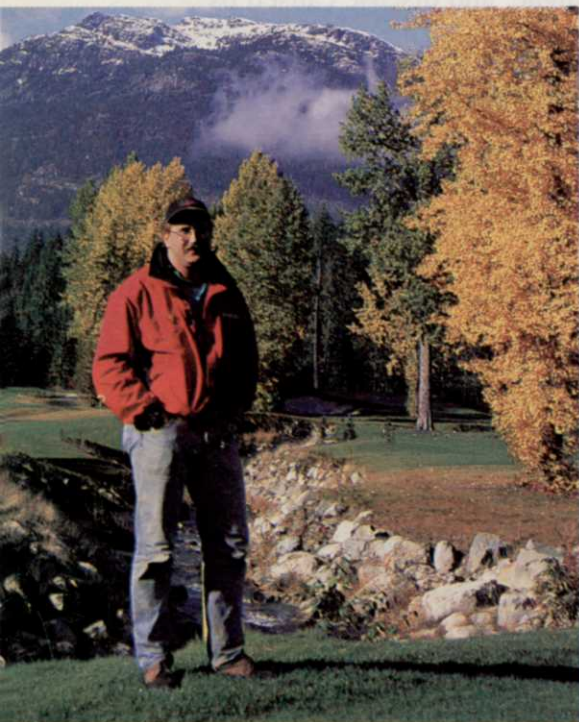
The fall season of 1994 is a good case in point. Pratt recalls the elegant, crisp, sunny October. It only made sense to keep the course open to accommodate guests and the public interest.

However, the maintenance staff was caught in the middle of winterizing activities, and an unusually early and heavy storm covered the course with three feet of snow on Halloween.

Then, heavy rain the following spring activated serious snow mold. Three greens had to be resodded and another 15 covered with tarp. The opening was delayed until June 1.

In the midst of all this craziness, Pratt's biggest challenge is to make sure his staff—some of whom have chosen careers in golf course maintenance—can learn as much as possible.

Weekly meetings allow workers to share their ups and downs, discuss what's happening at the course, and go over problems. **LM**



Let your workers know that every little contribution they can make is significant, says A.J. Pratt.