



Nature maintains much of links course

by Larry Kassell

Forty-two acres of low-maintenance fine fescue makes fairway care a breeze in the Nebraska heat.

This course is more than just a great place to play," says Corey Crandall, superintendent of Sand Hills Golf Course. "It's a real pleasure to maintain with its natural efficiencies and thoughtful design."

Sand Hills is an 18-hole private links facility that's not quite two years old. Located 60 miles north of North Platte, Neb. the course features private cottages, and—talk about out-of-the-way—the first tee is a mile from the clubhouse.

The Sand Hills look is largely a result of the workings of the weather. Wind, rain, snow and grazing animals have sculpted the course over time into a wide, rustic expanse, much like the Scottish links-style courses.

Very little earth was moved during construction. Some leveling and contouring were needed for the creeping bentgrass tees and greens, which average 5,500 to 6,000 square feet. Greens have a natural sand base; no gravel, tile or amendments were utilized. The 42 acres of low maintenance fine fescue fairways abut and compliment the native switchgrass, Sand Hills Blue Stem and Little Blue Stem, grama-grass and sunflowers.

Cool downs for heat stress

"The only irrigation is on tees, fairways and greens," says Crandall. "Our water is plentiful; it comes from an aquifer directly below us. Irrigation and precipitation is quickly absorbed by the sugar-sized sand granules below. With our heat and wind, the closely mowed areas dry up quickly, so we do a lot of cooling down during the day, plus watering at night. The native grasses regulate themselves and could get out of control if we applied water."

The 10 to 13-member maintenance crew is comprised of men and women. During summer vacation, high school students average 45 hours a week during heavy play. When they return to school, local ranch workers replace them.

"Many have to travel several miles to work here, and some have never played golf because ranch life is more important to them," says Crandall. "We have to teach them about mowers, heights of cut, mowing patterns; then the difference between tees, fairways, greens and collars. My assistant, Josh Mahar, will select pin placement and change the cups almost every day. Meanwhile our employees hand mow greens at 1/8-inch and collars at 3/8-inch."

Sand Hills is a treeless golf course. There are no water hazards, bunker rakes, ball washers or out-of-bounds areas.

"It's pretty much 'what you see is what you get,'" says Crandall. It's not unusual to play out of an animal or golfer footprint in a bunker. The crew does, however, rake washed bunkers after a severe storm.

▲ The links look is emphasized at Sand Hills. No ball washers, no signs, no rakes.

"Members have a 16 handicap or less. If a player misses a fairway or green, there's little chance of recovery from the tall, thick native vegetation.

"Probably the most difficult part of course construction was the cart paths," says Crandall. "It was necessary to bring in clay and gravel to stabilize the sand base. We chose this method over asphalt or concrete to retain the natural sand color. We allow carts to cross fairways, but they're not allowed in the extreme roughs. Fairways were seeded and cultipacked with a mixture of Oregon-grown chewings and creeping fescue varieties that performed well in our area."

The Sand Hills fairways are mowed at a half-inch with a 5-plex fairway mower. So far, the fine fescues have lived up to their reputation of being a very low maintenance turfgrass with low fertility requirements (1 1/4 pounds of N per year) and very heat and drought tolerant.

"If a spot does dry out on the fairway, we give it some water and it comes right back," says Crandall. "We experienced some winterkill this spring, so we seeded in some annual ryegrass as a nurse crop with our fine fescue. We expect all the annual rye to be gone next season. A balance is necessary to keep the various types of vegetation from encroaching on each other.

"Deer can be destructive to greens when they stop to feed on the turf, but we've learned to peacefully co-exist." **LM**