

Grass and beyond

As galleries grow with more spectators and the media's demands increase at major tournaments, superintendents find themselves being stretched beyond being 'just' great turfgrass managers.

by RON HALL/ Managing Editor

Winged Foot Country Club hosts the 1997 PGA Championship in August. In 1984 this venerable course just north of New York City was the site of the U.S. Open.

Veteran superintendent Robert Alonzi says the biggest difference between the two events, separated by 13 years, can be explained in a single word—size. Everything is so much bigger now.

Professional golf tournaments, because of their visibility and popularity, now require incredible coordination and logistical support. PGA people arrived at the Tillinghast-designed course almost a year before the tournament to begin organizing committees and subcommittees.

"Growing grass is secondary to most of us," says Alonzi. "But everything else has grown to such large proportions."

So, in addition to making roughs challenging enough and greens fast enough, superintendents at courses hosting major tournaments must also help prepare areas for the huge influx of spectators, corporate sponsors and media.

For instance, Alonzi says the media tent at the 1997 PGA Championship will be about 30,000 square feet, three times larger than it was for the U.S. Open in 1984. The corporate tents have likewise grown several times larger, and will probably be 30,000 square feet also.

The tents will probably have to be erected on Winged Foot's East Course. The East Course was used for parking for the 1984 U.S. Open, but that

didn't work out too well, remembers Alonzi. Only players, caddies and media will be allowed to park at Winged Foot for the PGA Championship, believes Alonzi. Others, including spectators will park offsite and be shuttled by bus to the tournament.

Much of Alonzi's attention prior to the tournament will be directed at the "corridors" on the course, and developing a plan to ease the flow of spectators. Planning for the placement of television towers and bleachers. Checking for things like hazard tree limbs.

The course itself, barring something unforeseen, should be in tournament condition. It is most of the season anyway, says Alonzi.

Bigger concerns include gaining the understanding of Winged Foot's 700 neighbors, and the cooperation of the many nearby small communities.

"Westchester County has really shown great support for the tournament," says Alonzi. A tournament that's grown so large that the local power company won't be able to meet its needs, and extra generators will have to be used.

Unlike Winged Foot that hosts periodic major tournaments, some courses host annual tour events. Their concerns can be different.

Several years ago when Amy Alcott blistered the Nabisco Dinah Shore Tournament at Mission Hills Country Club, LPGA officials complained that the Rancho Mirage, Calif., course wasn't challenging enough. That was addressed, says superintendent David Johnson, by narrowing some of the fairways to 28

yards wide. He also started fertilizing the roughs prior to the annual event so that the grass would be four to five inches instead of two inches.

"It went over real big with the ladies and they seemed to be happy with the tougher conditions," says Johnson, superintendent for eight LPGA tournaments at Mission Hills.

Johnson says he was expecting LPGA officials to



Robert Alonzi and Winged Foot CC hosting '97 PGA.

to give him "a little booklet" describing what conditions it wanted when he prepared the course for his first Dinah Shore event eight years ago. But the tour tells you what it wants—it's your job to figure out how to get it done, he says.

"As a superintendent, you can't always adjust things at the last minute," adds Johnson.

Cal Roth is director of golf maintenance operations Tournament Player Courses (TPCs). He works for the PGA Tour Golf Course Properties, a network of TPCs. This month Sugarloaf in Atlanta, the 14th TPC, opens. TPCs will host 13 PGA or Senior PGA events during 1997.

Roth works closely with agronomists and visits sites prior to major tournaments. He meets with superintendents at these courses to set standards for such specifics as green speeds and mowing heights.

In many cases the superintendents do not have to change much because they maintain their courses at championship standards throughout the season anyway. The most common change, says Roth, generally is mowing frequency. If the greens need more speed they're mowed in the evenings and again in the morning, for instance.

Roth says there is no single template in advising superintendents prior to tournaments. He says the PGA recognizes the uniqueness of each course.

"Each facility (course) is set up independent of the rest of them. Green speeds are adjusted to the types of grass on the course and the time of the year," says Roth. "A week before the tournament we usually start around 10 (stimpmeter reading), and then we adjust it to the site. It could be 11 one week, 10.6 the next because of conditions."



David Johnson made Mission Hills CC a challenge.



Cal Roth gets TPC sites ready for busy 1997.

A representative of the LPGA visits Moon Valley Country Club, Phoenix, three months prior to that club hosting the Standard Register Ping Tournament. That person meets with superintendent Paul McGinnis to talk about matters like which trees should be trimmed, bunker conditioning, and height of cut.

Since Moon Valley hosts the event annually, McGinnis has a good idea what to expect. He generally doesn't change Moon Valley's maintenance schedule that much other than to mow the fairways from 2

a.m. to 6 a.m. That gives his crew time to drag or vacuum the clippings off. Also his crew rolls the greens to make them faster.

"Once the tournament starts, the maintenance of the golf course is in the morning," says McGinnis.

One recurring problem when hosting a professional tournament is the mood of the club membership. As a rule, not all members are happy about not being able to golf at their club for a week even if it does mean hosting a major event.

McGinnis tries to lessen this by preparing Moon Valley for a major ladies "guest day" the Monday following the LPGA tournament. Also, in May he prepares the course for a special men's invitational event. "We try

to provide the same preparations as we would for the (LPGA) event," he says.

Alonzi, McGinnis, Johnson and Roth made these comments at a press conference during the GCSAA Conference this past February in Las Vegas. □