



Prairiegrass makes Merit Club a 'natural'

Management is the key to blending prairie into a championship-caliber course in Chicagoland area.

By RON HALL/ Managing Editor

More than 20 million acres of prairies greeted the first European settlers to what is now Illinois. The prairies shrank rapidly after John Deere in Grand De-tour, Ill., invented the self-scouring, steel-bladed plow. Settlers used the plow to turn

the vast grasslands into crop-land. Today, only 2,000 acres of the original Illinois prairies remain, says Kenneth R. Robertson of the Illinois Natural History Survey.

A group of farsighted individuals reversed the trend near Libertyville, IL. They worked as a team to recreate prairies within a championship-caliber

golf course, the Merit Club. The property also contains about 35 acres of protected wetlands and 40 acres of savannah containing mostly oak, hickory and linden.

Previously, the 500-acre Bert A. Getz estate, had been a farm. But Getz didn't want the land developed—not in the traditional sense anyway.

Instead, he convinced Ed Oldfield, former golf director at the Glen View Club, to assist him in planning a golf course. Oldfield convinced golf course architect Bob Lohman and veteran superintendent Oscar Miles to join the team.

Together they created one of Chicagoland's most unique and scenic golf courses. Meanwhile, Getz dedicated the 325 acres inside the golf course to the Core Lands Group and its Open Lands Project so that it would remain a perpetual green site.

Getz began building the Merit Club team in 1989, and the golf course opened for play on July 4, 1992. Ever since, it's been up to veteran superinten-

dent Oscar Miles to maintain the Merit Club's tees, greens and fairways, and also its natural prairies.

"The prairies make the course look natural so that when a person plays each hole, it's defined by the prairies," explains Miles. "Only three holes have native woods on them."

Maintaining a prairie is not an easy task, says Miles, not even with his 35-plus years of experience maintaining golf courses. It's an enjoyable challenge though.

"I was real fortunate here," says Miles. "When this course was being developed I was brought on the site to help prepare the budget and do the grassing plan with the architect and the course designer. Our goal was to do the course right the first time so we didn't have to do it over."

While the basic features of the course have remained intact since the course opened for play over four years ago, its prairies have not. Miles learned—and has come to appreciate—that prairies change



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Starting a prairie not cheap

So you want to grow a prairie on areas of your golf course? Make sure your budget can cover it. To start one acre of prairie, Oscar Miles, superintendent at the Merit Club, Libertyville, IL, offers these estimates of material costs:

Quantity	Product	Cost
2 qts	glyphosate	\$25
44 lbs.	IDOT native prairiegrass mix	\$114
44 lbs.	sheeps fescue	\$90
11 ozs.	IDOT native forbs mix	\$166
5.5 lbs.	wildflower mix	\$127
440 lbs.	6-24-24 starter fertilizer	\$75
880 lbs.	woodfiber mulch	\$229

The total cost for materials is about \$926 per acre, says Miles, but the real cost will approach \$2,000 per acre when you factor in the cost of labor and equipment.

Most of the above costs are one-time, explains Miles. Many prairie plants produce their own seed once they're established. (IDOT is Illinois Department of Transportation.)



The prairie at the Merit Club isn't very attractive after its annual burn, but as spring arrives the tall grasses and wildflowers become a beautiful background for the Merit Club's golfers, most of whom walk the course.



about \$6000.

"You can't just put the grass and wildflowers out and expect them to take over. It's going to take work to get rid of the competition and do additional seeding to enhance the area to make it become what you're visualizing," says

Miles.

In March, workers, use a 15-foot rotary and a 72-inch mower to cut the 6- and 7-foot tall prairie grasses down to six inches. Miles wants the cut material to lay on the ground to get a more controlled burn. Since the club has always worked closely with the village of Gurnee, it has no trouble getting a permit to annually burn the approximately 75 acres of prairie on the course. The permit costs \$75.

Workers take precautions to make sure the burn stays controlled, including initiating smaller preliminary burns a day or so before the big burn. Also, a two-man crew stands by and mans a 300-gallon sprayer with 200 feet of hose during the burn. The burn rids the prairie of woody invaders like cottonwood and black willow saplings. Because the prairie grasses develop such deep roots (often 10 feet deep or more), and because their growing points are below ground, they're not harmed.

Miles has been careful to keep the tall-grass prairies out of play ("unless you're really wild"), and planted a blend of dwarf turf-type tall fescues and wildflowers in areas separating the playing areas and the prairies.

"Some of these grasses, big bluestem, Indiangrass and switchgrass, are beautiful, but they're so tall you don't want them in an area where you're going to play. You have to keep them in the background or over on the side," he says.

The crew at the Merit Club isn't hesitant to give Mother Nature a hand in keeping the prairies beautiful and ever changing, particularly areas surrounding tees and greens. After a burn, for instance, the crew will hand seed wildflower seeds in open spaces between clump grasses. Because there are usually fissures in the soil, the seeds germinate in the cracks.

Miles says he learns something new about prairies every day, and adjusts their management to what he's learned. He also listens carefully to what members are saying about the prairies. When they have good suggestions, he acts on them.

"Most of our golfers here love it and brag about it," says Miles. "They know it's a real treat to walk this course."

Established prairies don't need any additional nitrogen or irrigation. These practices promote too much green growth.

Miles has also learned that prairies need large areas. "If a prairie planting is too small, it doesn't work. It looks too man-made and forced." □

and evolve. They don't require the level of care he provides the Merit Club's fine turf, but they do require maintenance.

Fortunately, he has a separate budget for prairie management, some of which pays for a crew of four or five workers to walk the prairies on the course several weeks each June and chop down weeds before they flower and go to seed. The weeds are piled, taken away and burned. Miles says it costs



Superintendent Oscar Miles says prairies sometimes need help.