

Sahalee

IS PGA PRIMED



Learn how this club in the Pacific Northwest used topdressing and upgraded its irrigation and bunkers to land the 1998 PGA Championship.

By LESLEE JAQUETTE

Microsoft put Redmond, WA, on the map. This August Sahalee Country Club, the site of the 1998 PGA Championship, will further enhance Redmond's reputation as a trend-setting Seattle suburb.

A private, 27-hole, "golfers" club, Sahalee not only defines quality golf in the Pacific Northwest but the club's landscape falls under constant scrutiny and modification. By committing to "nothing but the best" since the club's opening in 1969, membership has in actuality been preparing for this event for three decades.

While continuing a normal, rigorous maintenance schedule, Sahalee Superintendent Tom Wolff and Assistant Superintendent Rich Taylor have stepped up a number of programs to enhance the course beyond PGA specifications. Over the past seven years they have managed a number

of special programs that include: fairway topdressing, irrigation system replacement, bunker renovations and tree trimming as well as tee leveling and over-seeding roughs.

Still, says Taylor, "we feel the course is in good condition and we didn't have to do anything out of the normal. The tournament isn't a far stretch because we make continuous improvements. The PGA hasn't demanded very much and, in fact, it has been a totally cooperative effort in terms of maintenance."

In 1990 a local agronomist, Dr. Roy Goss, helped members visualize what an aggressive fairway top-dressing program could accomplish. Goss suggested that Sahalee, designed by Ted Robinson and located on the Sammamish Plateau about 20 miles from Seattle, could develop beyond a soggy, shoe-eating course to a beach model. While water would still exist, the sand would eventually build up, allowing

winter players to walk the course without wearing hipwaders.

After a successful trial of topdressing wet areas in fairways and roughs, membership budgeted two years with topdressing as the club's top maintenance focus. Tackling priority areas that made up about 30 percent of the fairways, the staff top-dressed a quarter of an inch of sand every 7 to 10 days during the summer growing season of May through September. Using 5,000 tons of sand a year those first two years (30,000 tons to date), the course was raised one inch by the end of 1992.

Despite the program's success, the membership wearied of the weekly sanding. Wolff notes, "each divot became a political nightmare," to the point that the topdressing program was modified to once in the spring and once in the fall over the entire course. Despite the slowdown, Taylor reports that these days the program



Fulltime members of Superintendent Tom Wolff's staff average seven years experience at Sahalee Country Club near Seattle.

Sahalee's only fear a wet June

Sahalee Country Club Golf Course Superintendent Tom Wolff and Assistant Superintendent Rich Taylor have one fear about hosting the 1998 PGA tournament in Redmond, Wash. "A wet June!"

If the Northwest enjoys an all-to-typical rainy June, it will make it just that much harder for the course to sustain "TV perfection" in the face of move-in and construction. With an economic impact of \$60 million to the region, the supers' fears are well founded.

While the weather is beyond their control, their management style is comfortable and successful by the looks of the course and the lack of employee turnover. Of the 21 full-time, year-around staff, one employee has been working at the course for 17 years; the average runs around seven years.

Capitalizing on complimentary styles, the two superintendents see their employees as

clients and the goal is to continue to engender loyalty, responsibility and career development. By rejecting the "boss" mentality and nurturing education and cross-training, everyone simply does their job. "With our solid, experienced crew we can run on autopilot," says Taylor, who admits Sahalee does not pay the highest wages in the area. "It also helps when it comes to training new people."

For the most part Wolff, who has been superintendent for nine years, operates on a "laid-back" philosophy. He is soft-spoken, a natural empowerer who teaches by example. "I believe in letting people do their job, give them the tools and let's all take responsibility," says Wolff.

Taylor manages the crew and admits to being a bit of a perfectionist. Both superintendents also admit they have a hard time playing golf for focusing on maintenance issues. However, the crew consists of excellent golfers who are invited to use the course three days a week.

In addition to this perk, staff takes great pride in the continual development inherent in the club. As professionals they enjoy challenges, new projects and an open invitation at the club's cost to participate in further education through seminars and community college programs. "Education isn't an extra, it's a continuing endeavor and our employees embrace the opportunity," says Taylor.

—LJ

still works with priority areas measuring four inch accumulation and others up two inches. Another huge benefit of the program has been an increase in the root zone such that the course hosts stronger plants and sees improved growing conditions.

Wolff recalls years ago during the PGA's first visit to Sahalee, a representative asked what was contained in the green boxes scattered about the course. Wolff gulped. The boxes held the original irrigation system's sprinkler valves, an obvious eyesore as well as a nuisance to playability. In an effort to demonstrate the old system's weaknesses, irrigation supervisor Scott Larson filmed a video to show the membership examples of how the heads were off-spaced. Conversely, the video showed how a more modern system works in terms of coverage and control. In response to the PGA query and the video, the members initiated a year-long, irrigation replacement program in 1990, installing

a Toro Network 8000.

A third project stimulated by the upcoming PGA Tournament was a bunker renovation on the north and south nines. The last nine will be finished after the August event. Wolff recalls that upon evaluation, the PGA only required that Sahalee change the contaminated sand out of the

The goal was to bring the bunkers closer to the greens to enhance play.

bunkers. Still, in keeping with the standards of the course, members decided a complete renovation was in order.

Redesigned by Rees Jones and installed



Members were apprehensive when workers began trimming and removing some trees, but they're happy with the results.

in 1996, the bunkers were moved much closer and grass was rolled down more on the green side. The bunkers were kept as deep as possible. Continuing an "aesthetics first" priority, Wolff admits the new bunkers are just as high maintenance as the old ones. Staff still hand rakes and hand trims the new bunkers, which are all now filled with tan bunker sand from Ravensdale, WA.

The bunker redesign entailed tree trimming and further landscaping. For the redesign to be successful and decrease tree litter from the courses' forests of 50-year-old cedars, firs and hemlocks, many trees demanded trimming, root removal or complete removal. At first members were skeptical about limbing up, but the results have received good reviews. Now the trees show increased contrast with more bark showing, the fairways receive more sun and spectator viewing is improved.

Over the past few years in keeping with Sahalee's Northwest woodland style, the maintenance staff of 21 fulltime (40 in the summer) is adding 84 large landscaped areas. Using no bulbs, annuals or wildflowers but rhododendrons, azaleas and heather, these gardens demand tremendous attention in terms of weeding and raking.

In addition, in preparation for the PGA Championship the staff has been occupied with an in-house, tee-leveling project. Undersized to begin with, the tees will all be leveled and expanded by summer. The process involves lifting off the sod, expand-



The Sahalee preparation has been a totally cooperative effort.

ing and leveling the tees, checking drainage and relaying the sod.

During the past two years the staff has overseeded the roughs to meet PGA requirements. In both September of 1996 and 1997, the crew spread 300 pounds per acre of a three-way blend of rye grasses. Next spring another 300 pounds will be spread in an attempt to increase the consistency and density of the roughs to a 3.5 to 4-inch cut. Despite this seed blitz, Wolff and Taylor are still concerned balls will get lost in the roughs. □

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