

Recapturing PGA magic

How superintendent Mark Wilson and his staff plan to make Valhalla Country Club a site worthy of its second PGA Championship in five years.

By RON HALL/Managing Editor

Valhalla Golf Club bustles with activity for its second ever PGA Championship—and the tournament is still two full years away! The 13-year-old Club, located on a quiet country road just east of Louisville, KY, hosted the event in August 1996, and it will again in August 2000.

"I told my crew that I'm excited because I feel

pare—both its golf course and its facilities—for the huge galleries and the incredible media scrutiny of a Major.

Wilson and his crew—indeed, the entire club staff—want to leave as little to chance as possible in making their second PGA Championship every bit as successful as their first.

A big success

That 1996 event, played in near perfect conditions, showcased an immaculately groomed Valhalla that brought out the best of the world's best golfers. In that tournament, Mark Brooks broke the hearts of many Kentuckians in the gallery when he sank a 4-foot putt on the first playoff hole and finished off Kenny Perry, from nearby Franklin, KY. The Kentuckian had driven into the rough on the first playoff hole giving Brooks the opening he needed.

About 30,000 spectators stood shoulder-to-shoulder along the mounded, 540-yard 18th to witness the finish, and more are expected in 2000.

"The thing that strikes you is when you stand outside the club house and see the television towers and the helicopters flying over, and everybody being interviewed," says Valhalla General Manager Mike Montague. "You realize at that point that it's a little bit too late to fix anything. If you know where you want to be in August of 2000, you have to start doing it now."

Valhalla, and particularly the golf course maintenance crew, scored a virtual touchdown hosting its first PGA Championship. But, then again, Mother Nature smiled on Louisville all the 1996 season, concedes Wilson, a vigorous, friendly man who's seemingly always on the move within the

440-acre golf club.

"The golf course was so good that I sat here and wondered, how in the world did we do that?" he says almost wistfully. "It was one of those years where everything that we did worked."

As an example, less than two months before the tournament he seeded a large spectator parking area



The maintenance staff at Valhalla will concentrate on improving the roughs for the 2000 PGA.

like our preparations for the tournament really begin this fall," says Mark Wilson, CGCS, now in his 11th year at Valhalla.

The PGA Championship is one of the so-called "Majors" along with The Masters, The U.S. Open, and the British Open. These are golf's premiere annual tournaments. A host club needs months to pre-

with bermudagrass. Mother Nature obliged even then. "We got some rain and the bermuda took off," he recalls.

Conditions can change

The Eastern Kentucky University graduate is not counting on such wonderful cooperation from the fates in the year 2000. In fact, this season keeps reminding him that conditions can change, and fast.

"This year's been difficult," he says. "We had a very mild winter. It started raining in the winter and it seemed like it wouldn't stop and we had lots of weed and disease pressure. We couldn't get the pre-emergent down just right; the roughs aren't nearly as good as we'd like them."

While the presence of weeds in his fescue roughs is disconcerting, and the Club's wildflower areas didn't pop with as much color as he would have liked (he's considering sterilizing some of these areas with Basamid and replanting wild flowers, perhaps even annually), the course itself is in good shape. Even so, there's plenty to do.

Late this summer he and his crew began attacking bentgrass encroachment in the intermediate roughs lining the Pennway fairways. He estimates that he and his crew will take out and resod a total of about three acres of contaminated bluegrass.

"The guys were kind of worried about that much resodding, but we'll probably only do about 500 yards a week on the front nine and 250 yards a week on the back nine," says Wilson. "When you put it in that context, that's not a lot of sod."

Greens being improved

Thinking even more long-term, Wilson last season began improving Valhalla's Penncross greens; but gradually. He planted and carefully evaluated several of the newest bentgrass varieties in his 10,000 sq. ft. turf nursery. For comparison's sake, he established them beside the strongest bentgrass plants he gathered from the course's segregated Penncross greens.

Wilson realizes that he can't completely rebuild or strip Valhalla's greens; the Club is open to its 230 members year-round. Instead, he's been inter-seeding the greens with Penn G-2.

Several factors will determine the success of this changeover, he believes: failure to be aggressive enough in the process, timing of the seeding (about



Mark Wilson takes a well-deserved breather with his friend "Chase," one of the regulars at the Valhalla Golf Club maintenance building.

the third week of September for Louisville), and competition from existing turf. Proper preparation is crucial, he says.

The first step is to purposely thin Valhalla GC's Penncross greens. His crew will do this by lowering the height of cut and frequency. (Typically the greens are mowed at less than .125 inch.) They will also be rolling the greens. Then, about three days prior to seeding, Primo is applied to the greens, 2/10th ounce per 1000 sq. ft.

The actual renovation process involves verticutting the green two ways, then aerifying twice with half-inch tines. He then mixes the Penn G-2 seed with Milorganite in a cement mixer, and makes one application of the mixed seed/fertilizer. After top-dressing, brushing and spiking the greens, he seeds a second time. Then the green is gone over with vibratory roller, followed by the third and final application of fertilizer/seed, a total of 1 lb. of bentgrass seed per 1,000 sq. ft. The process takes about two days, he says.

After the seeding, the greens are kept moist, and aren't mowed for about a week. The bentgrass seedlings grow rapidly after being fertilized once a



Mark Wilson says that Valhalla GC is not heavily bunkered, but the 41 sand traps—including one new one—are strategically placed to capture the errant shot.

PGA highlights

Privately developed, the Valhalla Golf Club is now partly owned by the PGA of America, headquartered in Palm Beach Gardens, FL. Superintendent Mark Wilson says one of his crews most important tasks in hosting the PGA Championship will be establishing areas for the hospitality and media tents, for parking, and providing other logistical support in anticipation of the huge galleries.

Besides its Championship and Senior Championship, the PGA is responsible for the Ryder Cup, golf's premiere international tournament, and PGA member tournaments. Here are some PGA highlights:

1916, PGA of America formed.

1916, First PGA Championship at Siwanoy Country Club in Bronxville, NY, and won by British-born professional Jim Barnes.

1920s-30s, Walter Hagen wins 5 PGA Championships.

1940, Byron Nelson defeats Sam Snead PGA crown.

1942, Snead holes 60-foot chip shot for birdie on 35th hole and PGA crown.

1980 Jack Nicklaus wins fifth PGA crown, ties Walter Hagen.

1999 PGA Championship at Medinah Country Club, Medinah, IL.

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So far, so good

"I'm not sure how successful I've been so far," admits Wilson. "Our greens have been fine so far this year. Even if it isn't as successful as we'd like, it'll still be a good renovation program. You've got to tear up the bentgrass once in while because bentgrass has a tendency to get thatchy and puffy."

Next summer, Wilson and his crew (14 fulltime, 6 part-timers, and 6 or 7 interns) will begin fine-tuning the course's 41 bunkers, and making whatever other major final preparations the course will need.

Wilson sees himself as being both a leader and a mentor or coach. He seems to be confident enough of his abilities to delegate day-to-day responsibilities to three assistant superintendents.

"My job as a superintendent also means I'm a personnel manager, purchasing agent, and public relation expert," says Wilson. "I'm the orchestrator, and try to bring it all together. But sometimes I'm a substitute too, and I have to fill in with the daily chores."

Wilson says preparing for a major tournament like a PGA Championship is stressful, but it's a great motivator too.

"If I could package the excitement that flows through our crew just before and during the tournament I would be a millionaire," adds Wilson. "For me and my crew it's like being in the that state Little League Championship we never got a chance to play in.

"Actually, I guess hosting a PGA Championship is like being in a World Series Championship." □