

Fighting the Muni Blues

Rancho Park Overcomes Bureaucracy



Maintenance crews can't stop to wait for golfers to putt or tee off. A careful public relations program is applied to involve golfers in the condition of the course.

The opponent is the stereotype of a municipal golf course so bogged down by bureaucracy, unmotivated employees and dwindling budget that the fairways are turning to dust.

Ken Novak is a fighter. He's part of a team of fighters in the Pacific Region of the Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation. The opponent is the stereotype of a municipal golf course so bogged down by bureaucracy, unmotivated employees and dwindling budget that the fairways are turning to dust.

Novak is the superintendent of Rancho Park Golf Complex in Los Angeles, site of the Los Angeles Open many times. It happens to be adjacent to the elite Hillcrest Country Club and across the street from 20th Century Fox headquarters. Real estate in the area sells by the foot not by the acre so the 132 acres occupied by one 18-hole course and one nine-hole pitch and putt are priceless.

Rancho Park was constructed in the late '30s as a private course. During World War II, the course fell on hard times like many golf courses in the country. In 1948, the Los Angeles Park System took the course over. Park staff did all the necessary redesign work to update the course; there was no big name golf course architect involved. Mature trees tower over the old clay greens which are 80 percent *Poa annua* and 20 percent bentgrass. Fairways are entirely kikuyugrass.

The first sign Rancho Park doesn't fit the stereotype is the amount of construction going on all over the course. Three greens are under construction with three new alternate greens taking their place. Tees are being expanded, a contour mowing program for

the fairways has been initiated and sand traps are being added. Plans include rebuilding four to six greens per year and installing a completely new irrigation system. Instead of cutting back, Novak has increased the mowing frequency, expanded his herbicide and fungicide programs and is starting a sod nursery on the course. Has someone forgotten to tell him municipal courses can't afford such improvements? When will he have to face reality?

The reality is golf is the largest revenue producer in the Los Angeles Park System. The reality is a foursome tees off every six minutes on Rancho Park and tee times are booked solid from 5 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. every day. An average of five tournaments are played on the course each week. Golfers, noticing the improvements, are starting to call Rancho Park—Hillcrest West. The crew hears all kinds of "attaboys" from golfers every day. It may be a public course but to these golfers it feels like a private golf club.

The Los Angeles Park Department has 13 municipal golf courses in three regions. Together they generate \$6 million in use fees each year. General manager James Hadaway saw golf as one of the best ways to increase park system revenues. To protect the golf courses from a restricted tax base, Hadaway decided part of each golfer's greens fee should be earmarked for capital improvements and returned to the courses. He saw this not as a gift, but as an investment to increase rounds played.



Ken Novak runs an aggressive rebuilding program at Rancho Park without closing the course to play.

Rancho Park now has \$50,000 more per year as a result and is using it frugally to renovate greens and tees. Where a private course might spend \$50,000 to rebuild two greens, Novak builds between four and six. The trick is a combination of group purchasing and labor from court referrals and welfare. When 13 courses buy as a group, and then only through a bid process, the savings are substantial. Novak uses every trick in the book to stretch his \$125,000 budget and he also targets each dollar to go where golfers will notice it the most.

The courses take advantage of people who must perform public service for court offenses or as part of California's Work Fair program. This important group of workers help the city save money by their efforts. Three of them liked working at Rancho Park so much they studied, took the required written and oral exams, and were later hired for the course crew.

The Los Angeles Open is a premiere golf event. Eighteen times the course had been chosen for the site of the tournament. The course, rated a par 71.2, was no pushover. Arnold Palmer took a 12 on the 17th hole during one LA Open and a plaque on the tee reminds both golfers and Palmer of that day.

Regional golf director Steve Ball knew the history of Rancho Park since he had been the superintendent there before Novak. Both knew Rancho Park could attract more golfers and increase revenues for the city if the course was carefully renovated.

When the decision was made to renovate the course regular golfers were asked what they liked and didn't like about the course. Novak says the golfers strongly voiced their concern over any major changes in the course. "Rancho Park golfers are very attached to this course and speak out as if it is a private course and they are the members. They wanted to make sure we didn't break the rich tradition of the course by mas-

continued on page 22

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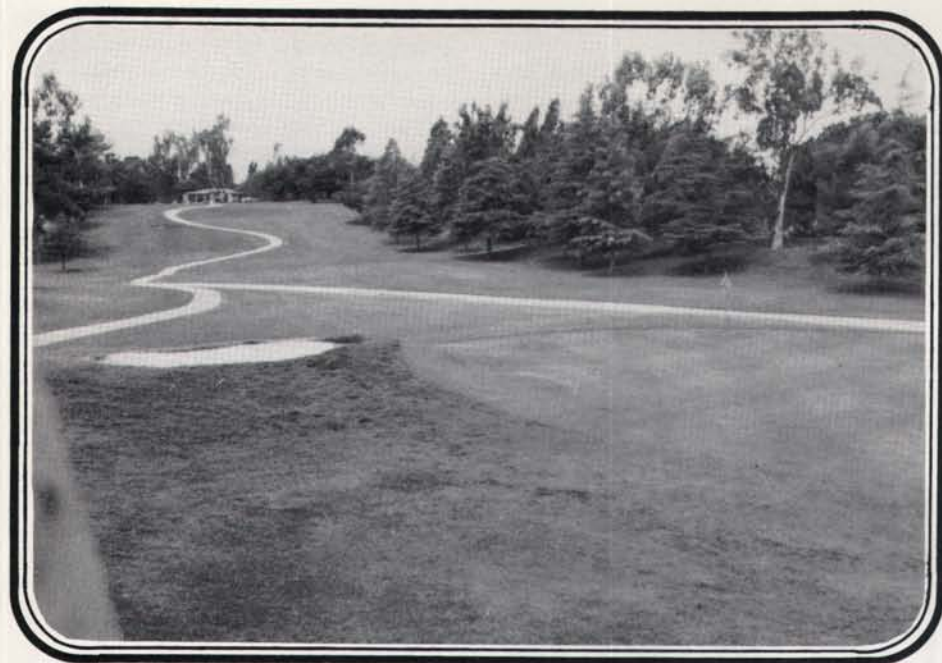
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Cart paths were installed three years ago to control turf damage by carts.

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continued from page 21

sive reconstruction. That tradition is firmly fixed in their minds when they play the course and adds to the challenge. They wanted the greens just like they were and no trees removed."

The problem would be helping the course withstand the tremendous traffic it already had in addition to the wear caused by more golfers.

Novak first focused on cart paths and greens. "Out of 400 rounds per day, more than 100 use carts," he states. "Cart traffic was causing severe damage which forced us to resod certain areas every spring. Three years ago cart paths were added to the worst areas but we still have some problem spots.

"Our biggest concern was the old clay greens. They would get light spots which looked like chemical spills. They turned out

to be the result of severe compaction. During the summer we have a crew which hand waters the greens in the afternoons to keep the *Poa* from wilting. This, combined with the large number of rounds and the clay soil, caused the compaction problem. We knew we had to convert the greens to United States Golf Association (USGA) specifications if they were to survive the wear. We also identified the need for double greens on three holes."

"Compaction is such a problem that we are forced to close the course when it rains," Novak revealed. "It has been closed 15 days this year due to rain. Fortunately, the rainouts are rarely a problem after April."

Twelve years as an irrigation repairer and three years as a golf course superintendent with the Parks Department had acquainted Novak with golf course construction. He knew the new greens had to have the same

shape, contour and roll as the old greens.

But first, the alternate greens had to be built. Novak chose Tifgreen bermudagrass sod from Pacific Sod for the sand-based substitutes and in just over six weeks he was able to take the old greens out of play. He surveyed the old greens every five feet so the surface could be duplicated exactly. Within two weeks the old clay was removed, new drain lines installed and the area staked every five feet to match the readings taken previously. Court referral labor under close supervision then used wheelbarrows and rakes to install a bottom layer of washed stone, a middle layer of washed sand and a top layer consisting of 70 percent sand (20-30 mesh), 20 percent composted redwood and 10 percent perlite. "It's very important that the lower layers have the same roll as the surface," Novak points out.

The greens were then seeded with Penn-cross bentgrass, fertilized and carefully irrigated. "Regular golfers observe the bentgrass greens coming to life and anxiously look forward to playing them after they are given three months to mature. In fact, golfers see everything we do since the course opens in the morning (5 a.m.) before we can start our equipment." A local ordinance restricts Novak from using equipment before 7 a.m.

Novak checks every green three times a day. "We have to do things a little differently with our greens due to the intense traffic," says Novak. "We intentionally let the thatch on the old greens stay between 1/4 and 3/8 inch thick. We aerify them every six weeks, break up the cores and drag them back in. In November, the old greens are double aerified, sand topdressed and overseeded with Pennway at one half pound per 1,000 sq. ft. The new bentgrass greens are overseeded with Penn-cross and the Tifway alternate greens with *Poa trivialis*. "We follow an intensive Scotts' preventative disease program in addition to pre-emergence weed control for *Poa annua* and post-emergence weed control. I've been using applications of iron recently on greens and tees with good results."

Novak has tried Kerb on the kikuyu fairways to get rid of the annual bluegrass and is exploring applications of Embark growth regulator for the same reason. Tees and fairways are aerified and dragged four times each year. Stolons brought up by the aerifiers are collected and planted in thin areas.

Out of Novak's crew of 15 full-time and five part-time men and women, three specialize in mowing. Greens are mowed daily at 3/16-inch, except in the summer when they are mowed at 7/32-inch, with Jacobsen Greens King triplex mowers. "They used to be mowed every other day and the fairways every three or four days," says Novak. "Golfers have noticed the difference in the course since we started daily mowing." The kikuyu tees are mowed at 3/8-inch with the triplex mowers and fairways at 5/8-inch with a Toro eleven-bladed, seven-reel gang, also on a daily basis. Roughs are kept at 1 1/2 inch.



Certain areas along the cart paths still have to be resodded each year.



Rancho Park crew topdresses a new bentgrass green, one of three installed this past winter.

The low nutrition needs of the kikuyugrass let Novak concentrate his fertilization efforts on the greens and tees. Whereas the fairways and tees require only one pound of nitrogen per 1,000 sq. ft. per year, the greens are fertilized weekly, a rate Novak calls lean. Both liquid and granular fertilizers are used, including ammonium sulfate, urea and Scotts Heavy Duty Golf Fertilizer. In this way he applies one pound of nitrogen per month per 1,000 sq. ft. to the greens. He includes

penetrants with each application of liquid fertilizer. To bring the bermudagrass alternate tees out of dormancy in the spring he applies iron and Gro-Power organic fertilizer. Novak is considering fertigation for the planned irrigation system as a convenient way to apply supplemental fertilizer to the greens.

"I take part of my crew with me to local night courses on turf care taught by Cal Poly University so they have a better understand-

ing of what we are doing," says Novak. "They know they don't have to go and they also know they work harder than a lot of other people in the park department. If they don't care about what they are doing, the golfers will notice and stop caring. Public relations is the most important thing they can learn. They can't always wait for golfers to finish putts or tee off. They have too much to do. If a golfer complains they must answer in a way that enlists his support in the maintenance program. The golfer can tell if it's just a job or the crew really cares."

"We have a goal to motivate us," says Novak. "Within three to five years we want Rancho Park to be equal to most PGA Tour courses. We want the professionals to ask to come back here for the Los Angeles Open or other tour events. It keeps the tradition alive and makes the crew and the golfers committed to the course."

Novak's spirit is catching. This month, the Parks Department gave him another course to breathe life into, the Armand Hammer Golf Course five miles away. The 18-hole pitch-and-putt course used to carry 200 rounds per day and is now down to 20. A grant from the Armand Hammer Foundation has been increased to help Novak incorporate the techniques used at Rancho Park at the Armand Hammer course. After all, if he can make one course withstand 138,000 rounds per year, what's another 70,000? ▶

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