

Preparing for the Seniors at PGA National



Phenegar gives instructions to assistant John Snyder.



The PGA National crew drills holes for posts to hold erosion fence around the perimeter of the Champion course.

Golf tournaments have become big business in this country. Only professional football and baseball attract more national television coverage than golf. That's saying a lot when you consider golf is not a team sport, does not require physical contact to generate viewer interest, and is relatively sedate compared to other sports.

Golf professionals often look like the person next door, not a typical muscle-bound athlete. If it weren't for their unique skill in manipulating a small, dimpled ball through treacherous terrain, they might be typical, average Americans.

But they aren't at all typical. Their names are common household words, and their recognition extends for decades instead of a few seasons. The tremendous popularity of the seniors tour is proof of the longevity of the leading golf professionals.

When the Professional Golf Association of America (PGA) was created in 1916, the status of the golf professional was considerably more humble than it is today. His personal success was based almost completely on his knack as an instructor and on his golfing prowess as compared to others at his local club. He was paid to teach more than compete . . . to promote the game more than to promote himself.

In the early days, PGA events were primarily golf demonstrations with the added attraction of competition between club professionals. When their golf courses closed for the winter, many golf professionals would head South to keep playing, to hone their skills and to teach at resort courses.

Although it was based in New York at the time, PGA organized winter tournaments for its members. It was then that golf professionals began to compete away from their home courses and to attract larger audiences. The PGA realized that tournaments required specific organization and management to be successful. Provisions had to be made to manage both the competition and the crowds.

Much has changed since PGA organized its first tournaments for members. Today, the field of players frequently totals hundreds, the spectators in the gallery in the thousands, and television viewers in the millions.

The old demonstration and grudge

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match between golf pros at a local course has evolved into a major sporting event. . . and any old course won't do. The

tum jump. Not only is it bathed in tradition, as the 50th anniversary of its founding at Augusta National in 1937 is observed, it is the first time the Seniors Championship will be televised nationally.

Litten (The Estates). Jack Nicklaus will soon begin redesigning the greens and approaches on the Champion.

The four-day tournament begins with a Pro-Am event on the Haig. The final three days of medal play will take place on the Champion.

Last November, Pheneger closed Champion and Haig for overseeding and initial tournament preparation. Since the courses would be used for Club Pro events from New Year's Day to the week before the Seniors, he had to get a head start.

"We have had a relatively warm and dry winter," reports Pheneger. "The 419 (Tifway bermudagrass) on the tees, fairways and roughs hasn't gone dormant in eight years. We topdress divots daily with a mixture of sand and soil dyed green." The bermuda is kept active through a program of fertigation and sprays with iron, manganese and other micronutrients. All cart traffic has been restricted to cart paths since December.

The fairways will be cut daily at 1/2-inch during the tournament. The roughs will be mowed at 1 3/4-inches.

The tees were aerified, verticut and topdressed at the end of last summer. Since then Pheneger and his assistant John Snyder, have blocked-off portions of the tees to control wear. "We control tee use by covering the off-limits blocks with clear plastic window screen," he explains. Arrows direct traffic around the blocked off areas. The tees are topdressed every week and kept at 5/16-inch.

The greens are the only portion of the course that is overseeded. Fertilizer is withheld for five weeks beforehand. In September, the greens are aerified with a Greensaire with 3/8-inch hollow tines. The cores are swept off and the Tifgreen 328 is verticut lightly before being topdressed with a mixture of 85-percent sand and 15-percent soil.

The day before overseeding, the greens are double verticut and mowed at 1/8-inch. The first of three applications of Penncross bentgrass is sown, topdressed with the 85:15 mix, and worked into the existing turf.

"We put down two pounds per thousand square feet the first time and come back twice with another pound," explains Pheneger. He adds a pound of Sabre *Poa trivialis* to the bentgrass on the second and third rounds. These secondary seedings are made after the course is reopened and are followed with light topdressing.

The cutting height is raised to 3/16-inch until two weeks before the tournament, when it is gradually lowered to 9/64-inch. Three weeks prior to the tournament, pin placements are intentionally kept away from their event locations. The greens are fertilized with 1/3-pound of IBDU nitrogen every two weeks from December until February.

PGA Tournament Director Don Smith and past PGA President J. R. Carpenter make the decisions regarding pin placement, green speed, and tee sites the week before the tournament. They keep in close contact

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Trimming fairway heads and yardage markers with Donuttrimmers.

term "tournament-quality" carries a lot of weight today when a developer or resort is building a course (or courses). "Stadium course" means exactly what it says: that the course is designed to facilitate the gallery and the television cameras just like a stadium.

To keep up with the needs of its membership and the growing commercial success of its tournaments, the PGA moved from New York to Palm Beach Gardens, FL, in 1964. There it could provide winter training and competition for northern pros.

In 1980, PGA jumped at the chance to consolidate its operations on one site in Palm Beach Gardens. With the birth of PGA National Golf Club, the rapidly growing organization was able to establish its headquarters and training facilities in one place, surrounded by four tournament-quality golf courses. Today, its staff has grown to nearly 100, and they manage more than 30 sanctioned tournaments and a growing number of golf schools annually. A fifth course was recently added to bring the number of golf holes to 90.

When PGA manages a tournament at home, it makes sure that every detail is considered—especially the condition of the courses.

One of the oldest PGA events, and one held every year at PGA National Golf Club since it opened, is the Seniors Championship, now called the General Foods PGA Seniors Championship. This month the significance of the tournament takes a quan-

ESPN was delighted to capture the rights to the tournament, realizing that 140 of the greatest golfers of the past will compete at the home of the PGA. Due to success of the Seniors Tour, their careers are far from over. The viewing public's admiration for them remains strong, as evidenced by the large gallery the event attracts every year. The cable network expects solid ratings for the four-day event.

For Greg Pheneger, general manager for golf course operations, the tournament is a reenactment of some of the great moments in golf as described by his father, Jack, the golf professional at Raymond Memorial Golf Course in Columbus, OH. Being only 28 years old, Pheneger missed seeing many of the seniors in their glory days. Four years at PGA National and his father's stories have helped him fill in those past moments.

This is his first year as general manager of the five courses since the departure of his predecessor, Luke Majorcki. Pheneger is quite aware of the responsibility placed upon him at such a young age. He draws on everything he learned at his father's course in Columbus, his training at Ohio State Agricultural Technical Institute in Wooster, and his four years at PGA National.

Pheneger has been preparing two of the five courses for the tournament since last fall. They are the Champion and the Haig. Three of the courses were designed by Tom Fazio (Champion, Haig and Squire), one by Arnold Palmer (General) and one by Karl

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with Pheneger throughout the year to make sure the course meets strict tournament standards.

Two weeks before the event, Pheneger and his staff busily prepare the course for the players, the gallery and the television crews. All 107 bunkers are manicured to perfection. Shells that work their way up into the bunkers are picked out by hand and a fresh coat of sand is then applied.

This year preparing the course was a little easier and faster, adds Pheneger, largely due to a new tool called a Donuttrimmer. He first heard about the device when a Boca Raton landscape maintenance contractor named Tom Wait and his partner, Joe DeMino, visited the course to give a demonstration.

The U-shaped metal blade of the Donut-trimmer fits onto the shaft of a string trimmer. Wait, whose PSU Property Maintenance Company has the contract for the city of Boca Raton, invented the blade after spending many tedious hours trimming around sprinkler heads with a cup cutter.

"Florida is famous for the cement donuts used around sprinkler heads," Wait remarks. "It would take one man all day to trim around 50 of these donuts with a cup cutter, and we have thousands of heads on miles of roadside in Boca. By shaping a blade to fit over these donuts and attaching it to a Weedeater, we discovered one man could trim up to 200 heads an hour!"

Wait grew up in Rochester, NY, with DeMino, who is golf professional at Riverton Golf Club. DeMino would visit Wait over the winter while working on his game. When Wait showed DeMino the Donuttrimmer, the golf pro immediately saw the time-saving advantage of the device. The two of them decided to create a company to patent and market the tool.



Sprinkler head before (top) and after (below) trimming.



To prove the speed and trimming ability of their invention, Wait and DeMino gave demonstrations, including the one at PGA National. Their big break came when Jeff Haley, superintendent of the Tournament Player's Club at Eagle Trace, FL, let them detail the course prior to the 1988 Honda Classic. Players and caddies appreciated being able to clearly see yardage markers on top of sprinkler heads. The word got to the PGA officials.

When Wait made the same offer to Pheneger, he jumped at it. After DeMino finished playing in the Club Pro events, he and Wait went to work. In four hours, four men trimmed every fairway head on the Champion. While they were there, Wait and DeMino also edged a bunker and a portion of one cart path. The following morning the pair were on their way to Pebble Beach, CA, for another demonstration.

"They saved us a lot of time," remarks Pheneger. It was time he needed to put up the gallery ropes and fence off the Champion. "It used to take four people nearly four days to do what they did."

Besides being the first year the Seniors will be televised, with all the cables and camera positions, Pheneger has to work out the gallery ropes to allow the seniors to use carts. More than 1,300 stakes are required to hold the waist-high ropes.

"This is a tough course," Pheneger adds. "There is water on 16 holes and 107 bunkers. The greens are small and undulating. It plays between 6,500 and 7,127 yards, depending upon the location of the tees. Only three players broke par last year. They have plenty to worry about, so we do everything we can to help them out."

In a way, Pheneger has to keep PGA National ready for tournament play year-round. His staff of 63 represents the PGA to anyone who plays there, and that includes many beside club professionals. To give more golfers the chance to play PGA National, seven more courses may be added in the next four years.

It's hard to imagine how much golf has changed since 1916, when the PGA was founded to help the golf professional spread the game through instruction and demonstration. Then it was a matter of introduction... today it is a matter of just keeping up with the demand. ●

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