

The ultimate challenge to many superintendents is not to be in charge of the most elaborately designed golf course. Instead, it is to preserve the character of one of the West's oldest courses.

That's the case for Jim Hustung, superintendent of Woodbridge Golf and Club in California's San Joaquin Valley, and his assistant, Dan Giammona. Woodbridge is one of the oldest courses in California, established in 1926.

In fact, it is really three courses. "The club's 27 holes are divided into the Lake Course, the Middle Course, and the River Course," Hustung explains. "Each is a unique blend of features derived over the century. "Ryegrass and bentgrass are used on the Lake Course fairways, while bermudagrass is used on the Middle and River Course fairways. Woodbridge's greens are made up of *Poa annua* mixed with bentgrass," he adds.

Husting admits that the choice of grasses was largely Mother Nature's. "The River Course was first. It was predominantly a horse pasture at one time, and had native bermuda there to begin with. So they just groomed with it. When the Middle Course was built in the 1950s, a lot of bermuda was there, too. So they just cultivated it. The Lake Course is the newest, built in 1979. It was planted all in cool season grasses, but don't ask me why!" he says with a grin. The seasons are seldom cool in the hot San Joaquin Valley.

The combination of grasses at Woodbridge, such as *Poa* and bent greens, may seem unusual, but it fits right in with the club's strange history, which started almost 70 years ago over a bottle of good wine.

"It's probably one of the oldest courses in the area," says Hustung. "It all began one



Green and tee surrounds at Woodbridge were a maintenance problem before Hustung changed fertilizers.

Woodbridge Golf and Country Club: **Superintendent Preserves Character Of Historic Western Course**

Saturday night in March 1924, when Claude Holmes, a foreman for the McHenry-Clark Construction Company, was with Doc Hare at the home of Emerson Herrick. While sipping some 1922 Zinfandel, the discussion of the evening turned to golf.

"Holmes thought that traveling to the Stockton club to play took too much time away from his business. Perhaps some pastureland that Holmes was renting nearby from Thompson Folger, on which he kept his two horses, would be suitable for a small golf course.

"That evening Holmes invited Herrick and Doc Hare to a game of golf, which was played at the rented pasture located on the

south bank of the Mokelumne river in Woodbridge. The three would-be golfers arrived next morning equipped with shovels, rakes, lawn mowers, brooms, and wheelbarrows to clear the way for the game," says Hustung.

"The fairways were relatively easy to shape, because of the abundant growth of bermudagrass, which had been kept well clipped by Holmes' unemployed work horses, Dick and Ben. The greens, however, presented a more formidable undertaking. The grass had to be cut short and raked several times before fine sand was flooded in to create a smooth putting surface. Basi-

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cally it was just sand greens at that time," Husting explains.

"After three full Sundays of dedicated labor, the golf course was ready. Tomato cans inserted into two greens served as cups, and mounds of wet sand formed on top of ordinary doormats became tees. By June, over \$150 had been spent clearing brush to form more greens and tees," he reveals.

"The pasture had now been transformed into five golf holes. Holmes had announced the plans for a golf club. By June 21 over 115 men had expressed an interest in becoming members. One month later, on July 24, 1924, the Woodbridge Golf and Country Club was incorporated. Entrance fees were set at \$15, with dues at two dollars a month. Today it costs \$20,000 to join," says Husting.

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"Claude Holmes was elected to serve as the first president. The original two-room shack of 1926 served as the clubhouse. A new clubhouse was constructed in 1938 and still remains today as the Elks Lodge," he continues.

"In 1952 another 12 holes were developed north of the Mokelumne River and combined with the six original holes to make Woodbridge a complete 18-hole golf course. The first footbridge was built to connect the links, as home development started on the north bank of the river. September 1979 marked the opening of another nine holes, and a new clubhouse was constructed. The tennis courts were also constructed in 1979," says Husting. "Right now we have 600 members. I still think the acreage with the original six holes is the best one out here."

Golf course architect Bert Stamps takes up the story at this point. "We designed the



Husting inspects fertilizer response on green surrounds.

third nine at Woodbridge, the Lake Course, in 1979," recalls Stamps, who has built over 100 courses around the world, from Venezuela to Africa to Taiwan. "Ted Kazakian, the developer, put four or five homesites around it. Some of the homes are half a million dollars apiece.

"The club had 18 holes and a flat piece of ground, so we had to beautify it to the point where it looked like a golf course. It worked out very well for them. They took in a couple hundred more members and remodeled the clubhouse," he recalls.

"We put some alternate tees in there for the higher handicap and the lower handicap. We stretched it out a little bit, so everyone could play and enjoy it. It's not an easy golf course. They have to shoot out over those lakes and thread the needle in a few places," says Stamps. "We put a lot of traps in out there. It really made the club, because they can play twice the people that they did before.

"Many years before that, I remodeled three holes on the River Course," he recalls. "I just remodeled the greens and we put seaside bent on them. But we started from scratch on the Lake Course. We used bermuda on the fairways in a mixture with bluegrass and Manhattan rye. And on the greens we used Penncross bent. I think we put a little chewings red fescue in the fairway to give it a little body."

Thus Husting inherited a golf and country club that was begun by inspired amateurs and completed over 50 years later by a top architect. He had the experience to make the most of it.

"I've been associated with golf just about all my life," says Husting. "I was a caddie at the age of 12. I became a greenskeeper at Lake Forest Country Club in Hudson, OH when I was a junior in high school. That was my summer job all the way through college. I got my first degree, a bachelor of arts, at Kent State. I didn't pursue the golf course industry until I came to California. Then I went to the two-year tech program at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. I have a two-year tech degree in ornamental horticulture with a major in turfgrass management.

"I was assistant superintendent at San Luis Bay Golf Course in Avila, CA from 1983 to 1984," Husting continues. "I went on to be assistant superintendent at Green Hills Country Club at Milbrae, CA from 1984 to 1987. Then I came here as golf course superintendent."

Husting pays close attention to the color and condition of the turf at Woodbridge. He employs routine aeration, periodic overseeding, and a balanced fertilization program. The threat of Summer Patch and Southern Blight on the cool season grasses, coupled with the desire to curb the use of fungicides, has spurred the superintendent to place a greater emphasis on soil testing and fertilization than ever before. "Summer Patch affects the *Poa annua*," Husting notes. "It doesn't affect the bentgrass that much, but it wipes out the *Poa*."

"I keep my grasses as healthy as possible going into the stressful time of the year, which is right now. And I have all three courses on a preventive fungicide program. So far, so good," says Husting. "I try to verticut three times a month on the greens, and I give a balanced fertilizer program to my fairways."

Husting explains, "My crew size is up to 16 fulltime employees now. We gear down to about 12 in the off season. We have four Toro triplex greensmowers. We use two for the greens and two for the tees and aprons. I have a Jacobsen HF-15 fairway unit to cut my fairways, and Toro gang mowers that we pull behind tractors to cut my roughs. I have a Toro Reelmaster 216 to cut my tee and green surrounds, and a few rotary mowers for tight hand areas in the roughs."

Using a rotary spreader, Husting applies water-soluble fertilizer once a month on Woodbridge's 27 greens throughout the growing season. With a Lely fertilizer spreader, he also applies ammonium sulfate twice a month on the bermudagrass fairways. Additionally, a custom blend nitrogen-based mix is spread every eight to 12

weeks, March through October, on the fairways and rough.

"The greens and fairways," he says, "are in good to excellent health through most of the year, despite the unavoidable peaks and valleys associated with using water-soluble fertilizer."

In the past, Husting applied the same custom formula on the courses' tee and green bank surrounds four times a year. Despite his best efforts, these areas were often a sore spot to Woodbridge's members and a blight upon the club's otherwise lush courses.

"The green and tee bank surrounds require a great deal of hand fertilization, often needing more care than my assistant and I were able to give them," he recalls. "When we applied the fertilizer, we saw a rapid flush of growth. The grass grew too high between mowings, and it was ragged. Clippings were uneven, and members had a hard time finding their balls along the tee and green surrounds."

The situation deteriorated further six to eight weeks later, when the fertilizer wore off. "The grass lost much of its vitality and took on a faded yellow hue," says Husting. "Our traditional response was to apply

more fertilizer, but our heavy workload often forced us to wait until well after the fade had begun."

With seemingly nothing to alter this cycle of uneven growth and inconsistent color, Husting grudgingly accepted the status quo. "The longest lasting slow release fertilizer I had ever used was effective for no more than eight weeks," he explains.

In November 1989, distributor Mike Blume of Turf Tech in Sacramento, CA, told him about Once, a controlled release fertilizer from Grace-Sierra. One application releases nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium each day for up to a full season.

Blume told him the fertilizer's activity is controlled by a coating system. The release rate is temperature-based, increasing as the soil warms and decreasing as it cools, much like the growth of the turf. The product's longevity is based on the amount of coating applied to the fertilizer. The more coating, the longer it lasts.

In April 1990, as he prepared to face the San Joaquin Valley's 100-plus-degree summer heat, Husting put Once to the test. "I applied it on the green and tee surround areas with a rotary spreader, as I do with any other fertilizer," Husting recalls. How-

ever, the results were quite different.

"Instead of the flushes of growth and subsequent fading of color that I had encountered with conventional fertilizers, I got eight months of steady growth. It carried me through the summer and into the fall, and the fertilizer seemed to kick back in this spring," he explains.

"Our clippings are also much more even. Members are no longer searching through green surrounds for lost balls or upset about the courses' appearance," says Husting.

He adds that environmental benefits are another important criterion by which a product must be judged. "We don't have to apply as much fertilizer as with conventional formulations. Less fertilizer means less potential of leaching. The turf takes up the majority of nutrients released, with very little lost to the environment."

"There are things a superintendent can do to make an older course better without major renovation," adds Husting. "Sometimes I think that is a bigger challenge than making changes which alter the character of a club. And, I think it's one reason Woodbridge has been successful for more than 60 years."

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