

Tournament preparation at Congressional Country Club

From the start of my career I have always had hopes and dreams of one day preparing a golf course for a US PGA Tour event. For years I wondered how I could turn this dream into a reality and this year I finally made it happen!

In June of 2013, I sent Mike Leemhuis CEO of Congressional Country Club an e-mail asking if I could come and help prepare the golf course for the AT&T National, now known as the Quicken Loans National hosted by Tiger Woods. I had never met Mike before and this was a complete shot in the dark to contact him. To my surprise he responded the very next day and a year later I landed at Dulles International and called Congressional CC my home for the next 4 weeks.

I arrived on Sunday the 8th of June and would be reporting for duty the next day at 5:30am. My residence during this time would be the brick house next to the maintenance facility where Derek Trenchard (Superintendent on the Blue course) and his wife kindly accommodated me. In the mornings we would meet in the staff canteen for our-morning meetings where all the staff was informed of the day's golf events and their daily tasks to be performed.



On my very first day they took it easy on “the newbie”, or at least I thought so. I was tasked with mowing greens in the morning, easy enough I thought but soon realised that I have not manually mowed greens in a while and definitely not in that kind of humidity. I quickly learnt that the way we do things in South Africa is very different to how they work in the US. Back home when you are told to cut greens you just go out and mow greens. Not there in the US. I have never mowed greens with turning boards (see pic) and have never used a whipping pole either.



As you can tell by the picture these boards are placed on either side of the green and are used to reduce wear and tear caused by the turning of the mower. As you can imagine it is a rather labour intensive task as you have to move these boards along after mowing just a few lines (sadistic buggers!). Once the mowing is complete you then take a whipping pole and walk over the entire green and clean off any bits of grass that might have stayed behind. As a result, the green is left in perfect condition for the days play.

After greens I joined the crew of interns and we would spend the afternoon repairing erosion damage that was caused by the previous night's rainfall. For the duration of my stay I teamed up with the Interns who play a critical role in the maintenance of the Golf Course. They are made up of local and international students, all of whom are studying to be Superintendents. Our days started 30 minutes before the other staff during which time, we would get all the day's equipment and mowers organized (see below)



Work would officially start at 6am and work would finish when the day's work was done roughly between 17:00 – 18:00. As the Intern, you would expect to be the last to leave the workshop but oh no Sir not at Congressional! The Superintendents (Thomas

Turi and Derek Trenchard), Senior Superintendent (Dave Hutchinson) and Director of Agronomy (Mike Giuffre) would almost always still be at it alongside the Interns. These guys hardly stopped working.

A normal week's work for me would include the entire range of golf course duties i.e. mowing, watering, course setup and whatever else needed doing. What stands out to me is the amount of hand watering that was done. Most of our afternoons were spent hand watering semi-rough and walkways (see pic).



Those days were tough and even the Superintendents jumped in to get the work done. Watering 18 holes of semi-rough and walkways in 34 degree heat with high humidity is no joke. At the end of those days you were just spent in every way possible.

During the first two weeks that was our programme as we were preparing for the Tournament. If I'm honest the golf course was in Tournament condition when I arrived and we had to work hard to keep it there. In short, they were well prepared and had all their ducks in a row well in advance.

Tournament week

Finally the tournament was here and it all started on Sunday afternoon at 4pm when all the interns and volunteers (made up of industry suppliers, Interns, Assistants and Superintendents from neighbouring golf clubs) met outside the Congressional maintenance facility for a cook out (braai). In total there were around 40 volunteers who would be working morning and afternoon shifts for the duration of the tournament. Let me just say that as fancy as the Americans are we could teach them a serious lesson when it comes to having a braai.....pap and sous was nowhere to be found.

Morning preparation

The mornings during Tournament week would start at 4am in the Tournament tent next to the Maintenance facility.



The mornings would start off with the attendance register only to be interrupted by Mike Giuffre who would belt out “are you ready!!!” This was very successful in waking up a few of the drowsier workers. Each morning all the usual’s were done:

Bunker raking: During Tournament week this was done by hand and they just looked great. Below is a photo of Ricky 1st Assistant on the Gold course doing a great job.



Course setup: Pins were done each morning and they had to be perfect. Often times you would see three staff members around a pin making sure it is straight. From the photo below you will see they also use boards around the cup to eliminate any wear and tear that might take place during the changing of cups.



Tee box mowing: This was done each morning by walk-behind mowers. Striping was just a neat and simple 12 to 6 cut.



Greens preparation: Now this was a different kettle of fish all together. The Director of Agronomy Mike Giuffre would go out ahead each morning with the Agronomist from the PGA Tour and take charge of this process. They would start by doing stimp and firmness readings on each green. Based on those results each green would be dealt with separately. Ultimately each green had to be the same pace and firmness before the days play. Based on those readings, some greens would be single mowed and rolled, others would be double mowed and rolled and others would just be given a single mow. Together with all the mowing and rolling, greens watering also played a critical role. That task was bestowed upon Nathan Turner (Australian intern) and myself. Photo bottom left is Andrew Keller an intern from Penn State rolling greens in style and on the bottom right is a photo of Nathan Turner and Myself after greens watering on Sunday afternoon.



Our goal was to have them as close to the edge of death as possible, a tricky and very important task. Fortunately we had the right tools for the job and Nathan to his credit was already experienced in greens preparation. Nathan had already worked out that on a hot day you would lose 6 percentage points from the morning to the afternoon. To give you an idea a measurement of 8 would be grass that is wilting and in need of water and we wanted the greens to be at an average of 15 before the days play, any less and they would be under stress by the end of the days play. A tricky balancing act, but that's what made it exciting.

This is how we went about it. The fieldscout moisture sensor was our weapon of choice and it allowed us to take pin point moisture readings at each green before applying any water. We would divide each green into blocks of 9 taking readings from each. The total of this would give us our average moisture reading per green. That information would be recorded and given to Mike Giuffre. We would then re-check all the blocks and take moisture readings all over the green at 1-2 metre intervals. If we found a reading between (7-14) we would flag it and then water that spot independently. For instance if we got a reading of 8 we would put down more water than we would if we got a reading of 14 as that would only need a little syringe to get through day. This process was followed each morning and the consistency we managed to get all our greens at was remarkable (FYI Westlake has just invested in some fieldscout moisture sensors). Some afternoons we even used watering cans instead of hoses just to make sure that we were pin-point accurate in our application.

Oh and the greens were just a little faster than the ones at Westlake (stimp of 14ft9" in the below pic))



Fairways: Due to a very successful spraying programme of plant growth regulators fairways were never mowed in the morning for the duration of the Tournament and were only mowed in the afternoon.

Afternoon preparation

Afternoon prep started each day behind play at around 5pm and finished around 8pm. This included normal prep with the exception of bunkers and course setup. What it did include though was fairway mowing "Augusta style". This stopped me dead in my tracks when I saw it, watching 20+ fairways mowers in a fleet coming down a fairway is pretty special stuff.



As in the morning greens were again stimped and rolled depending on their pace and greens watering was done exactly the same as in the mornings.

However my favourite part of afternoon prep was the last stop of each day. Just outside the Maintenance facility a Tournament tent was setup for staff. It was filled with all sorts of food and beverages. Now normal humans would opt for some of the healthy stuff but not Raymond Donaldson! I was completely mesmerised by the abundance of Dr Pepper and glazed donuts. In short Tim Noakes would have a fit if he saw what I was getting up to in that tent. Eish.....never again!!!! Below you can see Tyson Dickson a future Aussie Superintendent beating me to some fresh doughnuts "sneaky bugger".



So, what have I learnt from this experience?

This is a tough question as most of the members at Westlake are expecting me to come back with some kind of a magic trick that would transform our course into a US Open calibre golf course. Unfortunately I have come to realise that there is no "magic muti or secret weapon" behind the curtains.

The most important thing I have taken from this experience will be the way in which Mike Giuffre (Director of Agronomy) and Dave Hutchinson (Senior Golf Course Superintendent) managed their staff and how they seamlessly managed to bring this tournament together. They are extremely passionate about this industry and are some of the hardest workers I have ever met. We worked long hours but they worked longer! They are truly an inspiration and I one day hope to be like them.

Wrap-up

During my entire stay at Congressional I was made to feel very welcome by all of the Management and staff, I felt like part of the family and for that I am very thankful.

The Tournament was a huge success and hailed by many as the best Tournament they have ever hosted. From what I gathered there was also a lot of pressure on Congressional to prove that they are a true US Open golf course and they certainly delivered, with a winning score of only -5 under par. A few strokes less than the winning score at the US Open that was held just a few weeks before at Pinehurst Country Club.

Westlake Golf Club should also get lots of credit for allowing me to pursue this great adventure for an entire 4 weeks. Not once did the committee at Westlake hesitate in supporting me throughout this entire process. I think it's a truly great thing that all other clubs should look into. At the end of the day you will be left with a Superintendent that is loyal to his club and who will be keen to repay the favour in the coming summer.

In closing I would just like to say that this entire experience well exceeded my expectations and if there is something I have learnt. It is that you should always send that e-mail, it might just change your life!

