

Overcoming long odds at Oakmont

Although it was cold and snowing in Oakmont, Pa., last March, John Zimmers already was sweating the arrival of the 107th U.S. Open.

It was less than 90 days until the tournament was to be staged at one of golf's cathedrals when a snowstorm struck western Pennsylvania, followed by a brief period of warm weather, rain and finally a quick, hard freeze. Zimmers and several Oakmont officials had just returned to Pennsylvania from a club retreat in Florida. When he stepped off a plane at the airport in Pittsburgh, Zimmers knew problems waited at the golf course.

"It hurt the turf real bad," said Zimmers, superintendent at Oakmont. "I didn't say a whole lot. I downplayed it because I knew there wasn't much we could say.

"To be honest with you, it looked like the majority of the grass was dead. There was great concern."

Zimmers immediately called upon colleagues in the business for help, advice, anything they could offer. That circle include such people as USGA Green Section national director Jim Snow, Paul B. Latshaw, CGCS at Muifield Village Golf Club in Dublin, Ohio, and Matt Shaffer, director of golf grounds at Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, Pa.

"They thought I was overreacting," Zimmers, 37, recalled. "When they got here, oh boy, you could see in their eyes there was concern."

Zimmers immediately covered the greens in an attempt to save the turf. A month prior to the tournament, turf conditions still were not to U.S. Open standards, Zimmers said. And the use of greens covers at night was a necessity into May.

"Obviously, John had Oakmont in arguably the best condition for any U.S. Open that has ever been held," Shaffer wrote in his letter nominating Zimmers for the TurfNet's 2007 Superintendent of the Year award. "And while that in itself is (enough) for receiving the award, it is just the tip of the iceberg so to speak in regards to what he has accomplished at Oakmont."

But early on the jury was out.

Oakmont members are a demanding lot who want grueling conditions every day. They want the course to test them and brutalize their guests.

"No one here would ever criticize me for making this course too difficult," Zimmers said.

Nothing short of perfect for the U.S. Open would be acceptable.

"John's job was not to alarm me or the members of Oakmont. But it was scary," said club grounds chairman Chris Donohue. "I know John was concerned, and I was real concerned.



John Zimmers says the majority of the turf at Oakmont Country Club looked dead just a few months before last year's U.S. Open was played there.

"It was a challenge, because it had to be perfect. Ninety days out, the grass looked totally dormant. By mid-May it was in pretty good shape. By June, it was dead-stone perfect."

Indeed, pulling off an event the scope of the U.S. Open is a monumental task when conditions are perfect, much less when things go south. Aside from managing the turf to U.S. Golf Association specifications, the Open requires planning and coordinating of other duties that go well beyond preparation of the golf course.

Crews had to build grandstands and service roads and make concessions to accommodate all manner of temporary infrastructure. The adjacent East Course became, as Zimmers called it, a "tent city." But even that became complicated when cold weather before the tournament made stretching vinyl covers for concession and VIP areas difficult.

"I thought, 'Is this what I signed up for?'" Zimmers said. "I was frustrated and mad. I said to myself, 'Gosh, why does this have to be this hard?' We're going to have to earn every lick of it for it to be a success."

Then there was recruiting more than 150 volunteers, which was a full-time job in itself, Zimmers said. And all volunteers had to pass a background screening.

"There was a lot of paperwork that had to be filled out correctly, and that took a lot of time," Zimmers said. "There were a lot of stragglers."

Zimmers credits assistants Dave Delsandro, Brendon Clark, Brett Bentley and Chris Markel, and wife Tracey for helping coordinate everything from day-to-day agronomics to overseeing construction of infrastructure to coordinating volunteer schedules and housing arrangements.

Zimmers, who was on Paul R. Latshaw's crew at Congressional Country Club for the 1997 Open, and

was a volunteer for Tiger Woods' 2000 runaway win at Pebble Beach, attended the '06 Open at Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, N.Y., as a primer.

After the tournament at Winged Foot he and his staff immediately jumped into preparation for 2007.

"The more you plan ahead of time, the better the outcome will be," he said. "You have to look at it as an opportunity; seize the moment and enjoy it, because you might not have the opportunity again. Then the people around you feed off that. We felt like we had planned and had the right people in the right place. You hope the weather cooperates, and if it doesn't, you still have to make it happen."

Throughout U.S. Open preparations, Oakmont's members showed incredible confidence in Zimmers.

"It was kind of eerie. I felt like people maybe had more confidence in me than they should," he said. "I was wondering if they were not seeing what I was seeing."

In fact, Zimmers began to wonder whether he'd overestimated the damage. But he was cured of that notion after NBC officials asked him to accompany them on a helicopter flyover of the course so he could explain the layout to them.

"If you ever want to see flaws, go in a helicopter. I remember looking down and thinking, 'Oh my. This could be catastrophic,'" he said.

Zimmers said he caught his first break when snow and cold weather during a planned media event prevented attendees from going onto the golf course.

"I had a fact sheet with me, sort of a playbook of facts," he said.

"I wanted to be factual, but not a lot of it came up. I prepared myself to answer the difficult questions. I took the same approach with the members, because we knew what we had to do, and there was no sense getting anyone up in arms."

Zimmers said the experience afforded him the opportunity to learn more about himself than anything else.

"This was the first time in my life that the whole world was looking at me," he said.

"Some people called this the best modern-day Open. My main goal was to have a great event. If the USGA was satisfied and our members were satisfied, then to me that's how I define how successful we were. I think we met that. I am extremely proud of this Open and the job we did."