

High maintenance takes on new meaning at Edgewood

By Susan Wood

STATELINE – Coming off a wet winter and massive upgrades, Edgewood Tahoe stands to show off more than stars when the American Century golf championship swings into action this week.

The Stateline golf course has spruced up its grounds with a \$2 million overhaul on its 40-year-old irrigation system. Barely a few weeks into operation, the upgrade from grounds to pump house amounts to 20 and 30 miles of new pipes and wires, respectively.



Edgewood Tahoe Golf Course is ready to host the annual celebrity golf tournament July 13-18. Photos/Kathryn Reed

“It was time for a change. There was a desire from the company to improve the condition of the golf course,” Edgewood’s new Golf Course Superintendent Scott Schunter said in his office before touring the grounds. Golf shoes lie on the floor. A

U.S. Open flag from the 1991 tournament's sixth hole in Minnesota adorns his wall.

"From here, I have control of every single (sprinkler) head on the golf course," he said.

As a groundskeeper, Schunter is a pro. He came on board last August from Breezy Point, Minn., so he knows what big winters are like, such as the one Lake Tahoe experienced this past season. Since arriving, Schunter's vision was to bring Edgewood's eco-conscious grounds to a level equivalent to its world-class views.

Tahoe's roller-coaster winter prompted Schunter's crew to take the snowblower out in early March. The seventh hole's green had a 3.5 foot snowdrift on it that was settling into the ground with the melting and freezing of the bright sun and nighttime low temperatures.

"Water has to go somewhere. And that ice can be fatal to turf in as little as 75 days," he said. "With Mother Nature, you deal with what she gives you. Once you try to control her, she'll bite you in the butt."

Winter conditions on the grounds so late this year compressed the maintenance season.

"With the shortness of season – especially this year – it's imperative we come out and hit the ground running," he said.

Schunter must consider more than regular maintenance duties for his 22 seasonal and six full-time workers. To be an excellent groundskeeper means knowing your grass and knowing the way the ball rolls. A mix of grass covers the greens, which are flanked by a strip of Kentucky Blue to slow down a fast roller. A rougher grass that is cut higher covers most of the 250-acre course. The height of the grass and the water content affects the speed of the rolling ball. Edgewood mows at 0.145 of an inch. In comparison, Pebble Beach scraped its

grass to less than 0.1 of an inch for this year's U.S. Open.

"This is something we look for," Schunter said, while rolling a ball over the greens on the 14th hole. "It was bumping before we mowed. You can't have that. Consistency is the key."

Their equipment is based in a 12,000-square-foot facility tucked into the trees behind the course.

Ready for the celebs

The Edgewood crew has been working diligently to get the golf course up to par before its premier event – the American Century Championship, (<http://www.tahoecelebritygolf.com/>) a golf tournament that brings out a score of television celebrities and sports figures. They range from basketball great Michael Jordan to Ray Romano. One year soccer star Brandi Chastain started "extreme golfing" by running from hole to hole.

In its 21st year, the tournament – which runs today through July 18 – attracts thousands of spectators.

The event has such a reputation it's brought every day golfers like Jerry Thompson to the grounds. He's watched the tournament on television from his Atlanta home and decided it was time to try it out.

"I like this golf course. It has fast fairways," Thompson said, while hitting balls at the driving range. He noticed the altitude drives the ball farther.

"I can't wait to come back to try it for the first time in the morning. I'll be here first thing," he said last week. Tee times when the tournament isn't going start at 6:45am. About an hour later, Schunter's crew wraps up its maintenance rounds of mowing, fertilizing and watering.

Sprucing up the course

Improvement is the name of the game here.

By damming and pumping out its own, on-site water source, Edgewood has reduced its water and electrical usage by at least 30 percent. That savings to the system within the Stateline Stormwater Association system equates to about \$15,000 a year.

With Schunter at the helm, Edgewood has also taken special measures to review the amount and type of fertilizer its uses under Tahoe Regional Planning Agency guidelines. The grounds are fertilized once a month – with the greens receiving the spray once every two weeks. None is used on more than 30 acres of the golf course.

The golf course crews have even gone to the effort of overseeing a goose roundup on the grounds in order for the Nevada Division of Wildlife to conduct tests for avian cholera and West Nile diseases. This is no light chore. Geese excrete about 4 pounds of fecal matter a day, according to Schunter.

It's a balancing act as the veteran groundskeeper weighs the environmental benefits of saving water and letting nature take its course, with the embedded desire to please golfers and spectators who live in a green grass world.

"As we've grown up, the only thing we've known are irrigated greens," he said. "We're obsessed with green. But it's easier to kill grass by overwatering it."

Despite the challenges, Schunter shows a genuine satisfaction of his job. Driving a golf cart on this lakefront golf course with his dog Nikki running alongside suits the man who has worked on Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus signature resorts.

"If I'm happy, any golfer coming here will be happy," he said.

To Steve Rennie, there must be something to that logic.

"It doesn't get any better than this," the Los Angeles golfer

said on the putting green, while looking out at the lake on a picture-perfect day.

Rennie plays at Edgewood Tahoe Golf Course every year. He plans his trips before the celebrity golf tournament to get more playing time in.

Beyond the view and the challenge of the tricky wind, he enjoys the conditions of the grounds.

“The grass is always in great shape,” he said.

Rennie has noticed the strip of Kentucky Blue Grass surrounding the greens. He likes how the grass slows the ball down around the greens.

“But you can still putt off it,” he said, while demonstrating a short putt. He smiled as the ball kissed the hole.

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