

Surviving An Uncertain Future

Managing a bankrupt golf course back to life can be the ride of a life.

BY CLAY PEDIGO

I didn't think things could get any worse than September 28, 2010. I found out that day that my employer, Oak Lane Golf and Country Club in Woodbridge, Connecticut, would be closing its doors indefinitely on November 1st and I was losing my job a month later.

It was the end of my fourth season as superintendent of the club, and it capped off a demoralizing year for everyone involved. During the previous 12 months the club had shut down its kitchen operation in favor of hiring an outside caterer, had been through three general managers, and had reduced the green department operating budget by 33%. To make matters worse, a severe drought and state-mandated water restrictions left most of the fairways decimated from lack of irrigation. Morale, from club members to staff, was very low from the cloud of uncertainty that had hung over us during this time. Members were already searching for new clubs to join, and staff members were forced to deal with early layoffs and no confirmed return dates.

Adding to my anxiety was the weight of losing my job and with it a salary, company vehicle, my family's health insurance (wife and three young children) and the house provided to us. The club's board of governors informed us we were welcome to continue living in the house while the future of the club and property was being determined, but we always knew there was a chance that we would be forced to leave. For the next two months, I frequently transitioned between feelings of anger, frustration, fear, denial, and disbelief. I was experiencing these feelings while still working full time, navigating through the fall leaf season, and preparing the course for a New England winter.

On November 24, 2010, the day before Thanksgiving, at the urging of



State-mandated water restrictions left many fairways decimated due to lack of irrigation during the summer of 2010.



A sign of the times. An early May auction prolonged the existence of the golf course at Oak Lane G&CC.

my wife and father, I drove myself to the emergency department to have a chest x-ray to determine if I had suffered a broken rib that I had been complaining about for a few weeks. The results were negative for broken bones, but the x-rays detected a large tumor between my upper lungs and pressing against my trachea.

It sounds clichéd, but it is amazing how events in your life can shift your focus from one thing to another. Nine days after losing my job, I had a nearly seven-pound tumor removed from my chest through a large incision in my back. Two weeks later, on Christmas

which the clubhouse and back nine holes were located. With mounting debt, unpaid back taxes and at least 1.5 million dollars owed on its mortgage, the board of governors and bank chose to place the club-owned property up for auction. The club's landlord agreed to honor the remaining five years that existed on the Oak Lane lease with any potential buyer so the property could be nationally marketed as a golf course.

I remained on site that winter, plowing snow, gathering mail, checking on club grounds and buildings in exchange for staying in the house.

club, working closely with the bank, would fund a skeleton golf course operation that would end on May 10, auction day. My orders were simple: do whatever was necessary to present a visually recognizable golf course during the marketing period leading up to the auction and do it for as little money as possible. It was assumed that as of May 11 a new golf course operator would be in control of the property, so I was not to purchase any products that would be needed to maintain the golf course after that date.

Work began seven weeks prior to the auction. I was now an independent contractor being paid at my former weekly salary. The first four weeks I worked alone, but I was able to hire a former staff member for the final three. My first week in late March was spent preparing the equipment for a one-man show, which did not take long, as I had only to worry about one greens mower, a tee mower, and a fairway mower. I would have preferred to replace bearings and seals, grind reels and replace bedknives, but the parts were not available and I settled for back-lapping reels, fresh grease for the bearings, and replacing any filters that remained from the 2010 inventory.

All mowing would be performed on an as-needed basis, which turned out to be every other day on greens, now being maintained at a 0.160-inch height of cut. Tees and fairways were cut one to two times per week at 0.600 inch. The club's rough mower and Buffalo Blower had been repossessed over the winter, so I contracted out for the rough to be mowed twice prior to the auction. A mentor was able to lend me a tow-behind leaf blower that I used to clear the playing surfaces of winter debris.

In order for the golf course to remain presentable for marketing, the greens, tees, and fairways would be my only focus. However, numerous annual practices and chemical applications would either be adjusted or eliminated. The fungicides and chemicals remaining in inventory from 2010 would have to be utilized through the May date. The intermediate rough cut around fairways would be abandoned due to time constraints and a dilapidated



Grass clippings from the rough were collected and dumped on cart paths throughout the property to be removed later.

Eve, at the beginning of an uncomfortable recovery, my family received what seemed like the first good news in nearly a year. The pathology results were back and the growth was benign. Suddenly, my future seemed much brighter . . .

WINTER OF UNCERTAINTY

As the winter of 2011 progressed, it became apparent that Oak Lane would never exist in its previous incarnation. Attempts to find a buyer came up short. Complicating matters was the fact that the club only owned half of the property, which included the front nine holes, the maintenance facility and the house, and leased the other half on

Ironically, the fact that Oak Lane had closed its doors in December proved to be helpful for the club, but the worst case scenario for me. I had always felt that if the grass on the golf course were actively growing, there would be an added sense of urgency to get a deal, any deal, done immediately. Instead, with snow mold sprays complete, the irrigation system winterized and snow resting on top of dormant turf, the winter seemed to drag on as we waited to hear our fate.

A ONE-MAN SHOW

In early March, the board of governors informed me of the plan to put the club-owned land up for auction. The

mower in need of costly repairs. Spring aeration and topdressing would not be possible for one person trying to keep up with mowing. Repairing the previous year's drought damage also would be put on hold until after the auction date, as would any sand bunker work.

Surprisingly, there were few problems during this interim period leading up to the auction date. When I experienced a problem with equipment, I would either salvage a replacement part off a similar machine or call on some close friends in the industry to help with repairs. I regarded this seven-week period as an on-the-job tryout for a potential future employer. The golf course and club grounds exceeded most expectations on the May 10 auction day. Approximately 75 people, comprised of former members, townspeople, local politicians, and neighbors, attended the auction with three registered bidders in the audience. The result: the auction was cancelled when it was determined that

no one would be making the opening minimum bid of \$1.6 million dollars. The future of the golf course and my family remained uncertain.

LIMBO

I was laid off, again, the day after the auction. It also began raining and didn't let up for nearly a week. Rumors circled that there were still some on-going negotiations behind the scenes. I continued to mow greens, tees, and fairways, even though I was not being compensated and was once again all alone on the golf course. I always believed that, as long as a golf course existed, there was still a chance that I could save my job, my house, and the life my family had in Woodbridge. If the greens, tees, and fairways grew unchecked, as the rough had begun to do, to me it seemed unlikely that a buyer would be interested in investing money in a recovery operation. The quality of cut on most surfaces continued to decline as the equipment was

now in need of reel grinding and new bedknives instead of additional back-lapping. I was able to keep greens, tees, and fairways at a manageable, if not shaggy, height, especially in contrast to the actively growing rough. The lack of funds and chemicals meant that several important chemical sprays, including a pre-emergent herbicide for crabgrass, fungicide for summer patch, and an insecticide for annual bluegrass weevils were eliminated, and the results of that were quickly becoming evident.

For two weeks in early June, I was officially brought back to work with three former staff members as the first realistic offer was being negotiated. In vain, we began to mow rough, which was now more than 12 inches high, with an antiquated tow-behind Lastec Articulator. At the end of the two weeks, negotiations with the landlord holding the lease on part of the property broke down, which spelled the end of negotiations with the club as



The inevitable scalped appearance on the first hole upon completion of mowing rough back down to 2.5 inches.



Before and after: The par-3 15th hole on July 1 and on Opening Day, September 1.

well. The staff of four was informed of the latest layoff simultaneously, as the power company shut off the electricity to our facility.

For the first time since I was initially informed that Oak Lane Golf and Country Club would close, I was finally convinced that the end was imminent. The next day, with mid-June temperatures rising into the mid 80s, summer patch beginning to appear in fairways, the rough now more than 16 inches on at least 12 holes, and an irrigation system crippled by lack of electricity, I knew that my hard work and creativity had taken me as far as I could go. At this point, it was going to take an operator with startup capital to save any future for the property. I got back on a fairway mower and crossed my fingers yet again

THE LAST CHANCE

Amazingly, two things happened during the last two weeks of June that would prove critical for the survival of the golf course. Timely rain made it completely unnecessary to irrigate. Also, a buyer, Joseph DiNatale, owner of The Tradition Golf Club in Wallingford, Connecticut, and his advisor and restaurant owner of The Seasons at The Tradition, Steve Fontanella, began negotiating with both Oak Lane and its landlord. On June 30, an agreement with both sides was reached, and on

July 1, long before any sale closing could occur, The Tradition assumed operation of Oak Lane's golf course. And most important, I will be forever grateful that they chose to retain me as superintendent.

During the next few weeks, we set about playing catch-up to every other golf course in the world. Initially, The Tradition provided staff from their other golf course along with many volunteers who were friends of the new buyer. We began fixing up usable equipment and purchased several used mowers so we could perform routine maintenance once again.

At this point, our three biggest hurdles were the rough, which was now at least two feet high on most of the property, catching up with all the necessary chemical applications, and irrigating the golf course while the lawyers attempted to get power restored to the property. For the first few days, we set every rough mower in our possession to the highest height of cut possible. Some machines performed better than others, but progress was slow with each one. It seemed there was no quick way to go from 24 inches to 2.5 inches. We were also faced with the problem of removing the clippings. Oak Lane's antiquated leaf sweeper barely met the task. Full hoppers were dumped on cart paths to be removed when time permitted.

Progress was slow until a salesman recommended that we look into a Wiedenman Super 500 sweeper with flail blades. We were able to rent the machine, and rough cutting progressed more quickly. One machine was able to do the work that previously required three. When we finished mowing the rough, two-and-a-half weeks later, we had removed more than 550 hoppers of grass.

The pumphouse was a mess! A burglar stole most of the system's copper wire when the course was closed. We had it rewired and retrofitted to accept a 175-kilowatt generator that was brought in to provide power to the pumps. Three smaller generators were used to provide power to the field controllers. Without power in the maintenance facility, the central computer was useless, so irrigation programming was done manually with the field controllers as we monitored system pressure. After the eighth day of operation, an agreement was reached between the power company and the new owners, and we were once again up and running.

When not irrigating the golf course, I attempted to catch up with the basic chemical programs. An insecticide for white grubs was applied on time. Curative fungicide applications were made to suppress summer patch disease, albeit several weeks past due.

Oak Lane's annual bluegrass weevil population was worse than it had ever been. Spot treatments with granular Dylox provided some short-term results, but feeding damage from newly emerging larva continued and left the perimeter portions of greens in tough shape. By the end of July many of the greens had deteriorated.

Less than \$30,000 dollars had been spent on the property for the first six months of the year. Even though we had begun standard operating procedures on July 1, I had to accept that the lack of normal spring maintenance was coming back to haunt the golf course. An early August opening was postponed when we decided to aerate and oversee the greens to further improve turf conditions. In hindsight, this aeration was performed three weeks too early, even though daytime temperatures dipped into the mid 70s

for a few days. While aeration did not provide any immediate satisfaction, it allowed us to introduce more bent-grass seed into the greens.

As we attempted to patiently wait for the greens to mend so we could meet our new opening date of September 1, the weather shifted from high heat and humidity to bring us three major storm events at the end of August. On August 21, a tropical storm pushed through our area, with 6.5 inches of rain recorded at the maintenance facility. The storm flooded Racebrook, the golf course's water source for irrigation, and rising waters engulfed our pumphouse, causing electrical damage to the irrigation pump controls. A key cart path connecting the two sides of the property was destroyed under the flood waters. We quickly repaired the damage in time for Hurricane Irene to pass through on August

28. The 4.5 inches of rain and 70 mph wind gusts knocked down 15 sizable trees and scattered leaves, sticks, and debris throughout the golf course. Electricity was restored four-and-a-half days later, just in time for a soggy opening day. One more 5-inch rain-storm arrived on September 4 to effectively relegate golf carts to paths only for the first few weeks of operation. We seemed to be cursed!

Eleven months after I had first learned of Oak Lane Golf and Country Club's imminent demise, the Tradition at Oak Lane was now in existence.

CURRENTLY

As of this writing (October 2011), things are beginning to feel routine on the golf course. Mowing frequencies for the entire property occur on a more consistent basis. The sale is expected to occur before the end of the month. The clubhouse will need major renovations, including a new roof before winter. The future of the tennis operation is still undecided. The pool will be demolished and never return. It has yet to be determined whether the new business will be a public or semi-private operation.

Most important, plans are being made for the property for next year and beyond. Tree work, especially around some problem greens, has been scheduled. Old drain lines are set to be replaced. A continuous cart path will be extended on the back nine. The future looks bright once again.

"Risk/reward" is a term frequently used in golf when evaluating playing strategies. I often viewed the situation my family and I faced as a high risk/reward opportunity. In our case, there have been a few low-risk/low-reward opportunities that we have passed on during the last year. As it turns out, the risk we took in remaining at Oak Lane has rewarded us with a job working for a wonderful family-run company and the opportunity to continue to live in our community. The reward thus far was worth all the uncertainty and risk!

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Flooding in late August caused severe damage to cart paths and to the pumphouse.