



grooming  
**Tiger's  
lair**

# *A host of golf course maintenance professionals — and one awestruck magazine editor — join forces to prepare Pebble Beach for the 2000 U.S. Open.*

Story by Scott Hollister

Photos by Christine Bush

**T**hursday, June 15. 4 a.m. You'd think that after three days of early-morning wake-up calls, a man would get used to shaking the cobwebs from his head hours before most of America had even considered stirring from its sleep.

Trust me. You don't "get used" to 4 a.m. This morning's slap in the head was just as jarring as the slap in the head I took at 4 a.m. the day before, which was just as vicious as the day before that.

But life offers many trade-offs, and this was clearly one of them. A few additional hours of sleep in exchange for helping prepare one of golf's grandest courses for the 100th playing of the U.S. Open. Seemed like a good deal to me, and the 39 other volunteers who had made their way to Pebble Beach for the week apparently agreed.

Of course, the bulk of the other volun-

teers — not to mention the regular crew at Pebble Beach — were professional, real-life, honest-to-goodness golf course maintenance personnel. Whether they were head superintendents, assistant superintendents, mechanics or longtime crew members, maintaining golf courses put food on these folks' tables.

I, on the other hand, am a magazine editor. I only *write* about real-life, honest-to-goodness golf course maintenance personnel. Yet here I was, working side-by-side with some of this industry's finest, all the while desperately trying to disprove that old journalistic saying, "Those who cannot do, write about those who can."

This morning, my usual healthy dose of trepidation was mixed with an added sense of urgency. That slim margin of error that was present the first three days of the week was now history. The practice rounds were over. Today was the first round of, arguably, the most important tournament in golf.

It was game time at Pebble Beach. And somehow, I found myself at ground zero.

## **Into the fire**

Sunday, June 11. 12:42 p.m.

I'm airborne, jetting from Phoenix to

## **Dave Ward**

## **Olympia Fields Country Club**

For someone who never had "tournament superintendent" high on his list of career goals, Dave Ward is sure getting a good taste of what it's like to host some of the biggest events in golf.

The superintendent at Olympia Fields Country Club learned the historic Chicago layout would host the 1997 U.S. Senior Open shortly after starting at the club in 1991. After that event came off with nary a hitch, the USGA rewarded Olympia Fields with an even bigger show, the 2003 U.S. Open.

So with that event looming just three short years

away, the 25-year GCSAA member jumped at the chance to serve a turn as a volunteer at Pebble Beach this year and the opportunity to see exactly what was in store for his facility.

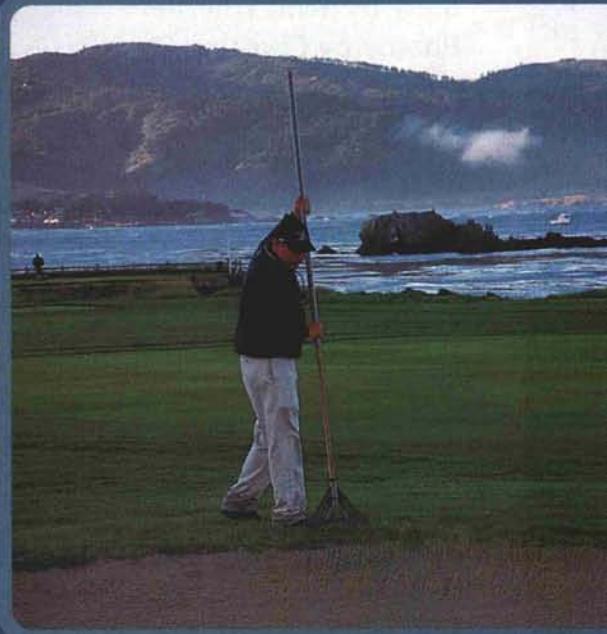
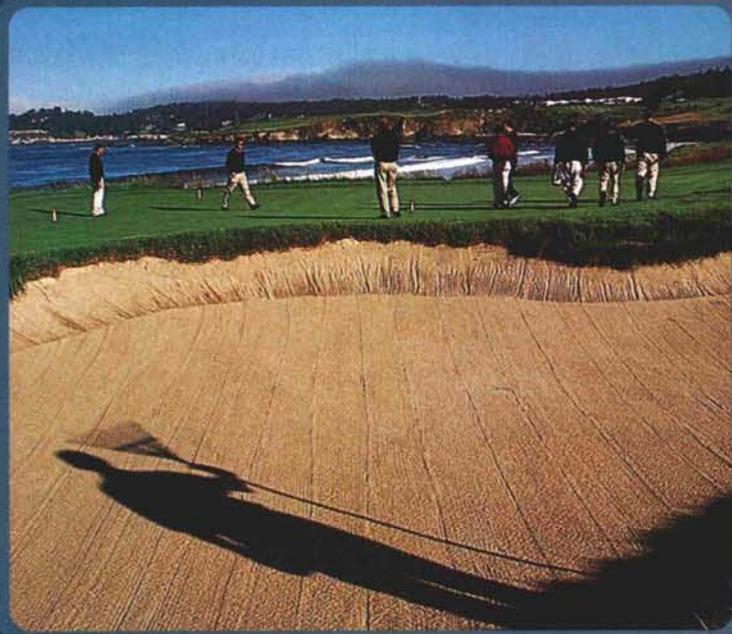
"The thing I'll take with me most is just the size of the whole thing," Ward says. "I was amazed at the size and spectacle of it all just for a one-week event. I was really looking at the logistical things — the staging, the transportation, the press area. Things like that. It really made me aware of some of the things we're going to have to be ready for."

Pebble Beach and contemplating how I got myself in this predicament. I suppose I owe as much to dumb luck and good fortune as to masterful planning. In fact, one stray comment during a passing conversation at the 1999 U.S. Open set the whole affair in motion.

Sent to Pinehurst, N.C., to chronicle, among other things, the exploits of three assistant superintendents who had won an essay contest to participate in The Toro Co.'s Championship Tournament Training Program, I had a chance meeting with Mark Michaud, then the superintendent at

and do something once I got to Pebble Beach. The skills I had mastered as a writer and editor — observing, questioning, eating — would do me little good in this spot. I would be a working member of the maintenance staff who would actually be expected to, surprisingly enough, work.

So in an effort to get at least a smidgen of experience, I signed up for a few weekends of golf course maintenance boot camp at Alvamar Golf and Country Club, just down the road from GCSAA headquarters in Lawrence, Kan. I crammed as much education into a few days as I could.



Pebble Beach Golf Links, who was volunteering at Pinehurst.

When I mentioned that a novice's view of golf course maintenance at a U.S. Open might make a good story for a certain magazine I knew, Michaud encouraged me to volunteer for the Open he would be hosting the following year. A few weeks and several phone calls later, I had been enlisted.

There was one small problem, though. Early this year, Michaud left Pebble Beach to take the top job at Shinnecock Hills Golf Club in Southampton, N.Y. I figured my spot on the crew at the Open had left with him.

I figured wrong. Ted Horton, CGCS, vice president of resource management at Pebble Beach and a great friend of GCSAA, made sure he and new superintendent Eric Greytok honored each and every commitment Michaud had made prior to his departure, including mine. Ready or not, I was locked in.

Of course, now I faced the prospect of having to go out

Left: Handling duties ranging from bunker raking to greens mowing, 40 volunteers joined the regular maintenance staff at Pebble Beach for the 2000 U.S. Open.

Center: The 12-man bunker-raking crew at the U.S. Open, including the author, was charged with preparing each of Pebble Beach's 92 bunkers for play each day.

Right: As a flock of seagulls looks on, the author, left, joins fellow volunteer Ronald "Ben" Fish, assistant superintendent at Green Tree GC in Vacaville, Calif., in preparing a fairway bunker on the sixth hole.

I cut cups.

I mowed greens.

I raked bunkers.

I changed tees.

I emptied trash.

I also pried as much info as I could out of head superintendent Dick Stuntz, CGCS, as well as my own personal superintendent trainer, Ron Downing, a part-time weekend worker at Alvamar who just happened to be a co-worker of mine at GCSAA. Apparently, Downing knew what he was talking about — he has since left GCSAA to become the full-time assistant superintendent at Alvamar.

By early June, I had done all I could. I was as ready as I was ever going to be. Pebble Beach awaited.

## Hitting the beach

Monday, June 12, 5:36 a.m.

If there is a better spot to begin your work day than this one, I haven't seen it. And after spending some quality time inside the famed seawall fairway bunker on Pebble Beach's 18th hole, I'm pretty sure I never will.

Running nearly 100 yards along the far left side of the fairway and ending just short of the front edge of an elevated green, this is a bunker that rarely sees any action. The brave of heart attempting to reach the green in two on this 543-yard

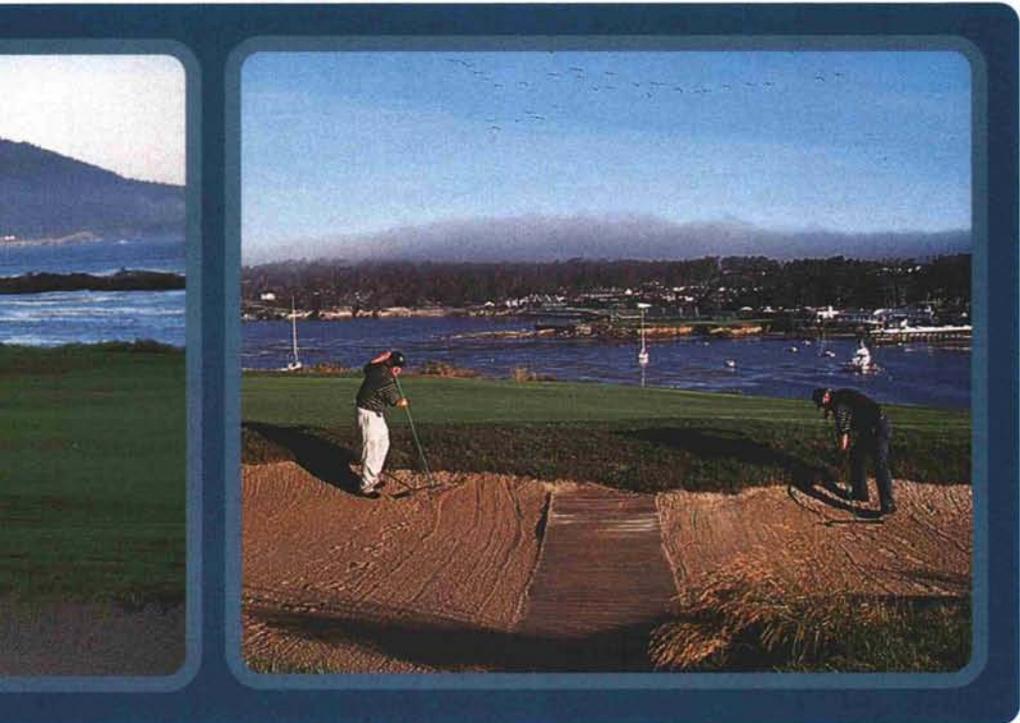
par 5 will occasionally find the tail end of the bunker, like Tiger Woods will do at the end of his first round on Thursday. But most will either be safely on the fairway to the right or dancing with the sea lions on the rocks to the left.

From the bunker, the whole of Monterey Bay stretches out before me. And although it is still relatively dark, my first glimpse at Pebble Beach is an outrageous one. The sun will begin to rise at my back in a few minutes, but that spectacle will have a tough time tearing me away from this sight.

The business at hand does a much better job. The first group of players on this, the first day of practice rounds, will climb the first tee in less than an hour. I, along with 11 others, have drawn bunker duty for the week, and our charge today is to be clear of the fifth hole by the time those players reach No. 3. Great. I've been on the course less than an hour and I'm already on deadline.

And there would be no mechanized bunker rakes during this week. No sir, every single one of the 92 bunkers at Pebble Beach will get the human touch for the Open. Good for the bunkers, not so good for the bunker-rakers. At least not this bunker-raker.

But fortunately for me, actually getting out and doing what I've been thinking about doing for all these weeks did a fine job of melting away my anxieties. After a quick



## Ronald Fish

## Green Tree Golf Club

There are alternate career paths in golf course maintenance, and then there are ALTERNATE career paths. The tale of Ronald "Ben" Fish clearly falls among the latter.

The assistant superintendent at Green Tree Golf Club in Vacaville, Calif., spent more than two decades in the Air Force as a special agent for the Office of Special Investigations. But playing Matlock for so many years did little to dampen his enthusiasm for his first true love — golf course maintenance.

So when his 23-year military career was through, Fish headed off for the University of California-Davis and began career No. 2.

"Both careers involve managing resources and using the scientific method to solve problems," the five-year

GCSAA member says. "I just love golf. My brother and I built a three-hole layout in our backyard when I was 10 years old, and it grew from there."

Among the crew of volunteers at the U.S. Open, Fish may have been the most knowledgeable about Pebble Beach. A veteran volunteer of three previous AT&T Pro-Am tournaments, Fish knew the lay of the land as well as many of the full-time staffers at the course. He was also well versed in the history of the course and the stories behind many of the recent changes.

"I'm very fortunate to be able to pursue my dream, which is to become a respected certified superintendent. I just want to thank my mentors for keeping me pointed in the right direction and giving me opportunities to prove myself," Fish says.



The new par-3 fifth hole at Pebble Beach was the focus of plenty of attention during the U.S. Open, from fans, the media and the maintenance staff alike.

lesson in the art of bunker raking from our fearless bunker commander for the week, Pebble Beach staffer Mike Wolpoff, we were off and running.

#### **A front-row seat**

Monday, June 12. 5:08 p.m.

The first day of practice rounds is drawing to a close, and it is already apparent that this trip will be far more than just a foray into the world of golf course maintenance.

Don't get me wrong — the practical side of this experience was invaluable. I got to try my hand at a number of tasks that previously I had only written or read about. I raked bunkers to within an inch of their lives. I

filled divots. I repaired ball marks. I fluffed rough (don't ask).

I also got a firsthand look at just how intensive the maintenance can be at an event such as a U.S. Open and why the results of that kind of maintenance can put John Q. Superintendent behind a big ol' eight ball. It was tough enough for a crew of nearly 80 with plentiful resources to keep Pebble Beach looking the way it did for one *week*. Expecting a superintendent to do the same with a crew of 10 and extremely limited resources for an entire *season* is downright unfair.

But what I've really taken away from my time at Pebble Beach are those singular, once-in-a-lifetime moments, experiences that seem to roll one on top of the other.

Want an example? Try this on for size: We're working the par-3 17th hole, one of golf's most famous holes. Tom Watson's chip in for birdie from the back side of this green won him the 1982 U.S. Open. It's late in the day Monday and although a few groups remain on the course, we're getting after our duties.

As a group of us attack the greenside bunkers, who should approach the tee but a group including Watson and the man he beat that day in '82, Jack Nicklaus. When they

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A veritable army of workers, including USGA officials and members of the maintenance staff, work on the 10th green before the start of Tuesday's practice rounds.

reach the green, the trash talk begins. Nicklaus asks Watson if he thinks he could hit that lucky shot again. Watson retorts that it was nothing but skill, then proceeds to toss a few balls on the spot of that famed shot and, although the hole location is different, take a few hacks at repeating the feat.

Meanwhile, those of us within earshot of this banter are too awestruck to rake. ESPN's Classic Sports network couldn't have cooked up anything better if they had tried.

#### A very good day

Tuesday, June 11. 7:18 p.m.

As if Monday's encounter with two of golf's greatest heroes wasn't unbelievable enough, today has quickly trumped that

experience in sheer volume alone.

In the morning, the USGA's Tim Moraghan allowed the maintenance staff to spend a little quality time with the championship trophy Woods will eventually hoist over his head on Sunday afternoon. "I just wanted you guys to see this. This is what all your hard work is for," Moraghan told the crew.

That afternoon, a couple of golf fans dropped by the maintenance facility to thank everyone for all their hard work. That I was only mildly surprised when those two golf fans turned out to be former

commissioner of Major League Baseball Peter Uebberoth and actor Clint Eastwood — two of the principal owners of Pebble Beach — just goes to show you how desensitized to the fantastic you become at this place. Hanging with the Outlaw Josey Wales just doesn't seem too out of the ordinary in this neck of the woods.

But that's not all. Late that evening, the owner of a rather sizable home off the 11th green approached a trio of us repairing ball marks on that green. No, he wasn't there to complain about anything. This gentleman, hosting a small party on his patio at the time, broke away from his friends to thank us for "taking such good care of my green," as he put it, and to offer us a couple of adult beverages.

## Jeff Steen

### Olympic View Golf Club

As a boy growing up in Canada, Jeff Steen's dreams were of Stanley Cups, not Ryder Cups. But when injuries cut short his promising junior hockey career, the three-year GCSAA member knew his future in that sport might be limited to the back of a Zamboni.

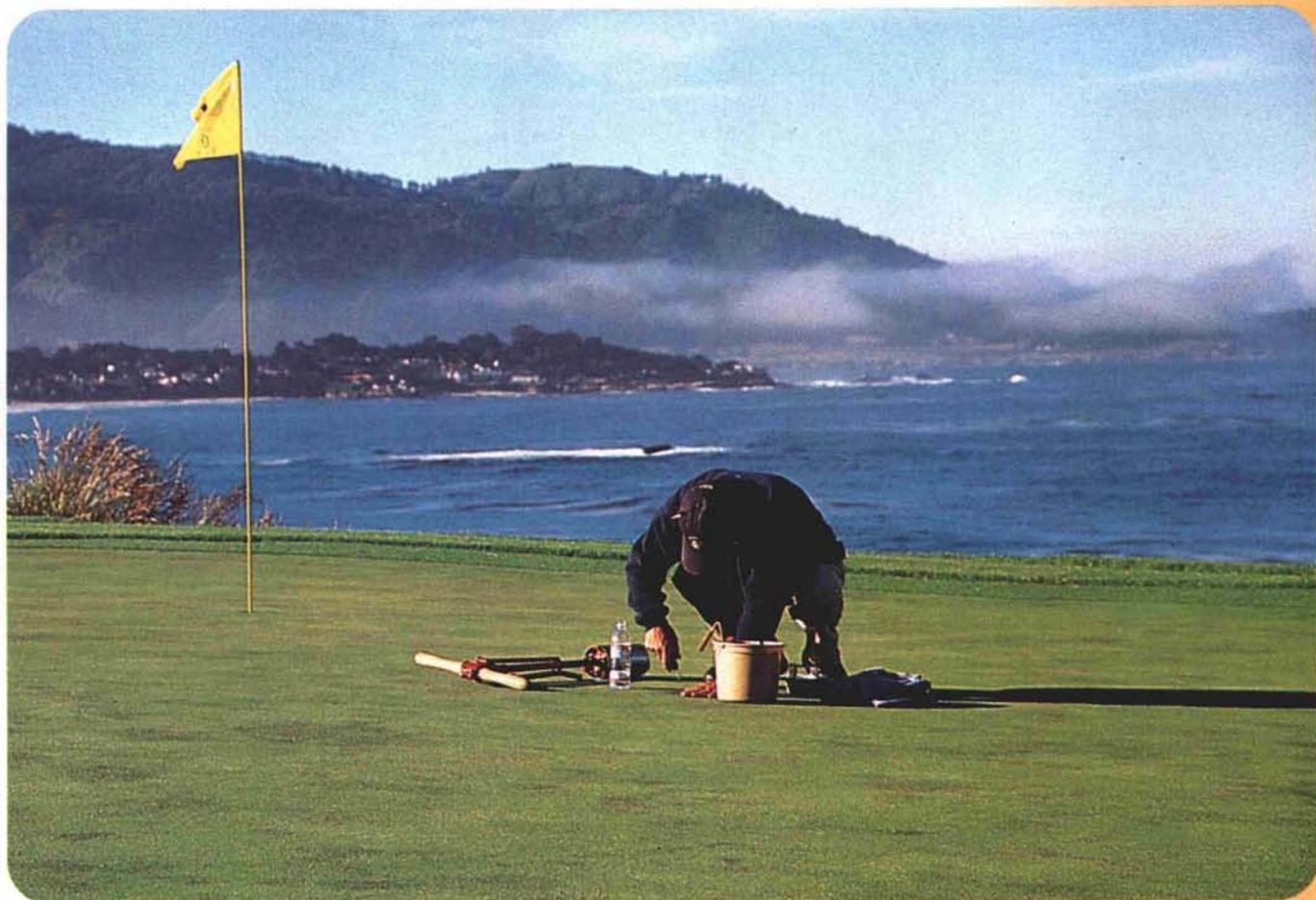
So Steen turned to a new love — golf. And even he admits to being shocked by where that career led him during the second full week of June.

"The U.S. Open? Come on," Steen laughs. "For someone from Canada to be here doing what I'm doing is a

once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I feel very, very fortunate."

Now at Olympic View Golf Club in Victoria, British Columbia, Steen first learned of the opportunity to work the Open after playing a round at Pebble Beach and meeting with then-superintendent Michaud. A few gentle reminders to both Michaud and Greytok later, Steen was on his way.

"The squeaky wheel got the grease, I guess," he says. "A very thankful squeaky wheel."



I asked my co-workers — Troy Russell and Ken Nice, both superintendents at the much-heralded Bandon Dunes Golf Course in Bandon, Ore. — if that kind of stuff happened every day to golf course superintendents. They both laughed and assured me that, no, that kind of stuff did not happen every day. A pat on the back or a kind word was the most superintendents could expect.

Wow, I deadpanned. Just another sign that GCSAA's public relations campaign is beginning to pay off.

#### **The end**

Friday, June 14. 4:08 a.m.

In less than 12 hours, I will board a plane heading east. Unavoidable conflicts forced me to limit my stay at Pebble Beach to just five days. Initially, my apprehension about the whole affair convinced me that three days of practice and two days of actual tournament preparations would be more than enough for this Kansan.

Now, leaving before the last group walks up 18 on Sunday is the last thing I want to do. Believe it or not, I have actually taken to my tasks on the golf course, to the people I have met while at Pebble Beach. With each bunker,

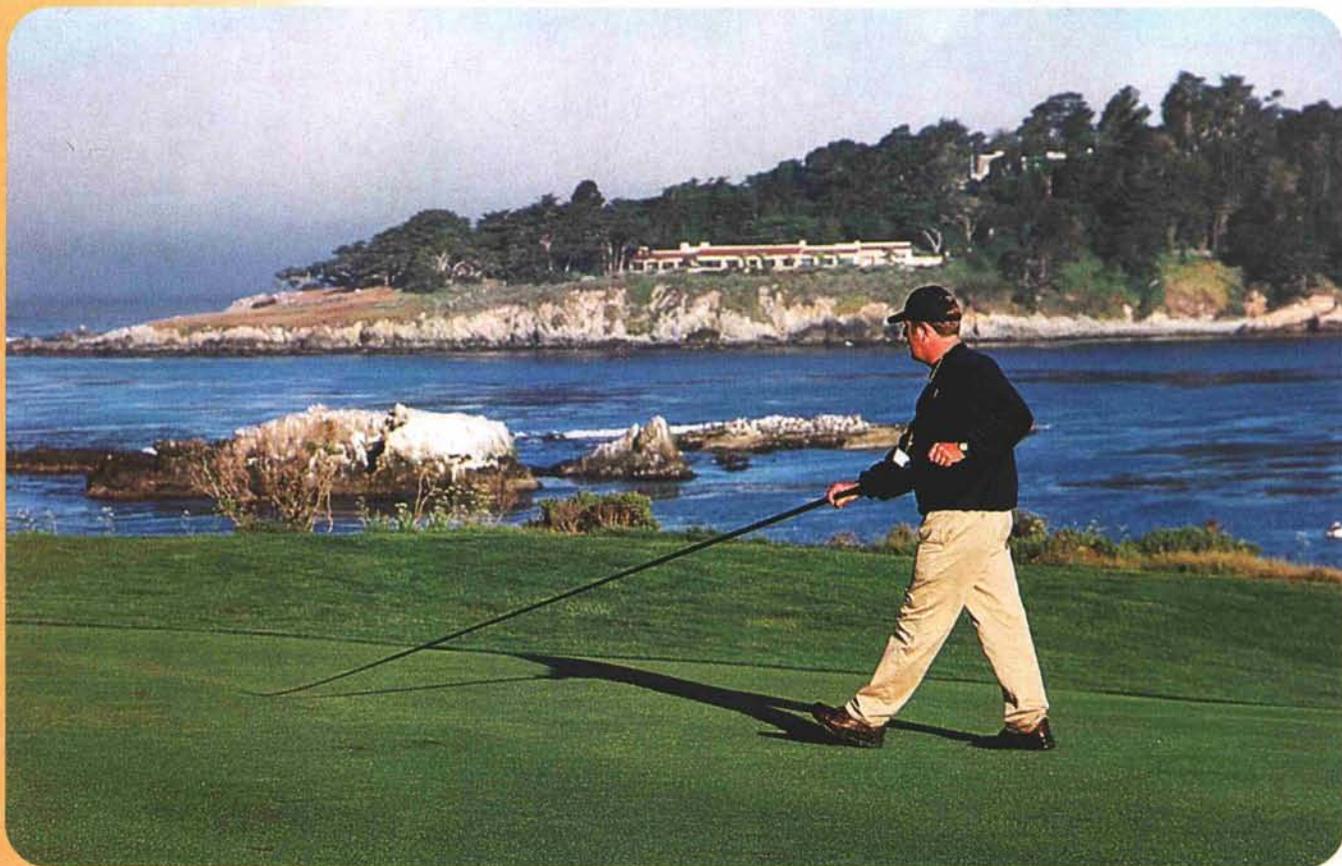
I can feel my technique improving, my confidence growing. And although raking a bunker may seem like a menial task, I am drawing an ever-increasing amount of satisfaction from my work.

There is something visually pleasing about a freshly raked bunker that I find tugging at me more and more as the week goes on. I'm sure the stunning setting that serves as the home to these bunkers has something to do with it, but I have to admit it — I kind of dig this superintendents' business.

Today, that newfound confidence will be greatly tested. A thick blanket of fog rolled in off the ocean early Thursday afternoon, forcing a delay in first-round play. That delay

The removal of ball marks from the diminutive greens at Pebble Beach was a nearly constant task for the maintenance staff during the U.S. Open.

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Several volunteers were responsible for whipping dew from Pebble Beach's fairways before play each day.

soon turned into a postponement until early Friday morning, when players will pick up where they left off.

That has put the pressure squarely on the maintenance staff. Like some charity tournament at a local municipal course, golfers will head back to the course for a 6:30 a.m. shotgun start. That means the course must be completely ready by that time. The work we have normally finished in three hours must be done in two hours today.

Complicating matters is the bulk of our work will be done in almost complete dark-

ness. We won't get the benefits of sunlight until well after 5 a.m., and even then, the lingering fog will mute much of that light. Save for some modest help from the headlights on our utility vehicles, we'll be working blind.

Five days ago, that prospect would have left me petrified. Today, I can hardly wait to hit the course.

Once again, it's game time at Pebble Beach. And somehow, I was lucky enough to find myself at ground zero.

**GCM**

*Scott Hollister is editor of GCM.*

## A thank you

This experience would not have been possible without the gracious assistance of a good number of people. So, my heartfelt appreciation goes out to all who had a hand in this project, in particular:

- Dick Stuntz, CGCS, and the rest of the maintenance staff at Alvarado Golf and Country Club in Lawrence, Kan.
- Former GCSAA media/public relations coordinator Ron Downing, now the assistant superintendent at Alvarado
- Pebble Beach Vice President of Resource Management Ted Horton, CGCS
- Superintendent Eric Greytok and the rest of the staff at Pebble Beach Golf Links
- Mark Michaud, superintendent at Shinnecock Hills Golf Club in Southampton, N.Y., and former superintendent at Pebble Beach
- My wife Britt, who allowed me to miss her birthday in order to be in California for the U.S. Open