

Tiger Woods putts before an enthusiastic Argentine crowd during the 2000 World Cup of Golf at Buenos Aires GC.

A True performance

The World Cup and one young superintendent bring golf excitement to Argentina.

Dale L. Wesselman

In January 2000, the Buenos Aires (Argentina) Golf Club was selected to host the 2000 EMC² World Golf Championships. Ranked as the No. 1 golf course in Argentina, the club also has the distinction of having one of the top 500 golf holes in the world. Its par-4, 456-yard ninth hole on the yellow course has been rated one of *Golf Magazine's* best par 4s in the world. So, it is not surprising that the organizers of the tournament were charmed with the exquisite design and the splendid conditions of this golf course.

Scheduled to appear at the event were 48 of the world's best golfers from 24 countries, including Tiger Woods from the United States. The local media promoted the tournament as one of the biggest sporting events in the history of Argentina — a pretty lofty claim considering soccer is king in this sports-crazed country

that has won two World Cup soccer championships.

For many American-born and educated superintendents, preparing a golf course for a key PGA tournament may not be such a huge undertaking. However, for many foreign superintendents working outside the United States, it can be a daunting experience. The pressure of trying to compete with the likes of Augusta National or Pebble Beach is overwhelming. The majority of the turfgrass managers abroad do not have a formal education in turf management or agronomy. Nor have they had the opportunity to intern under seasoned veterans at world-ranked courses.

For most, their knowledge of turfgrass management was acquired through years of on-the-job training. In Argentina and in other countries in South America, many superintendents are hindered by their lack of

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0.20% Water Soluble Magnesium (Mg)	0.02 0.04 0.07
0.20% Water Soluble Magnesium (Mg)	0.02 0.04 0.07
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AD INFO #93



Photos by Dale Wesselman

Buenos Aires GC superintendent Diego True (right) received help from superintendents and crews from other South American countries, including (from left) Marcelo Travieso of Valle Escondido in Uruguay and Ricardo Melognia from Madison GC in Uruguay.

English skills. Whereas there are some technical publications in Spanish, the more advanced information is usually available only in English, making it difficult for superintendents in South America to keep up with existing advances in turfgrass management.

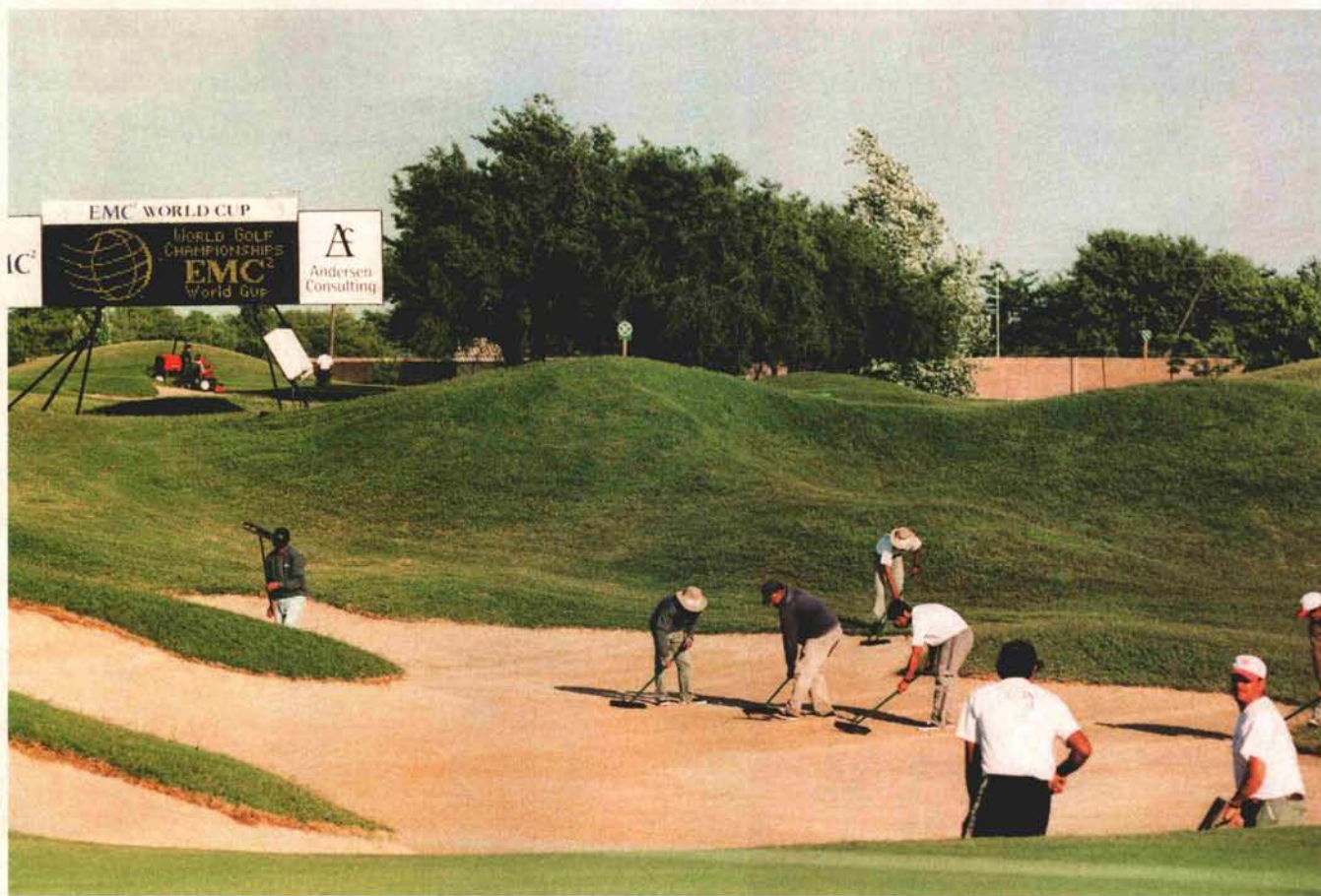
However, one superintendent who was anxiously awaiting the challenge of preparing his golf course for the world's best was Diego True at Buenos Aires GC. In addition to his bilingual abilities in English and Spanish, True has nine years of turfgrass management experience and is a six-year member of GCSAA. He also had a few good mentors along the way who helped him hone his skills. He is the first to admit that without these individuals, he would not be where he is today.

Early lessons

Born and raised in beautiful Sierra de la Ventana, a village 375 miles southwest of Buenos Aires, True's first teacher was his father, Joaquin. He taught his son the game of golf and how to appreciate the game and its surroundings, something that has always been etched in True's memory.

When True was 19, his family moved to Buenos Aires. In need of a job and remembering how much fun the golf course had been, he found employment with the Asociacion Argentina de Golf (AAG) where he got his first taste of greenkeeping and where he met his next mentor. Under the watchful eye of agronomist Guillermo Busso, the AAG's director of golf courses, True tended to their three nursery greens. Two of the greens were Tifgreen bermudagrass, and one was Pennlinks bentgrass. Little did True know at that time, that eight years later he would be grooming 18 Pennlinks greens for the best golfers in the world.

After a season with the AAG, True took an assistant superintendent position with the Argentina Golf Club, a small club in Del Viso, about 20 miles from Buenos Aires. At Argentina GC he learned more than just how to care for greens, he also learned the daily routine of golf course management. This involved cup-cutting and course set-up, tee and fairway mowing, bunker maintenance and crew management.



Tournament preparation included hand raking bunkers on No. 3.

During True's apprenticeship at Argentina GC, Buenos Aires GC opened 18 of its 27 holes on its property in a neighborhood north of Buenos Aires called Bella Vista. An American, Randy Thompson, directed the construction and grow-in of this Robert von Hagge design. A native of Massachusetts and a University of Massachusetts-Stockbridge graduate, Thompson had experience in Massachusetts and Texas as a superintendent as well as experience as a construction superintendent at several other von Hagge projects.

In January 1995, Thompson, now a 20-year GCSAA member, was searching for someone to train to become the next superintendent at Buenos Aires GC. He contacted Busso at the AAG, who recommended True. Thompson offered True the position. In February 1995, True began working at Buenos Aires GC and trained full time under Thompson for one year. Together, Thompson and True constructed the bunkers on the final holes and began manicuring the young bentgrass greens in preparation for the

opening of the last nine holes. One of the many aspects of greenkeeping True learned from Thompson was the art of maintaining bentgrass greens in the warm-season climate of Buenos Aires.

Irrigation advice

As True was developing his skills, he acquired the nickname "Riego" (Spanish for irrigation) because he used so much water on the greens as he believed they needed it to survive the hot summer. Thompson showed him how to limit the amount of water and nitrogen, yet still maintain healthy putting greens. Thompson also demonstrated the proper procedure for aggressive verticutting and top-dressing. After a day or two, the greens responded beautifully. True absorbed every bit of advice Thompson offered, and to this day, True credits Thompson most for his success.

In 1996, the management at Buenos Aires GC, with Thompson's recommendation, gave True the day-to-day management responsibilities of its 27-

hole facility. Soon after, Thompson opened his own company, South American Golf Course Design, Construction and Consulting now based in Santiago, Chile. One of his first clients was Buenos Aires GC, where he is still a consultant of agronomy and design. Thompson makes bi-monthly visits to the course and assisted True with conditioning the course for the World Cup tournament.

With the support of the management and membership at Buenos Aires GC, the next four years became a learning experience for True. And while the green committee had set high standards, True had access to the resources needed to maintain the course to those high standards.

Weather woes

The months prior to the World Cup tournament were far from normal for True.

In January 2000, Jon Scott, CGCS, director of agronomy for the PGA Tour and a 27-year GCSAA member, made

his initial visit to Buenos Aires GC. Scott toured the course with True, Thompson, Busso and Gianfranco Macri, club president. Preparation for the tournament required a complete renovation of the 88 bunkers on the 18 holes of the composite course that would be used for the tournament. Several tees also had to be built to lengthen some holes, and the 17th green complex had to be totally rebuilt.

The club decided that, given the construction experience of Thompson and True, in-house construction crews could complete all the required improvements.

True began planning immediately. His annual maintenance budget for the 27 holes at Buenos Aires GC was increased from \$800,000 (U.S.) to \$1 million (U.S.) for the year prior to the tournament. He also added four full-

time bunker construction workers to his usual three-man staff, which includes three landscape personnel, two mechanics and assistant superintendent Luis Martinez. Martinez was the first person hired by Thompson 10 years ago to hand pluck (with a table fork) the *Poa annua* from the young Pennlinks bentgrass nursery. Martinez also assisted in many other areas during the construction of the golf course and knows the locations of the irrigation valves, buried electrical wires, drain lines, etc.

As the renovation projects got under way, the weather was reasonably cooperative. However, in April the rain started and continued into the South American winter months of June, July and August. This period was one of the wettest in Buenos Aires history, and True had several fairways under water for almost three weeks. One green was submerged for four days. However, the crew tried to maintain the construction schedule, knowing that many hours of cleanup would be required later when the flooding finally subsided.

The combination of rain, no sun and cool temperatures contributed to the thinning turf conditions. Since True could not control the weather, he said he concentrated on rebuilding the bunkers and tees, trimming tree branches and even removing several trees. In spite of the weather, preparations for the tournament progressed, albeit slowly.

Volunteer call

The rainy days provided True the opportunity to address his staffing and equipment needs for the months preceding the tournament. Two months prior to the event, Sebastian Ruggeri, president of Profield SA (Toro's equipment and irrigation dealer in Argentina), donated more than \$300,000 worth of Toro machinery for the tournament. So equipment was not a concern. To recruit additional staff for the tournament, True took advantage of the networking he had done at various seminars, field days, etc. He informed all the local and regional superintendents that if anyone was interested in volunteering during World Cup week, they were welcome. He thought it could be a learning



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AD INFO #142

experience for many of the area golf course managers. However, only one Argentine superintendent responded. Luckily, friends in nearby Uruguay and Chile who were working on golf courses offered their assistance.

Marcelo Travieso, superintendent at Valle Escondido Golf Club in Los Barnechea, Santiago, Chile, was anxious to arrive in Buenos Aires. Travieso's work at Valle Escondido earned him a merit

award in GCSAA's 2001 Environmental Steward Awards. Before moving to Chile, Travieso, a three-year GCSAA member, had worked at Buenos Aires GC.

Gustavo Arizabalo, then general manager of golf course operations at Madison Resort, Golf & Spa in Carmelo, Uruguay, was also willing to assist preparations for the World Cup. Arizabalo brought along nearly half of his staff for the entire week of the tournament.

With the onset of spring in the Southern Hemisphere, weather conditions improved. Throughout the winter, True kept Scott informed on the progress of the work on the golf course via regular e-mails. In addition, Thompson visited regularly to monitor the bunker and green construction. As the bermudagrass came to life after a short dormancy, the golf course greened up considerably, and fine-tuning could begin.

At the end of September, Scott returned to Argentina to check on the progress at the club. Almost every item he had discussed during his initial visit had been addressed. The bunkers were nearly complete. Tees had been constructed, and the 17th green was rebuilt with a new approach.

Furthermore, as recommended by the PGA, the fairway contours were adjusted to narrow the landing areas. It was perfect timing to make these adjustments as the 419 bermuda fairways were just beginning to green up. True's aerifying, verticutting and topdressing program had strengthened the fairways and approaches considerably. They were mowed at 0.4 inch for the tournament.

The 419 tees had also improved significantly. Martinez and his crew had worked hard all winter on a tee-leveling program that produced excellent results. Regular verticutting and topdressing had yielded nice firm, pool table-smooth surfaces that allowed for the close mowing (0.2 inch).

When drier and warmer weather resumed, the Pennlinks bentgrass greens quickly built up density.

In October and November True began to narrow his focus. He always kept several golf balls, a putter and a Stimpmeter close by so he could check the consistency of the putting surfaces. His experience showed. He was no longer "Riego" Diego, as he was more judicious with his irrigation and had begun hand watering the very undulating greens. Foliar fertilization was decreased to around 1/8 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet every two weeks and was adjusted accordingly for proper growth and density. Micronutrients were used as needed.

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AD INFO #102

Light topdressing and brushing continued every 14 days. The groomers were used on the walk-behind mowers, and the roller was occasionally used for its smoothing effects. With the tournament approaching rapidly, True had the greens exactly where he wanted them. The target speed for the tournament was 11 on the Stimpmeter.

Comfortable with the greens, True now concentrated on other areas. The

landing areas and approaches were smoothed with regular topdressings and firmed up by using less irrigation. And since this tournament would be televised worldwide, mowing tees and fairways became very important.

The bunker crew's hand raking during the tournament resulted in very attractive bunkers that complemented the undulating greens nicely, especially from the elevated view of the television cameras.

The World Cup

Finally, after almost a year of anxious planning and hard work, the time had come. The grandstands were up, the television cameras were in place, the players arrived, and the maintenance staff was eager to begin. True met with the PGA tournament officials to discuss any necessary last-minute changes. Martinez assigned each crew member a job for which he or she would be responsible throughout the tournament.

The early morning course preparations and late afternoon mowing sessions went smoothly. All of True's advance planning and rehearsing paid off. When asked how and why the golf course maintenance operation ran so efficiently during the week, True simply replied, "Communication." The entire week he was in constant radio contact with the tournament officials, the equipment mechanics in the shop, as well as with his assistant and the numerous supervisors out on the course overseeing the crew.

As for the tournament, it was filled with highlights. From the opening day match-up of Argentina's Eduardo Romero and Angel Cabrera against the U.S. team of Woods and David Duval, to the closing ceremonies on Sunday afternoon, huge soccer-like crowds that included then President Fernando de la Rúa, descended upon Buenos Aires GC. The fans chanted their encouragement and roared their approval even as the United States pulled away to the victory over the Argentine team, which placed second. Throngs of people from all walks of life got their first glimpse of world-class golf played on a world-class golf course.

For True, it was a time to remember. Having a chat with Woods and meeting the president of his country in the same week is something not everyone can boast about. Newspapers and magazines from around the world were not only writing about the tournament and the players, but also about the immaculate conditions of the golf course. But in the end True, humbly mingled among the gathering maintenance crew, thanking and commending them for a job

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well done. And sitting on golf cars not far away were Thompson and True's father, Joaquin, smiling proudly.

True's next challenges include continuing to improve the conditions at Buenos Aires GC by updating the irrigation controllers and adding some part-circle heads around the greens. He also hopes to work fewer hours so he can have more time for his hobbies, such as playing more golf. He says he wants to play all 27 holes at least once a week to get a player's perspective of the course.

Golf in Argentina continues to grow in popularity, and Argentine golfers are also making their mark on the world's golf tours. There is no doubt that there is a positive future for golf in Argentina.

GCM

Dale Wesselman is superintendent at Madison Golf Club in Carmelo, Uruguay, and a 14-year GCSAA member.

2002

This article is eligible for the 2002 Leo Feser Award, presented annually since 1977 to the author of the best superintendent-written article published in *Golf Course Management* magazine during the previous year. Superintendents receive a \$300 stipend for articles. Feser Award winners receive an all-expenses paid trip to the annual conference and show, where they are recognized during the Opening Session. They also have their names engraved on a plaque permanently displayed at GCSAA headquarters.

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AD INFO #82