

A year-round Quest



Golf course superintendent Justin Heptinstall and Bunker.



Spreading sand in March is just part of the pursuit of golfing excellence

Summer's here. It's time to stretch your legs and enjoy the warmth. Outdoor fun, good food, relaxing times with friends at the cottage... it'll be great.

At the end of March, as the last storms surged through Muskoka in a winter that never wanted to end, Justin Heptinstall was spreading sand on the grass.

It was just one of many off-season jobs for the superintendent of the Port Carling Golf and Country Club, as he babied the grass and prepared the course for spring opening.

"We spread nine or ten bags of black sand on each green," Justin explains. "It absorbs the sun's heat and melts the snow more quickly."

It sounds labour intensive, but Justin says it's less so than the treatment required in 2013, when the mild winter led to a buildup of ice on the greens. "We had to shovel 14 of them off, half a dozen of us shoveling by hand to clear them. Now that was labour intensive."

Spreading sand or shoveling ice, it's all just part of the activity that's required to ensure the club is ready when its 300 members begin to arrive in spring.

"Some of our members might only be up six or seven weekends in the season," says general manager Wayne Middaugh. "It's essential that every aspect of the club be perfect for each of those weekends."

Personal service
Even when the snow was

still thick on the ground and Justin's black sand was just starting to do its work, chef John Tasoulis was busy at work in the kitchen, meeting with suppliers, planning menus, and testing recipes.

Like all the managers at Port Carling Golf and Country Club, John knows that he'll be busy when summer arrives. Not only will he create a complete culinary experience that will be a treat to the taste-buds, he will also spend time in the dining room – every evening he tries to visit with each table, chatting for a few minutes, welcoming diners and gathering feedback.

Members will usually be greeted by name, just as they are in every other area of the golf course. It's part of what

Wayne refers to as the VIP service that every member and guest receive.

"We try to learn something about each member that can help make every visit to the club special," says Wayne. "It can be your birthday, anniversary or something as simple as your favourite number. If a golfer's lucky number is seven, and they show up for the round to find their clubs set up on cart seven, most golfers I know will immediately think it's going to be that perfect day when they post a career score."

"It's the little details that make a big difference."

Sometimes the big details matter too: things like ensuring the course and dining room are available at all times. For

example, the dining room is only available for special functions at times when it wouldn't otherwise be open. "The primary reason the club exists is so members always have access to a club and a course that is always in perfect condition," says Wayne.

That also means ensuring that booking a tee time or reservation is never difficult. "We only offer two bookable tee-times every thirty minutes, and members

never fear missing a round due to a corporate outing or outside tournament booking the course."

A fine balance

For Justin and his crew, there's a delicate balance between caring for the course and staying out of the members' way.

Throughout the winter, Justin checks on the snow conditions and monitors how well his precious crop of bent grass is doing. A heavy snowfall acts as a blanket, preventing the grass from going into full dormancy and potentially allowing snow molds to grow. Ice buildup can

prevent methane gas from escaping, which can be toxic to the plants. Monitoring those conditions helps him ensure he's ready to give the grass what it needs when spring finally arrives.

Pre-season care is one thing. The bigger challenge is maintaining the course through the playing season.

Mowing and watering, feeding and aerating are all essential elements of the job, tasks that are customized to each part of the course. "There are some holes that are 250 feet higher in elevation than others, so each hole has to have its own system of management."

Spreading sand isn't just a winter job, either. Maintenance crews spread half an inch of sand over the entire course twice a year, a massive task that takes a couple of weeks in early spring and late fall.

The bi-annual sand treatments have done a tremendous job of combating a thatch problem that once plagued the course. "After five or six years of really pounding the sand to it, we've really got the fairways where we want them, with the right amount of firmness," Justin says. "We now see some ball roll, they don't just thwack into the ground."

It's another detail – a big one, in this case. But, just like knowing the members' names and visiting their tables, it's a detail that matters.

"People say 'nobody takes care of me like you folks do,'" says Wayne. "And that's exactly the reaction we're always striving for – our ultimate goal is to exceed everyone's expectations every day." **DS**

BY ANDREW WAGNER-CHAZALON



PORT CARLING GOLF & COUNTRY CLUB
12 Donald Dr., Box 279, Port Carling, ON P0B 1J0
(705) 765-6600 • waynemiddaugh@portcarlinggc.com
www.PortCarlingGC.com

"It's the little details that make a big difference."