



Good enough for French Open is not nearly good enough for Ryder Cup

In the everyday world, we have good, better, best. In the golf world we can replace this by good, better, and the superlative 'Ryder Cup'. Ever since 2012, life has been a dream for 34-year-old greenkeeper and superintendent Alejandro Reyes. In that year he was employed to prepare France's most important course for the 2018 Ryder Cup.

Author: Hein van Iersel



7 min. reading time

BACKGROUND



In the editorial office of Greenkeeper Magazine, Jos Theunissen (Melspring) is on the telephone: 'We are proud to contribute to the success of the golf course hosting the French Open, with our fertilizers and liquids. This course is a contact of my colleague Georges Veber and the superintendent of this course would be glad to see us and tell us about his preparation of the course for the 2018

Ryder Cup. Do you want to join me?' Of course we want to join him. Paris is certainly no punishment, and Reyes' story sounds really sensational. A greenkeeper under 30, being awarded this kind of job. Alejandro Reyes is originally from Spain and studied agronomy on an academic level, both in Spain and in England. After that, he worked in the south of Spain for some years on a number of Jack

Nicklaus courses.'I started out as a greenkeeper, but when the crisis struck and a large part of the staff were dismissed, I soon became responsible for several courses as a superintendent and I was leading a team of 25 greenkeepers.'

Reyes continues:'In 2012, when I was 29, I ran into this vacancy at Le Golf National. The French golf



A perfect course with perfect equipment – there is a special team of three people from Bernhard, manufacturer of sharpening systems, to grind the reels.



Entire blocks of flats have disappeared underground.

federation was given permission by the organisation to organise the 2018 Ryder Cup, provided the course was in perfect shape. That is why the federation was looking for a superintendent with tournament experience and a broad knowledge golf courses construction.. I was invited for an interview. One of the requirements was being able to speak French. I was not, but fortunately I had three months to learn it. And when at the beginning of the second interview they asked me if I wanted to speak French or English, I chose French.' Reyes tells this with a broad smile, but it is clear that he was taking a chance, especially when he was told that he could not switch to English halfway through the interview.

To cut a long story short: Reyes got the job. 'The first day, there was a huge pile of papers on my desk, all about the things I had to realise. Money had been thought of as well. By raising the membership fee of the national golf federation by 2 € and by seeking funding in the region, 7 million euro was collected. This enabled us to carry out the programme that was necessary to prepare the course for the Ryder Cup within five years.'

Reyes: 'You mustn't think that Le Golf National was a bad course. Far from it. But the Ryder Cup is just another category, where different standards apply. The greens etc. were fine, but the drainage of the fairways, for example, was in a mediocre state.'

Reyes explains: 'Organising a mega-event is risk management, for the most part. The French Open is usually organised during a period when Le Golf National is very dry; but it could be very different for the RC, the last week of September.. That is why the drainage of the course had to be optimal, so that even after a downpour the fairways would

immediately be dry again. After 90 mm of rain, the course should absolutely be playable again within three hours!' Reyes: 'When I came here in 2013, this was unthinkable. In winter, for example, it was not allowed to go on the course with trolleys. This has been realised by 'sand-banding': double drainage. On top of the regular drainage, diagonally, there is 140 km of shallow slit drainage: 15 or 20 cm deep slits, filled with coarse sand, help the rainwater to drain quickly, whereupon it is further transported through the main drainage system!'

"1500 sprinklers, connected by more than 50 km of slits, containing 32-315 mm diameter"

The irrigation figures are impressive too. Reyes dishes up some figures: 1500 sprinklers, connected by more than 50 km of slits, containing 32-315 mm diameter HDPE pipes, controlled by a Toro Lynx irrigation computer.

Marathon Golf, Matrix, Melstar S and the complete Melgreen range were used during construction and maintenance of Le Golf National Marathon Golf, Matrix, Melstar S and the complete Melgreen range were used during construction and maintenance of Le Golf National

Dressing

Le Golf National tries to make the course water-proof in a number of ways. First of all, intensive drainage work has been carried out during the past few years. Water can now be transported as fast as possible, helped by the intensive topdressing programme. During the season, the greens are sand-dressed a fraction of a millimetre every week. Once a year the course closes for a number of weeks, when the intensive maintenance is carried out. Well over 1 cm of dress ground is then applied

to the greens, tees, fairways and approaches. In all, almost 2 cm of dress ground is applied yearly. And this can be seen and heard. Jokingly, I say to Theunissen that the greens are so hard, they seem like rustic oak furniture. Standing on the greens, you don't need a stimpmeter to know that they are both very fast and hard as a rock. On a random September day, the greens would be stimping at more than 11, the greenkeeper says. And it would be even faster in case of tournament conditions and if the greens are mown and rolled twice.

Reyes thinks intensive dressing is good for a number of reasons. There is hardly any organic matter in the top layer (less than 1 percent). Therefore, the grass is actually growing on neutral soil and the growth can be perfectly controlled. That is why the greens are 100 percent fertilized with water-soluble fertilizers, applied by means of a state of the art Jacobsen field sprayer. This field sprayer is supported by GPS, so basically it knows where to spray and where not. Reyes does not use this option, however; he puts his trust in an old-fashioned foam marker. Reyes uses the Melgreen biostimulant program for reinforcement of the greens, to compensate for the high stress situations on this substrate like soil. The fertilization of the fairways is partly liquid and partly granular is done with granular long release Marathon fertilizers from Melspring for the forgiving buffering mode of action, coupled to a water soluble fertilizer regime for precision control. Whereas the liquid fertilizer is applied on the greens with a Jacobsen field sprayer, on the fairways this is done by means of the irrigation system. For the greens, however, this is not precise enough.



"HDPE pipes, controlled by a Toro Lynx irrigation computer."

As regards the composition of the grass, the greens consist of a mixture of bluegrass and bent. This mixture may not be completely Green Deal-proof in the Netherlands, but Reyes is pleased with it. And it really helps that the golf course architect adheres to the slogan trees and golf do not mix. Trees are non-existent on the course, enabling it to dry quickly in the wind. It also helps that Reyes still has quite a large medicine cabinet with fungicides at his disposal - although in France the pressure to use less pesticides is increasing as well, he says. That is why the use of the Melgreen program allows him to already reduce on chemical use to quite some extent, but it is clear that the wish to abandon all pesticides is less strong in France than elsewhere in the northern parts of Europe.

Demolition waste

Reyes takes us to the course, to the place where greenkeepers are preparing a separate driving range for the Ryder Cup. He points at the demoli-



Jos Theunissen (Melspring) and Alejandro Reyes



6 min. reading time

- Le Golf National is owned by the French golf federation
- The most prominent course is the Albatros, with 25 French Opens, 1 World Amateur Golfers Championship, the 2018 Ryder Cup and the 2024 Olympics
- Three courses: Albatros, Aigle and Oiselet, with a total of 45 holes
- Surface area: 139 hectares
- 95.000 m² of practice area, 2 driving ranges and 7 putting greens (5.500 m²)
- Greenkeeping team includes 24 M/F + seasonal Gkps

tion waste that has been dug up from the ground. Everything you do not want under a golf course, has come up here from the ground. Pieces of rubble of more than 100 kilos, PVC pipes, but also electrical supplies, pieces of wood and iron. It appeared that during the construction of the golf course in the eighties, the builders were searching for free materials to create different levels in a relatively flat environment. Whole blocks of flats were dumped here, it seems, mixed with some black soil.

Driving range

Another distinguishable feature of a Ryder Cup course is the driving range. Ryder Cup players can easily launch 300-plus metres drives on a good day. This is not possible on the old driving range. That is why a new one is built, far into the nearby golf course.

About Le Golf National

Le Golf National, owned by the French golf federation, was originally built to host the French Open. The course as a whole consists of three different courses: the championship course Albatros, and two less prestigious courses: Aigle (Eagle) and Oiselet (Birdy). These are also 18 holes courses, but less challenging in design and construction. The course was designed in the early eighties by the French golf course architect Hubert Chesneau. Apart from a good-looking, challenging course, there was a wish for a course that was suitable for major tournaments. Practically every green and every tee is surrounded for the greater part by a slope of several metres high, primarily designed to accommodate as many spectators as possible. Reyes: 'And on top of the slope there is going to be a grandstand! Theunissen and I are giving each

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other a meaningful glance and are saying, almost simultaneously: 'Seeing this course makes you realise why there are no suitable courses in the Netherlands for the Ryder Cup.' Not because they are lacking beauty or because they have a smaller number of greens or fairways, but because their design and infrastructure are not appropriate. Reyes points at the paths on the course, asphalt for the most part, not much to look at. 'Don't forget that during the months before and after the Ryder Cup, every two minutes a heavy lorry weighing more than 20 metric tons comes past. Therefore, all these paths are calculated to carry 40 tons.'

Closed for nine months

In order to carry out the major renovations, the course was closed for nine months in all. During that period the drainage and the irrigation were adapted, as were a large number of greens and tees. Lake edges were reconstructed as well, bunkers installed with Capillary Concrete, a full drinking water pipes and fibre optics lines to be able to host 65000 spectators a day and a so on.

Algae and orange are beautiful

A top quality course goes with top quality material. In the case of Le Golf National, this is Jacobsen and Olmix. The course has been orange for a number of years, and recently the Ryder Cup closed a sponsorship deal with Jacobsen and Olmix. We can see it when we enter the halls, a little later: packed with Jacobsen mowers for greens, tees, fairways and roughs. It is clear that the maintenance level of all these machines is high. A team of mechanics are grinding the reels. Reyes explains that two out of these three men have been seconded here by Bernard, manufacturer of sharpening systems. For Olmix (based in France) it is their first entry in this most prestigious golf tournament in the world, a more logical venue than this cannot be found if you want present your vision for a world with less pesticides, chemicals and antibiotics, thanks to algae.

Beautiful or not?

Is Le Golf National a beautiful course? That depends on personal taste and preference, of course. Personally, I prefer courses where nature and experiencing nature are number one, which is not the case on Le Golf National. Here, it's all about golf. And considering the constant stream of Japanese, Chinese and American golf tourists, they seem to have succeeded. The Cup Ryder Cup logo certainly helps to lure those greenfee players.