Maintenance Field Day at Martin Downs CC Draws 150 Members, Local Press

One of the biggest problems superintendents face is that golfers don’t really know what they do. Bridging that disconnection has been one of main goals of the GCSAA in its recent marketing blitz to show golfers the value of having a professional superintendent on staff.

John Cunningham, superintendent of the 36-hole Martin Downs CC in Stuart took the GCSAA message to heart and has done something very successful to take that message to his members. Cunningham just held his 2nd Annual Turf Maintenance Field Day and the attendance shot up from 85 last year to more than 150 this year.

Of course nothing of value is ever achieved without hard work and preparation, and for three weeks prior to the field day there’s a lot of nervous anticipation by the staff that is not accustomed to being in the spotlight. But once the curtain goes up, all settle down to talk about their jobs to an audience of interested listeners and the experience becomes a positive reinforcer for staff and members.

Cunningham is passionate about communicating with his members and instilling pride in his staff. He approached his board of directors last year about holding a field day and they approved. He hasn’t looked back since, and the field day has taken on the importance of a major golf event at the club.

When Cunningham took over six years ago, he began a program of improvements to make the maintenance facility a less drab and cluttered environment to work in. Once that was accomplished he thought, “We complain that golfers don’t know who we are or what we do, why not bring them down to maintenance and show them?”

He got the idea for the field day approach from attending the South Florida Turf Expo in Ft. Lauderdale. He said, “What if we set up six or seven stations. Broke the members up into small groups and had them move from station to station on a timed schedule. We could have tables set up in the building and serve lunch when we are done.”

And so the Martin Down Turf Main-
Assistant Superintendent Eric Kunkel (far right) explains to members how and why aerification and top dressing equipment is used on the course. Photo by Joel Jackson.

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Maintenance Field Day was born.

The day of the event the members play in a morning shotgun tournament and then drive down to the maintenance facility where the tournament results will be scored. They participate in the program that lasts less than an hour and then sit down to lunch in the maintenance building.

Cunningham explained, “We have seven stations this year. Each presentation will last approximately seven minutes including questions and answers which is where we can really display our expertise. Each presenter writes his own spiel and we rehearse the whole program three times and have a dress rehearsal the morning of the field day. We critique the content and time the presentations to make sure they fit the schedule.

“You know a mechanic’s strong suit isn’t usually public speaking, but once he gets started explaining the precision of what he does and answers a few questions like, ‘How many reels do you grind on just this one machine?’ And he says, ‘150.’ The members begin to realize there’s more to maintenance than meets the eye and his pride builds.

“The whole crew is involved. There will be seven tour guides — one to take each group around to each station when time is called. We have a table crew to set up for lunch and we have six or...
seven members of the staff preparing lunch. Last year we had a barbecue this year we are having a Mexican fiesta theme.

"We did go to the expense of renting banquet tables at a cost of $350, with board approval, to improve over last years presentation. We also have hired entertainment this year from a local club to add to the fiesta ambience."

Cunningham says the paybacks and benefits of such an undertaking are worth the effort, "The members make a connection to the staff. They are no longer just faces passing by on the golf course. They understand these people are trained professionals and have pride in what they do. They also learn that maintenance is a lot more complex than they realized and that it is a team effort. Once they learn about what really goes on behind the scenes, they are a lot more positive about the club in general and complaints go way down.

"Just as important is what the staff gains from the experience. We push them out of their comfort zone a little bit. They are nervous. Most don’t sleep the night before. Every wife has heard the presentation umpteen times, but they do just fine. The pride and improved morale from pulling it off creates such a positive working atmosphere that it is a win-win success for all concerned."

Cunningham is already planning the topics for next year’s field day and the members are showing off their newly acquired insider knowledge about golf course maintenance facts. GCSAA’s Kelly Loganbill came down from Lawrence, Kan. to see what Cunningham was doing since he had ordered 500 of those golf maintenance inserts that have appeared in golf magazines. The association will be looking at how to present his field day formula as a tool for everyone to use.

The local paper also had a reporter present and there was a great positive half-page article in the Stuart News about the event. So, there is a way to tell your story and no reason for your members to not know about what you do. It’s up to you. Go for it. It works.