Maintenance for hire: Best of both worlds?

By PETER BLAIS

While Ray Grady signed on as general manager in early 1989, the 45-hole Bobby Jones Municipal Golf Complex was losing money, the city was going broke paying off its mortgage, and three country clubs operated at a loss. One maintenance worker had 45 years experience, another had 25 years. In light of these facts, Grady decided it was time to hire a golf course maintenance company, an outside management firm based in downtown Sarasota, Fl., to manage a 150-member men's club. A Michigan ruling could change the way golf clubs nationwide organize their weekend tee times. How? By allowing guests, or members whose dues exceed $300 per year, to purchase a day's worth of tee times for a flat fee of $20.

Payroll woes solved at municipal complex

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Marshall, Rieszengberg barnstorm with personal Hydrojects in tow

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Peter Marshall was 56, without a pension plan and wondering what he was going to do after retirement when a Toro representative demonstrated the Hydroject aerator last fall at Portland (Maine) Country Club.

Superintendent Pat Lewis was impressed with the water-injection aeration system and talked about renting one the next spring. That got Marshall thinking:

"I called a few people down in Boston and Cape Cod," the former Portland CC maintenance employee recalled. "They had bought Hydrojects and were doing very well subcontracting their services to local golf courses.

"No one was doing it in Maine."

So I called a few superintendents, found out they were interested and decided to take a chance."

Marshall took out a $40,000 second mortgage. He bought a Hydroject, truck and trailer. He advertised in golf publications, rented a booth at March's Maine Turfgrass Conference and called on local superintendents.

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New publication tracks trends in daily fee, resort management

Golf course managers and operators take heed: A recent publication warrants your attention. Trends in Resort and Daily Fee Golf, 1992 Edition is a statistical review incorporating operating and financial data on approximately 100 daily fee, resort and semi-private golf courses throughout the United States. The data used in this edition was compiled from the year ending Dec. 31, 1991.

This publication is designed as a reference and management/operational aid for golf course operators and others in the golf industry. It shows results in the following categories: revenue per round, average income and expenses, golf course maintenance expenses, maintenance costs per hole, and average expense variations 1991 vs. 1990. The results are reported by region and by type of course: resort, daily fee, semi-private. Pannell, Kerr, Forster, an international consulting firm, worked with the National Golf Course Owners Association (NGCOA) in developing the survey, collecting the results and putting together the report.

According to Mike Hughes, executive director of the NGCOA: "It details the actual financial results of a large number of daily fee operations. Now for the first time a golf course operator can compare their operations with others, both on a national and regional basis."

This report, especially when used with the NGCOA's Uniform System of Accounting for Daily Fee and Resort Golf Courses, allows the direct comparison of financial information between operations. The Uniform System encourages the uniform categorization of revenues and expenses, plus the uniform presentation of financial statements to maximize the management information available to the operator. Most large and many smaller operators have already adopted the system.

The Trends report sells for $50 to members of the NGCOA, $75 to non-members. The Uniform System of Accounting for Daily Fee and Resort Golf Courses sells for $20 to members, $30 to non-members. To order either, call 1-800-933-4262.

Men are former golf course maintenance professionals who have bought Toro Hydroject Aerators. "I've got 10 to 15 golf courses lined up for June, July and August," said Riesenberg, former head superintendent at Cincinnati's Hyde Park Country Club. "Superintendents seem to like it better every time I do their courses. A lot of people who signed up for one visit this year are asking me to come back three times next year."

Both men have an assistant. Riesenberg said he can do 18 greens in as little as 14-1/2 hours. Marshall said he has done 15 greens in a single day, but prefers to do no more than nine because of the distances he must travel and set-up time.

Marshall charges $1.5 cents per square foot. Riesenberg's square-foot rates vary from $0.8 cents to $1.25 cents, depending on the total area.

Both men do their own maintenance on the machines to hold down costs and reduce down time. "You have to replace the water filters every 25 to 30 hours," Riesenberg said. "They cost about $15 apiece. I've learned to bring along a couple of extras just in case something goes wrong. The biggest problem can be the quality of water you pump out of the lake to use in the machine."

Both men want to expand their operations. Marshall would like to buy a second machine. Riesenberg hopes to add deep-tine aeration to his Hydroject services. "The only thing I wish is that I'd started marketing last fall when courses were setting their budgets rather than waiting until January," Riesenberg said.

While golf courses are their primary customers, the two have found other clients as well. Bowdoin College in nearby Brunswick has contracted with Marshall to service its football field. The University of Maine was planning to monitor Bowdoin's results and could sign up as well, Marshall said. Several Portland CC members with oceanside homes have asked Marshall to aerate their lawns. He has also done lawn bowling and croquet fields.

Riesenberg said he has likewise serviced lawns and athletic fields. As for Marshall, you'll probably find him draining long putts on those lush Maine greens when retirement beckons 10 years down the road.

When it comes to covering a lot of ground, the competition isn't the only thing

Barnstormers

Continued from page 39

[Image of Barnstormers]

Peter Marshall and his trusty, portable Hydroject.
Maintenance companies hired on
Continued from page 39

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- RESULT: Access to expensive, occasional-maintenance equipment an individual course cannot afford, but a maintenance company can share between several facilities.
- Reduced liability exposure since employees work for and equipment belongs to the maintenance provider.

**ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES**

Golf course maintenance companies have been around for some time. ISS, which maintains 144 holes in Florida, has been in the business 10 years. California-based Environmental Golf took over DeBell Golf Course in Burbank 15 years ago and has since added two more courses for a total of 72 holes.

Professional Turf Managers Inc. of Lakeeland, Fla., (22 holes) and Serviscape of Michigan City, Ind., (27 holes) are two other experienced firms.

Generally, a maintenance company hires all employees (including the superintendent), provides most of the supplies and equipment and plans for future maintenance projects.

ISS Business Development Manager Steven Sanford said contracting maintenance services has several benefits for owners and managers, including:

- Fixed maintenance costs that are adhered to throughout the year.
- The ability to do additional projects — bunker renovation or fairway aeration for instance — with special work teams employed by the contractor.

Maintenace companies hired to maintain the facility for the city. To avoid any political backlash, Requests For Proposal (RFP) required the maintenance company to offer employment to all course employees. If the employees refused, which the four senior staff members eventually did, they were offered transfers to other city departments, keeping their benefits intact.

“Things couldn’t have worked out better,” said Grady, who settled on Tampa, Fla.-based ISS Golf Services following a nationwide search.

The complex is making money. And it is in much better shape, he said, following ISS renovations and additions that included flower beds, irrigation lines, rebuilt bunkers, new distance and out-of-bound markers, upgraded equipment and improved maintenance practices.

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