

Getting along

COURSES OFFER TIPS FOR COEXISTING WITH NEIGHBORS

by
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RICE

Owning a home on a golf course is a dream for many people, but for those who have made it a reality, errant golf shots, noisy equipment, flooding and other issues can turn that dream into a nightmare.

So how do clubs and courses deal with these issues? After all, it's not as if a course can ban golfers who hit bad shots or morning maintenance. Both are vital to a course's survival. And while it's reasonable to expect that homeowners understand what they're getting into when they purchase a home on a golf course, there always are gray areas that can compromise the relationship between a course and homeowners.

Fore!

At one time or another, every golfer has hit a shot that didn't go exactly where he or she

was aiming. In most cases, this results in a tough next shot, but when there are homes lining a fairway, that off-target shot can result in property damage.

This is something Brad Dutler, the general manager of Plantation Golf Club in Frisco, Texas, has come to expect. All of Plantation's fairways are lined on both sides with homes, creating a rather unforgiving space for golfers.

"I've never seen homes as close to being in play as they are at Plantation," Dutler says. "You have your playing corridor, 20 to 25 yards of rough, then you have a fence line all the way around the golf course, five to 10 yards of homeowner grass, and then the house. So it's tight."

While Dutler couldn't say exactly how many broken-window complaints the club receives in a year, he says there are a lot of

issues, but nothing too serious. How those incidents are resolved depends mainly on the golfer.

"Golfers are responsible for their actions," he says. "We hope that if they do break a window, they're honest and come forward and talk with the homeowner, but I can't make them do that. If a homeowner calls, and his window has just been broken and says the person wasn't forthcoming, we'll try to help them out. I, or a member of my staff, will go out if they've got a good description of the group or a cart number, we'll try to talk to them and mediate that way if possible. Sometimes we're successful, and sometimes we're not."

Plantation, which is owned and operated by Evergreen Golf Alliance, doesn't have the market cornered on broken windows, though. At Weymouth Valley's Fox Meadow



Drainage is one of the biggest complaints from homeowners living near Fox Meadows Golf Course in Medina, Ohio.

Photo: Fox Meadows Golf Course

Golf Course in Medina, Ohio, superintendent Tim Cunningham has heard plenty of complaints.

"We've had the situation come up, and the club takes the stance that golfers are out there at their own risk," he says. "Most of the time, they'll knock on the door or leave a business card, but not always. That doesn't make the homeowner very happy because they then have to pay the deductible on their insurance."

While Don Sutton, superintendent at Kinsale Golf Club in Powell, Ohio, hasn't had much trouble with errant shots on his course, which opened in 2004, that doesn't mean he's unfamiliar with the problem.

"At a previous course where I worked, there was this certain house that tended to get hit a lot," Sutton says. "In that situation, the homeowner decided he wanted to plant trees and asked if he could plant them on the golf course, so that was a win-win situation for us and for him."

Maintenance

For those homeowners who live close to a tee, green or maintenance facility, the sound of equipment starting at the crack of dawn during the summer can be a nuisance. But at the same time, it has to be done to keep a course in tip-top shape. Fortunately for Dutler, that hasn't been an issue at Plantation.

"The City of Frisco has a noise ordinance that states we can't operate machinery until a specific time each day, and we try to abide by that as much as we can," he says. "Obviously, there are some days when we can't because we have to get golfers on the course. If it's heavy machinery, we're not going to operate that until the specified time."

According to Cunningham, noise hasn't been an issue at Fox Meadow, which might be surprising given the proximity of one of the homes to the maintenance facility.

"He was good about working things out before building," Cunningham says. "Before he built, the homeowner did his due diligence — he wanted to know what time we normally started our equipment."

One misconception some homeowners have is that golf course maintenance staffs also are their own personal maintenance staffs. Whenever Sutton sees that, he makes sure to nip it in the bud.

"From time to time, some people think we can stop and pick up their clippings from their yard," Sutton says. "That's not a service we offer to them, so as quickly as I see that starting, I will approach the homeowner and ask them not to do that."



The developer that built Kinsale Golf Club in Powell, Ohio, also built the housing community around the course. This makes communication between the maintenance staff and the homeowners easier.

Drainage, water issues

Drainage and flooding can be rather contentious issues between homeowners and golf courses. At Plantation, most of the homes sit higher than the course, but there are those that sit lower.

"All the water from the homes will run onto the golf course, and it just happens to run toward these other people's homes because they're a little bit lower," Dutler says. "For the most part, however, it doesn't cause too many problems, except in the spring, when the rains are at their most torrential."

Fox Meadow has dealt with drainage and flooding as well. Cunningham says it's one of the biggest homeowner complaints.

"Drainage has been one of the big problems that we try and rectify," he says. "If there is a problem we correct it. In one particular situation on our driving range, we made an adjustment — we brought a bulldozer in here and did some regrading to redirect water."

Besides flooding, the most common water-related issue Dutler has at Plantation is

the occasional sprinkler head that misfires.

"Sometimes the settings get knocked off and at two or three in the morning, they get peppered with perimeter heads hitting their house," he says. "Our perimeter heads are set to cover 180 degrees, but sometimes the setting that keeps it from making a full circle will get knocked loose. That might happen once every couple of years."

Building good will

One advantage Kinsale has is the developer who built the housing community also owns the golf course. This allows the company to have a person in charge of the homeowners association, making communication and cooperation between homeowners and the course much easier.

"He can field a lot of the questions and deal with any contractor we might use for mowing open spaces and things like that," Sutton says. "He's really a liaison between the homeowners association, the golf course and the developer. So that's something that has worked out really well for us."

Having that liaison allows Kinsale to be proactive when dealing with issues.

"In a lot of situations, he's able to take care of those problems without us getting involved," Sutton says.

Cunningham also has a good relationship with the homeowners association because the golf course has a contract with the association to perform maintenance on the green spaces that aren't part of the golf course.

"It benefits the company because the green spaces, which you would assume are part of the golf course, are actually owned by the association," Cunningham says. "We worked out an arrangement with them in which we are contracted to do the fertilization, weed treatment and mowing of the bigger green spaces that are closer to entrances to the development."

Attentiveness is the key to Cunningham's approach when dealing with homeowner complaints.

"We need them like they need us, so when they call with any concerns, I make sure I listen and then meet with them and look at the situation," he says.

Often, even minor situations command Cunningham's attention.

"We have a restroom out on the fifth hole," he says. "It's a well-done restroom — not a portable one — but we had a homeowner who complained that they could see it from their backyard. They asked if we could screen it with some pine trees, and we did that just to alleviate any other problems."

When dealing with homeowners, Dutler agrees listening and being polite can go a long way toward keeping the peace — although that's not always the case.

"We try to be as cordial and helpful as we absolutely can, but sometimes we aren't able to give them the result they're looking for,"



When dealing with homeowners, listening and being polite can go a long way toward keeping the peace between a golf course maintenance staff and homeowners.

he says. "We've got to be sure we're doing things that everybody can live with as opposed to being ultra-aggressive and drawing a line in the sand."

Dutler says being cordial is a two-way street, and while golf course staff at Plantation technically doesn't offer services to homeowners, there are exceptions.

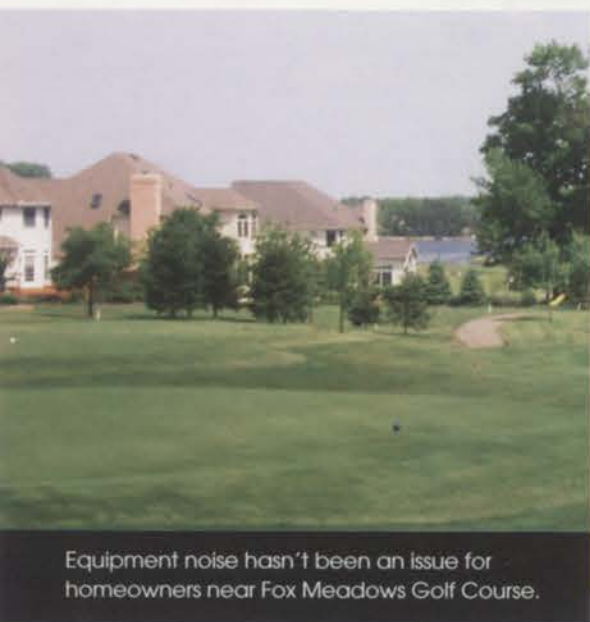
"Sometimes a homeowner might need some help with something, and they'll ask my superintendent to help out with something they don't have the equipment for," he says. "If they ask and they're friendly about it, our superintendent is more than willing to help out with those issues when he has time to do that. If they ask nicely,

generally it's not a problem. It's those little things that really help us develop a good relationship with the individual homeowner and with the homeowners association as well."

But perhaps the best advice for keeping the peace with homeowners comes from Cunningham.

"Try to alleviate anything you see that might flare up and become volatile," he says. "Nip it in the bud and be proactive, because it can come back to hurt you." GCN

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Equipment noise hasn't been an issue for homeowners near Fox Meadows Golf Course.

Photo: Fox Meadows Golf Club

Tips for keeping the peace with the neighbors

- **Be proactive.** If you see a potential problem that might arise in the future, head it off early.
- **Communicate.** In most cases, you can keep in touch with the surrounding community through a homeowners or neighborhood association.
- **Lend a hand.** If it doesn't stress your schedule or your budget, help out a homeowner who asks for it. The good will you develop will pay off in the long run.
- **Be attentive.** If you ignore homeowners, their complaints will only multiply. Listening to their issues and realizing you need them as much as they need you will go a long way toward smoothing out any problems.
- **Don't be a pushover.** If you feel a homeowner is taking advantage of you or your staff, speak to them. Often, the root of the problem will be a simple misunderstanding.