

THE PROFITABLE TRIO

The following article by Paul Voykin is based on an address he gave to the Illinois Section of the Professional Golfers' Assn. Education Seminar for golf professionals and assistants.

The Russian word *troika* always brings to my mind the image of three snorting horses pulling a sleigh full of Russians with hungry wolves chasing close behind. The expression "troika system" sometimes is used to describe the three key administrators in a club operation who pull the club's sleigh—golf professional, superintendent and manager—a triumverate equally responsible, working together as a team and trying mightily to keep abreast of the inflationary dollar.

Their paramount aim is to give the club membership a first-class operation. Why does a club need three department heads? Why three entities? Can't one executive run the whole shebang successfully? Not really, not if you want a first-class operation in these three important areas. Of course, it's been tried before, a long time ago, and some clubs are still recovering from the bad experience. Conversely, other clubs now have forgotten their sad experiences and are advocating going back to the restriction of that era—complete control by one man.

A quarter of a century ago, when I first began apprenticing as a "greenkeeper," one man handled two and sometimes three key jobs in a golf course operation. His title or titles became legion: pro-greenkeeper-manager, pro-greenkeeper, pro-manager or manager-pro and

The team approach, says the author, is the only way to operate a golf course profitably and efficiently
by PAUL VOYKIN

sometimes even greenkeeper-pro-manager. Sad to say, some clubs are now trying to go back to that mixed-up yesterday. And that's bad. It didn't work out then and it won't work out today.

Club officials in those days learned quickly that when more and more demands were placed on gracious country club living, with its syndrome of comforts and recreational services, that a man was either a good greenkeeper and a poor pro, or still worse, a man was a damn good manager, but poor in the other two departments.

Finally, as the pressure on good turf grooming and meticulous care continued on the golf course, with greater demand in the clubhouse and pro shop for better service, the man ended up being good at nothing. The sad part of that experiment was this: The more a man became proficient at one job, the worse he became at the

other two. It was a frustrating experience and a lot of guys ended up shell-shocked.

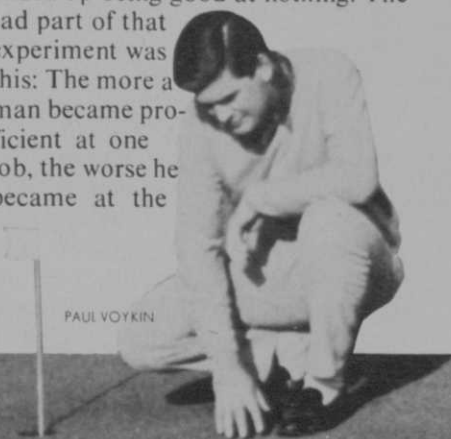
There is something else also.

There was a lot of job movement, especially by managers, who finally found a good residence in hotel and motel management. Eventually, wise club officials learned that, by having one man in complete and undisputed control, the money saved was negligible and the club services neglected. It was proven in the long run that the most successful method was to have three different responsible department administrators, working together to provide the utmost in country club service. The same premise still holds true today.

Admittedly, there has to be one man (the manager) to coordinate everything for the other two with the chairman and committee. That's all right. Remember, the manager controls the club's money and final bookkeeping. I am not against that principle; but complete control has never worked out, and I don't think it ever will. Also, there must always be a member-department head involved in working together, in planning and enforcing constructive suggestions, exchanging views and finally teaming up with the three administrators to carry out the plans once they have board and committee approval.

For any one man to be in dictatorial control and to expect a topnotch operation is, in my opinion, too much to hope for. It is the fastest route I know of to frus-

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PAUL VOYKIN

tration and frequent job changing.

The very nature and importance of our respective jobs requires an aggressive, strong-minded individual to perform commendably through the bad and good years. There is no place for a timid, placid golf professional, superintendent or manager in our demanding profession no matter how knowledgeable. One of them soon succumbs to a *stronger personality* and the quality of his work deteriorates.

I don't think this will happen to those men who have total respect for our profession and each other. We don't want to go back to the past history of friction, one man rule and frustration compounded by incapability.

We must always retain the troika system, working as a team and exchanging ideas for broader planning with our committees and each other to give the membership a top-notch performance. Anything else is as outdated as the gutta percha golf ball or the sand greens and can't possibly work out. History has proven that.

Our job, then, is to continue working in harmony and rapport, without fear of offending each other and preserve the troika system.

With all respect to the managers, I will discuss primarily my professional relationship with the golf professional at Briarwood, Joe Zelazny.

Mr. "Z" and Mr. "V," as Joe and I are sometimes called by members at Briarwood, have been together at the club for 14 years. And after all those pleasant years, I can say sincerely that I still have a smile every time I see Joe, which is almost everyday. Our successful relationship is based not only on professional standing, but also on an old friendship that mellowed with age and respect for each other's enormous responsibility to the membership.

We have been together through the thick and thin years, through storms, yes, some quarrels, lots of constructive discussion and planning, loss from *Poa annua*, some good drunks and once having to pay Joe off after he threw four birdies in a row at me. In fact, I think he did it twice to me. Though he still doesn't

know anything about growing grass, we are even. I don't know anything about giving golf lessons or running a pro shop. But what we do have is cooperation, friendship and respect for each other's profession. And we both know that the secret of that is communication and exchanging views. Joe is one of the most dedicated professionals I know and has his hands full all season giving the best service he possibly can to the membership. I don't infringe on his territory or administration and he doesn't infringe on mine. He knows how dedicated I am and that I am trying to do my best at my end of the profession. Our effort is mutual, along with the manager's, to give the members the best possible service that we three can. We know also that the quality of one performance vitally affects the quality of the other two. We communicate and answer each other's questions about our work without offending each other by making a great deal of noise about it.

We never have a confrontation in front of members unless it is done with humor and good fellowship over something insignificant. For example, as golf course superintendent, I have to look weekly at the club calendar and note what club events are scheduled, then prepare for them. Naturally, the big three events occur in this priority: Ladies' Guest Day, which is comparable to preparing for the moon shot; The Blue Ribbon event in the fall, and, of course, Men's Guest Day. For these days I work especially hard in cooperation with the professional and manager. There are minor events, however, that I sometimes forget about, especially when the *Poa annua* starts to go out on me.

Last year was a good example. I forgot to check the club's calendar and forgot that we had a Hard Day course scheduled on Sunday, with the tees to be placed way back and the pins in tough positions. I forgot to carry out this responsibility and finally realized something was wrong by the funny looks of the golfers who already were at the fifth and sixth holes, two holes that had tees way up front and the pins in extremely easy positions. Eventual-

ly, one of the perplexed golfers called me over and exclaimed: "Hey you, genius, don't you know today is Hard Day course? Ladies' Day was last month."

Joe, now, has a note for me in my letter basket for some of these minor, but important, club tournaments. Perhaps, a string on my finger would also help.

The point I am trying to make is how to have the communication and public relations without breeding animosity. That's the whole secret in our business and it isn't easy to come by. It takes hard work sometimes just to get along, especially in the busy summer when we are running around trying our best to please the members. But, I repeat: Without communication and a little humor now and then, a successful relationship between the professional and the superintendent cannot be realized. We must always keep in mind that we make our "bread" at the same place, so why not communicate and get along and try to help each other.

Let's also honestly look at the other side of the coin and see what can happen when animosity develops among the administrators at a golf club.

First, the membership is soon aware of the poor relationship and consequently suffers because of it. Secondly, the employees under the key administrators feel the animosity among the bosses and begin to feel insecure. They start bickering, take sides, begin disputes and their work deteriorates. Finally, the problem, unless solved, becomes so grave that the board of governors has to step in and take action. Then, everyone suffers when it is all over. Why allow the situation to happen at all when a little compromise, a little communication could have solved it.

If you are to blame, then back off as quickly and gracefully as possible. Otherwise, initiate a meeting to save face or eat a little crow if you must by admitting your mistake or oversight. This takes a certain amount of guts, but you will not lose your self respect if you do it honestly. If the confrontation is such that you can't possibly resolve it because of the other man's un-

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reasonable personality or stupidity, then remember the old adage: "Give a fool enough rope and he'll hang himself."

An excellent golf professional, such as Joe Zelazny, who is in contact with the members more than I am, often will help me by explaining to some golfer why I am seeding or aerating and why the cars aren't allowed on the fairways right after a heavy shower or when the temperature is nearing a hundred degrees and sometimes why the course is closed. I try to post a bi-weekly notice on the bulletin boards in the men's and ladies' locker rooms explaining some of the things the members can expect within the next two weeks or so on the golf course. The professional and manager get copies, as does the green chairman. This type of communication makes it easier for everyone to better understand my problems and projects.

A good professional can make a situation easy or hard for the superintendent by backing him up with a low-keyed explanation or he can be derogatory by walking away shrugging and saying, "I don't know what the hell he is doing, he never talks to me." That's no way to handle a relationship. Both parties inevitably suffer.

After 25 years of working at country clubs, I have found out that administration without rapport can never be successful and that the paramount cause of a bad relationship at any golf course is poor communication and disrespect for each other's profession. Of course, mowing the practice fairway on a Saturday morning will do it every time, also. I feel sorry for the professional and superintendent who don't have a live wire open to each other all the time. A no communication situation can become

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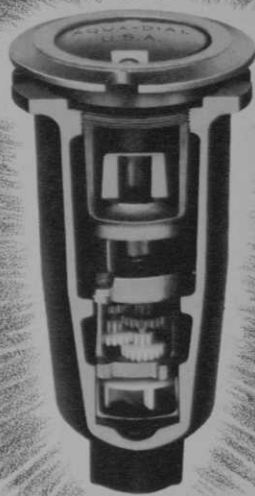
unbearable, and everyone loses, including the membership. That can be very serious.

Joe and I get together frequently for lunch. We usually just sit there and listen to the golfers talk about the weather, their golf games, business or their bad health. After a while, when the talk finally comes around to the shape of the golf course, Joe will usually break them up by stating that when the course is beautiful, it is a direct result of Paul's knowledgeable action; but when it goes out, it is an act of God,

completely beyond the control of man and Paul. □

PAUL N. VOYKIN is known in the golf industry not only as a superintendent, but as a lecturer and writer. His articles have appeared in national magazines and his book, "A Perfect Lawn the Easy Way," was cited by *The New York Times* as one of the top garden books of 1969. He is a past president of the Midwest Assn. of Golf Course Superintendents and lives in Lake Bluff, Ill., where he is active in civic affairs.

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