

Have You Created A Maintenance Monster?

During the last few recession years, golf courses, especially the private country clubs, have been in a serious financial situation because of skyrocketing operational costs. These operational costs have increased so much that many clubs are now having difficulty keeping their heads above water.

Some have sold out to home builders and high-rise developers. Others are desperately looking to fill their decreasing memberships and reluctantly lowering the application standards in order to exist. Boards of directors and club management are working hard at most clubs to find means of surviving for the future, without drastically cutting out the gracious living familiar to country clubs. How does the superintendent fit into this?

Superintendents are in a serious rut, and they are responsible for their position. They have brought themselves to this predicament. The best among the ranks are to blame for the situation all superintendents face. They have set the standards too high. The problem, as I see it, is over-grooming of golf courses. We do too much of it. The desire to improve and excel in the maintenance of our golf courses has been carried to a ridiculous and costly extreme. If we did less grooming, the country clubs could save money and have more challenging golf courses with fewer headaches. I am not in any way talking about reducing the upkeep and management of our greens and fairways, I am only talking about possibly reducing the costs of grooming other areas that we do so diligently maintain now.

At Briarwood, we mow our greens at a tight 3/16-inch and our widebent collars at 1/2-inch or less. Our sloping aprons that meet the fairways in the front are cut at 3/4-inch and then we use a triplex mower to mow around the traps and the back mounds of the green. This is all accomplished before we even

Have course maintenance standards been set too high over the years? This Midwest superintendent feels that with soaring costs and tight money, overgrooming is indeed overspending.

by Paul N. Voykin
Briarwood Country Club
Deerfield, Illinois

come to the rough which is also mowed too short and too frequently, but my members love it that way. The fairways are mowed from 5/8-inch to 3/4-inch with a strip or two outside our fairways which we call intermediate rough.

Next example is our tees which, except to be level, are really not that important. They are mowed too frequently, seeded, sodded and fertilized too often. The tee banks are also mowed constantly so as not to look shabby. The precarious mowing of fairway bunkers and the laborious hand-mowing around all trees on the golf course also devour a lot of time and expense.

There are many superintendents who have to contend with other time-consuming, relatively unimportant jobs, like mowing high creek banks and cultivating shrubs around trees, over-edging of traps, pruning too high under low-branched trees and perhaps raking traps that do not come in to play, mulching every leaf that drops in autumn and mowing out-of-the-way areas that really do not have to be groomed at all. I found this out a couple of years ago when I left unmowed all season two acres on the remote west side of my course. No one complained. In fact, no one even noticed.

It is becoming too expensive to maintain 160 acres like our own back yards. The machines are going constantly from day to night. We

have spoiled the golfer rotten with expensive around-the-clock grooming. Now we have the high cost monster looking over our shoulder with hungry fangs, and we cannot afford him for a pet anymore.

How much can you save? Here is what I did. I went over my time sheet from April to October and came up with these figures. Mowing roughs at \$3.50 an hour, 700 hours = \$2,450. Mowing around greens and some tees, plus the practice tee, 350 hours = \$1,225. Triplex around tees and green and fairway traps, 400 hours = \$1,400. Rotaries around trees, 250 hours = \$875. Total grooming cost is \$6,000. I only chose these items because they are four maintenance items which I feel I could reduce by 50 percent or about \$3,000. It would still give the membership a presentable, but slightly tougher and a definitely more interesting course.

Maybe \$3,000 does not sound like much. But we can also accomplish other important savings in machinery. I know I could save an impressive amount on machinery over the years because, instead of having my present two or more pieces of equipment for the four jobs I mentioned — rotaries, triplex, rough and pro — I could get along with one piece of machinery in each category because of less demand for grooming. There is \$5,000 more saved right there. Not to mention saving in mechanical upkeep and gasoline.

Also, there would be a substantial saving in having to use less fertilizer and pesticides because the grass would be longer and therefore be stronger and better able to cope with the elements with less attention. Traffic damage by carts would definitely decrease. And keep in mind that I chose only four items that I can reduce easily by a full 50 percent. There are many other maintenance aspects that can be reduced

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by perhaps 40, 30 or 20 percent.

The next question is — why don't I do less grooming? My reply to this is that unless other golf courses in my area agree to follow suit, I would not try it without a solid agreement from my club. I would be afraid unless I had it in black and white that I might jeopardize my job by doing it. I have 200 other greenskeepers at my club who play other country clubs in the area and then come back and tell me what great shape the courses are in. They unfairly always compare the golf grooming but give no thought to or have any knowledge of local

conditions such as drainage, soil problems, water source and work force and also overlook other important variables such as budgets, equipment and size of golf course. They also forget that the more acreage, the more grooming is required.

In the near future we may just have to sit down with our chairmen and board of directors and show them with cost charts that grooming everything meticulously to the point of almost pricing ourselves right out of the game is ridiculous. And we may have to explain that letting the grass grow a little longer will actually make the game a little more challenging and more enjoyable. □

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