

IS THE GREEN CHAIRMAN

by NICK ROMANO

Hardly anyone would disagree that today's golf course superintendent is a professional man. Most have college educations, continue to keep abreast on new developments in the turfgrass field and are trusted with investments of hundreds of thousands of dollars in equipment, chemicals and fertilizers.

Still, though, the superintendent is not alone. Many private clubs throughout the nation still employ

the committee system and the watchful eye of the green chairman is ever-present when the superintendent deals with money.

There are probably as many opinions on the subject of the real importance of the chairman, as they are superintendents. For that matter, there has been an ever increasing question as to whether the committee system in the running of a club is altogether archaic, in view of the continuing acceptance of the general manager concept.

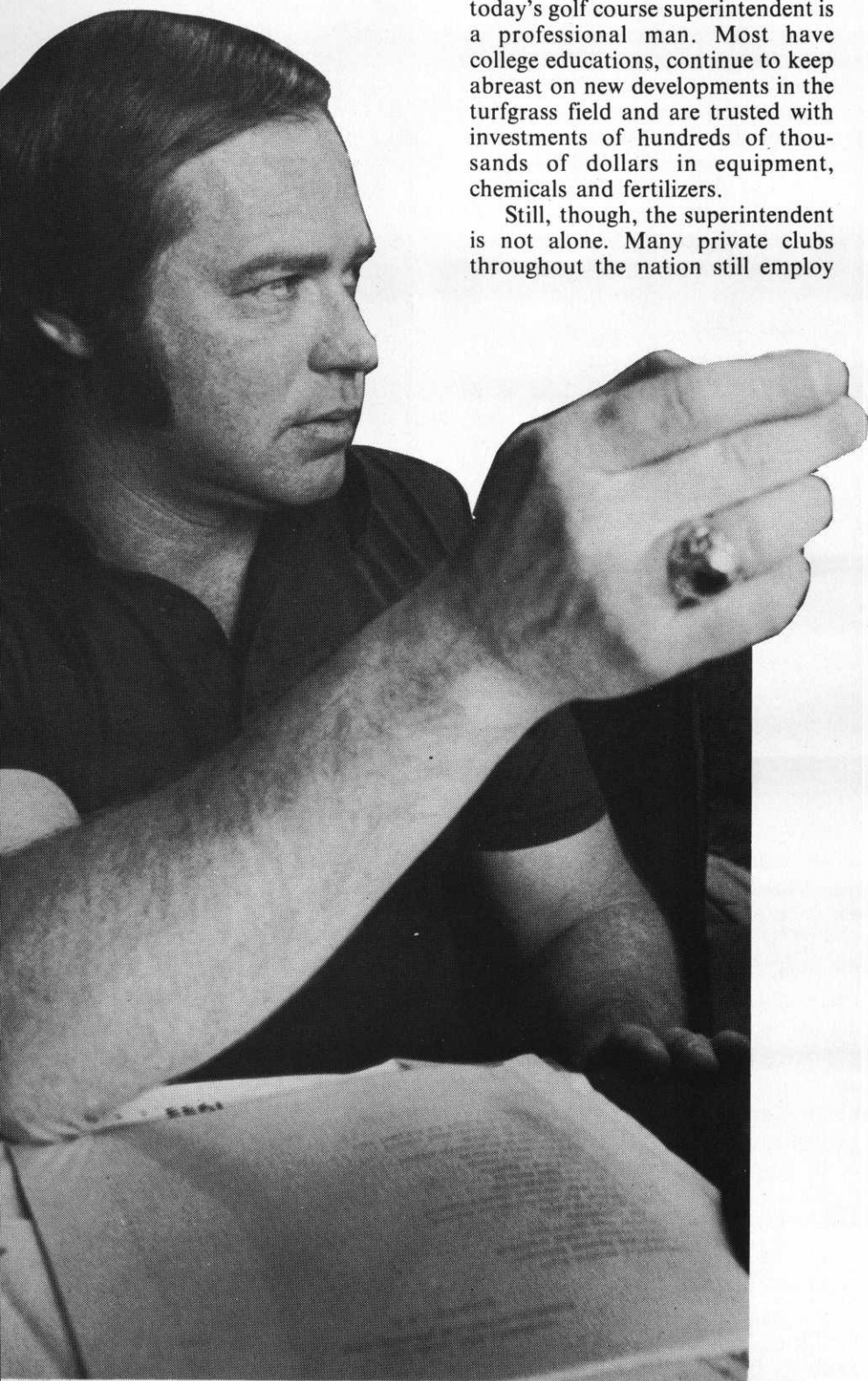
Golf has become a big business in the last 30 years. Private clubs are filled with members that are business successes, but those same businessmen would not make their every day decisions by committee.

A random sampling of superintendents from around the country by GOLFDOM on their feelings about green chairmen was surprising.

Many superintendents that talked to GOLFDOM said their individual experiences with chairmen were, in general, good ones. For example, Ted Wuehrle, national vice president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America and superintendent at Oakland Hills Country Club, Birmingham, Mich., said the green chairmen of today seem to be less involved in decision making, but are still important as liaisons between the superintendents and the membership.

The idea of the chairman remaining the public relations and complaint taker for the superintendent is one that many superintendents accept as the prime duty of the committee head.

Many think the chairman should have some technical knowledge of the superintendent's job and this was echoed by George Polillo, superintendent at Decatur (Ill.) Country Club for 15 years. "My green chairman has a 6-year term of office," said Polillo, "but we are going to a general manager and I'm



IS IT STILL IMPORTANT?

not sure if the committee system is going to stay in tact."

Not all superintendents are as fortunate as Polillo in having a green chairman for a long term, although some superintendents will say that can be a disadvantage, at times. Tom Malehorn, now in his fourth year as superintendent at Red Lion (Pa.) Country Club, commented that he gets a new green chairman every year and just when the old chairman is getting the hang of the job, a new one comes in.

Malehorn prefers the committee system and says he likes working his ideas over several people than just one decisionmaker, as in the general manager concept.

Often a good, veteran green chairman can lend a sense of direction to a superintendent new on the job. In the case of Ron Brandon, Warwick Hills Golf and Country Club, Grand Blanc, Mich., the chairman technique has worked well for him, since coming to his club less than 10 months ago.

"I had no way of knowing the needs and wants of the golfers on my course," said Brandon, "and it took my green chairman to let me know what they wanted."

When the green chairman first gets his new position, he usually knows little about the job he is taking or the job the superintendent has. According to former United States Golf Association president Richard Tufts, there are several things the chairman has to know to do a good job.

"The job of the green chairman is to serve your fellow members by maintaining the type of course the majority of them want . . . a tough layout that is a challenge to the expert may not be very enjoyable to the average golfer — of which there are so many. Certainly, your job is not to rebuild the course the way you want it."

Tufts states that the duties of the chairman and the committee members cannot be done in a passive

manner. Problems demand time and attention. Tufts continues:

"You should be willing to learn and spend some time reading journals, pamphlets and magazines dealing with turfgrasses. You should attend an occasional turfgrass meeting. A good chairman should be an active golfer, but not necessarily the club champion.

"A good chairman knows his limitations. He should avoid causing problems by crossing bridges that, in reality, may never have to be crossed.

"A golf course program of maintenance and management is an intricate combination of men, materials, timing, climate, grasses, etc. What is good for one course is not always the best for the course down the road. Don't be "bulldozed" into doing things because someone else does them. Leave the program up to your superintendent, for it is his responsibility to grow grass for golf. A good chairman need not become a turf expert. He must, however, have sufficient knowledge to answer questions asked of him by the board and the members.

"Visit the course occasionally while the men are working and thus understand their problems. Good chairmen have found the best time to acquire the confidence of the superintendent, as well as a better understanding of his job, is to go out with him at 6 a.m. when he faces his problems for the day. Walk the course with him," Tufts added.

Other functions of a good green committee chairman:

1. Maintain liaison upwards among course operations, club members and the board of directors.

2. Employ a competent superintendent, capable and progressive. He should report directly to the green chairman.

3. Keep up to date on member complaints. Remember, there are no "little" complaints.

4. Assist the superintendent in



CHAIRMAN

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an advisory, budgetary and policy-making capacity. Be alert to problems involving salaries, fringe benefits and retirement plans.

5. Have a voice in the scheduling and the number of tournaments. Inform the superintendent of the tournament schedule, including women's events.

6. Be acquainted with the problems and the functions of the superintendent. Become a "buffer" for him with the membership.

7. Have a thorough knowledge of the course in its best playing conditions.

If both the chairman and the superintendent realize the importance of cooperation, usually, the relationship works out for the general betterment of the club. Such is the case with the pair at Cleveland's Canterbury Country Club.

Bill Burdick is superintendent at Canterbury. Burdick has been top man there for five years and a superintendent for 13 years. George Dawson has been Burdick's alter-ego for two years.

Both have praise for each other. Burdick works closely with Dawson on his projects and Dawson keeps interested in the financial end of his superintendent's job. Burdick is a proponent of telling Dawson everything about his job, so he can help sell Burdick's program to the board.

"With that reason in mind, it is important a green chairman have a term lasting at least three to five years. The first year for the green chairman is usually an ineffective one, as the chairman attempts to learn his job," Burdick said.

Dawson agrees. "The chairmanship of any committee and especially the green committee is a tough one. This side of the business is really foreign to the club member. I feel I'm getting more confidence in this job, but it takes time."

Outspoken about his fellow chairmen, Dawson admits some attempt to influence the superintendent to remodel their courses as monuments to themselves. "After a

while, you'll see 18 different monuments on a course," Dawson noted, "To be honest, I keep my mouth shut, because my front lawn doesn't look that well."

Although, Burdick is for the chairman system, he does think the day of the full committee is soon to come to a close. "I see very little function in the complete committee. It is little more than mass confusion. We have a committee, but it's rare that they meet more than once a year."

One thing Dawson firmly believes in is that members at private clubs do care about their club and are more than willing to voice their complaints about the course's maintenance to the green chairman. "There are days in the fall, when the place is covered with leaves and I wouldn't think of going into the grill. After a while, though, you develop a thick skin. I know I have."

Not everyone thinks the green chairman is an asset to course management and the most notable example of this philosophy works just a few miles down the road from Canterbury, Firestone's Peter Miller.

"It's an advantage to not have a chairman. I think I can better plan the direction the course is taking. Long range plans can be developed," Miller said about his corporately owned facility.

Miller is an advocate of advanced management principles and thinks the entire idea of the green chairman is old-fashioned. "The superintendent should be freer to do his own thing. He is a professional and should be treated that way by his club.

A green chairman should recognize a superintendent is a person of many hats who is not only versed in agronomy but is also knowledgeable in the field of horticulture, landscape, architecture, construction, mechanics, accounting, supervision, business management as well as public and labor relations. However, the superintendent should not be hesitant in calling outside help such as fellow superintendents, a consultant and especially a golf architect if you're doing extensive construction. The chairman should also encourage the superintendent to attend, at the club's expense,

seminars and other turf clinics or conferences. Recently there have been many important changes in the profession (EPA, turf equipment, chemicals, OSHA etc.) and they must keep up with these changes in order to run clubs better.

Every possible effort should be made by the chairman to see the superintendent is fairly compensated and recognized for his work. The superintendent, on the other hand, should strive to surround himself with competent workmen who should be fairly compensated by the club. Without competent help a superintendent isn't going to be much of a success, no matter how many certificates, diplomas and degrees he has.

It has been the experience of many superintendents that private golf courses having optimum playing conditions for golf during the season are those that have established proper relationship between the superintendent and the green chairman. Both parties work on behalf of the membership to give them the best possible course with the budget they have.

Looking at the relationship between the superintendent and the green chairman, it is important to maintain this association in the turf profession, but complete general managership might be the end anyway.

The most meaningful relationships must have these ingredients to achieve the best results for the golf course and the membership:

Establishment of trust in each other. An understanding of the club's problems and goals. Not only with the golf course, but the whole picture so the superintendent knows what he can do and how far he can go with what is under his jurisdiction.

Success stories are available on courses that utilize the chairman type of supervision and those that do not. The superintendent probably has more to say about the advantage of either program.

Chances are good, though, that as the general management concept becomes more and more acceptable at clubs, the green chairman and the decisions of committees in general will tend to be less significant in the long range plans of clubs. □