

Superintendent's image

By Jim Converse



Jim Converse is one of America's leading botanical artists. His paintings and drawings have appeared in numerous national publications, and his weed and grass identification

books have become standard tools of the trade. Jim is far more than a botanical artist, however, with years of practical turf experience. Before assuming turf management responsibilities at O M Scott & Sons Company, more than 20 years ago, he worked as a golf course superintendent. After tours in Scotts Research and Retail Training areas, Jim was transferred to the ProTurf Division where he headed their training and educational programs. He is currently concentrating his talents in the area of visual communications.

Professional involvement

Many volumes have been written about turf maintenance and from a technical standpoint very little has been overlooked. Turf maintenance has developed into a truly fine art. Unfortunately, the skills of applying this art are never etched in stone, nor fixed in concrete. There are very few rigid rules and never a chance for preserving perfection, for turf is a fickle master. It not only changes from day to day, but quite often from hour to hour. The good manager must administer all of the things that he knows are right for his turf and then anticipate and react to all of the things that can go wrong. It's a full time business and must appear amazingly simple to everyone who doesn't bear the responsibility.

In recent years, science and technology have greatly improved the competence of the turf professional. This is especially true of the golf course superintendent. Today's golfer expects little less than perfection on his golf course. Fairways should be wide, give a good roll and a good lie. Roughs should never be too rough and

greens should be as true as a billiard table—seven days a week. On most course, it's a standard that the superintendent achieves with remarkable consistency.

Unfortunately, there are a number of golfers, and not necessarily new golfers, who have little awareness, or knowledge of turf maintenance. They might play golf several afternoons, or evenings during the week, then Saturdays and Sundays. They very rarely see the usual maintenance operations. They have never heard of phythium, rhizoctonia, nitrogen solubility, or wet wilt. As long as playing conditions remain good, they're happy. When things are wrong, they lash out at the invisible "block-head" who seldom does anything right. For them, a little knowledge could make many conditions, or situations, more understandable and tolerable. The golf course superintendent is the one person who has this knowledge and a complete awareness of everything that is happening on his course. Thus, it's more than a sad situation when we realize that many golfers have never seen nor talked with this man.

If the golf course superintendent seems invisible it's because his entire effort has been designed to be as inconspicuous as possible. It starts with the equipment building, which is almost always located in some obscure place on the course. And it follows with daily maintenance, which remains inconspicuous by avoiding the flow of golf. This is generally accomplished by working when the golfers are sleeping. Unless the superintendent makes a special effort to become better acquainted with the membership and the officials of the course, his role can become even more inconspicuous. The training, the skills, the intricacies of his profession become lost. In the eyes of many members, his position represents little more than the man who is in charge of mowing and watering. It's a situation in which everyone loses.

Every phase of the golf course operation benefits when the superintendent becomes involved. But one of the best ways is through golf itself. He should be encouraged to play the game and not at what might be considered a "discreet time". He should play on a busy weekday with the most avid golfing members. If he isn't a

golfer, he should be encouraged to walk the course with golfers. Most of all, he should view each and every shot, or situation, from the view of a golfer. He should hear the questions that every golfer asks. "Why do you do this? Why do you do that?" It's a great opportunity for an exchange of thoughts and information. A golfer should have some idea of why certain practices are necessary on the golf course and the superintendent must have complete understanding of what is acceptable and desirable for the golfer. Only through a timely and free exchange of thoughts can these goals ever be achieved.

Today's golf course superintendent is no longer a grass cutter, or the farmer who lives down the road, and it's a sad golf course that pictures him as such. He is a man with a tremendous number of skills. In addition to a superior knowledge of turf and turf maintenance, he must be an expert in mechanics, irrigation, chemicals, business relations, managing people, government regulations and everything else that might become a part of his daily operation. Very few professions require such strong capabilities in so many areas of endeavor, and the list isn't growing smaller. There are many trade organizations, schools, and publications that can keep him abreast of his skills and technical information. And, if he doesn't keep pace, he can be expected to fall by the wayside. Unfortunately, these sources of learning do very little to teach him how to improve his own image.

Since so much of the superintendent's professionalism is never obvious, he must make a concerted effort to make certain there is more awareness of the "superintendent". This doesn't have to be done with a bugle and bravado, or a loud voice that says "Listen to me!" But, it must be done in a quiet, positive way if he is to rise above the average. Golf and the golf course are a part of his profession and even though his work is designed to be inconspicuous, he cannot place himself in that same position. He can learn to become better acquainted with the golfer. Until he has gained the full support and the understanding of the person who plays the game, his profession will never receive a full recognition.