

Do Tell

If *you* don't tell golfers what you do, chances are they'll never know

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR.,
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Thomas Martinek views his superintendent's office at Shaker Heights CC in Shaker Heights, Ohio, as a quick-response center. He's armed with communication tools of the information age to educate golfers about course maintenance before he finds a group of angry golfers on his doorstep wanting to know why something was done.

Continued on page 28

PHOTO: MIKE KLEMM

COMMUNICATION, NATURALLY

Nature provides pleasure and pain for most golfers. While it can cause a horrible round, it also provides a magnificent background for sport. For Glenn Smickley, superintendent at the RTJ Club in Manassas, Va., nature allows him an additional opportunity to communicate with golfers.

Smickley's club was the first certified member of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses in Virginia, and he uses the certification to bond with golfers. He designed a program that includes putting up signs on each tee alerting golfers to the wildlife they might see on the course. Other signs talk about the trees near the tee and highlight wildflower growth. Whatever the subject, the signs get golfers talking about the course's environmental aspects.

"Golf courses have an image problem to overcome as far as being friendly to the environment," Smickley says. "When you work as hard as we have to be environmentally friendly, you want to make the most of it."

Meadows and naturalized areas dot the course and provide a habitat for a variety of wildlife, Smickley says. By bringing the attention of golfers to these additional amenities of the course, it provides a more complete experience for them.

Because golfers at the RTJ Club are more aware of their effect on the balance Smickley hopes to achieve, they take better care of the course.

The RTJ Club has become such a model neighbor, that Manassas recently allowed another golf course to be built in the area — as long as it followed the model of Smickley's environmentally friendly course.

"Good word of mouth is the best way to promote a course among golfers," Smickley says. "Our program has certainly done that."

Continued from page 26

Newsletters, e-mails, a hotline dedicated to informing golfers about course conditions before they arrive — Martinek uses all these tools and more to enlighten golfers about greens aeration, storm damage or a major renovation project.

"You want to give your golfers as much information in as many different forms as possible," Martinek says. "If you give them enough communication outlets, they can customize the way they want to get course information."

Communicating with golfers can be trying at times, and it seems like it's all superintendents can do not to throttle the next golfer who asks why golf cars can't be driven on the fairways after a heavy rain or why a crew member is topdressing the greens. With a little practice, however, superintendents can turn communicating with golfers into a productive procedure.

Martinek says pictures are a vital part of

Continued on page 30

TIFSPORT

CERTIFIED BERMUDA GRASS
FOR GOLF COURSES, ATHLETIC FIELDS & HOME LAWNS

- Upright Leaf Blade Orientation
- Impressive Leaf Texture
- Dark Green Color
- Superior Turf Density
- Cold Tolerant
- Pest Resistant
- Good Lateral Growth
- Superior Sod Strength
- Excellent Traffic Tolerance
- Extensive Root System
- Drought Resistant

Call 888 584-6598 or Point Your Browser Here For Complete Details: www.tifSPORT.com

Developed at the Coastal Plains Experiment Station in Tifton, GA by Wayne Hanna, USDA/ARS Geneticist

Continued from page 28

his communication arsenal. For example, when he built a new bridge this past winter, he chronicled the project from start to finish with his digital camera, and he keeps the photos on his computer where he can access them on a moment's notice. Martinek understands there will be golfers who haven't visited the course since the fall who will want to know about the bridge.

"With the pictures, I'll be able to com-

municate in a few minutes what it might take me hours to communicate otherwise," Martinek says. "Use photos whenever you have to help golfers understand what you do."

Building relationships with golfers is an essential part of the job, says Mike Mumper, superintendent at Park Ridge CC in Park Ridge, Ill.

Golfers will be more willing to listen to the superintendent's point of view when problems arise if the superintendent has made the effort to build trust with them.

"Part of a superintendent's job is to educate golfers about what they do," Mumper says. "You have to be visible, and you've got to build relationships."

Mumper says he writes a column in the club's monthly newsletter dealing with course

ALL A-BOARD!

Lynn Richert, superintendent of Angushire GC in St. Cloud, Minn., thinks her maintenance staff should act as greeters at the clubhouse door as golfers come in to receive their tee times.

Naturally, Richert realizes that with a 9-hole executive course to care for, such duties would be difficult, if not impossible, to do in person. So at the suggestion of an assistant, Richert developed the next best thing in 1995 — a poster covered with photographs of each member of the maintenance staff on a piece of equipment. The board is prominently posted as club members walk in the door.

"Our golfers almost certainly knew the faces of most of our maintenance crew



members, but it was hard for them to put names with faces," Richert says. "With this photo board, it helps the golfers feel more at ease with the crew members when they're on the course."

Photographing the staff in action also conditions members to see what the maintenance staff does every day, Richert says. It creates a sense of community that wouldn't normally exist.

"Golfers often stand in front of the board for quite a while when they come in and study the faces intently," Richert says. "It has created more of a connection because the staff members are human beings to our members now, not just people out there on mowers and aerators. It starts what we hope will be an ongoing conversation between the maintenance staff and the golfers."

Richert says the feedback on the board has been positive from members, who now feel as if they can approach the crew members on the course to ask questions about what they're doing. This interaction leads to a better understanding for golfers about the maintenance practices and why they are necessary.

The pictures are placed on a colored piece of poster board and then placed in a frame, Richert says. The cost of the effort is minimal, but the reward of helping everyone get to know each other is invaluable in the long run.

"If you give (golfers) enough communication outlets, they can customize the way they want to get course information."

THOMAS MARTINEK

maintenance issues. He says he uses humor to make complicated maintenance issues easier for golfers to understand. He also makes sure that his presentations to the green committee are always professional.

While appearances aren't everything, affluent golfers who are accustomed to top-notch written presentations in their businesses expect the same from superintendents. Mumper said he put together a 10-year equipment plan that would have looked at home in any corporate boardroom.

Jim Becker, president of West Bend, Wis.-based EPIC of Wisconsin, says superintendents must earn golfers' respect as people before they can expect respect for what they do.

"Superintendents know how hard they work, but the vast majority of golfers do not,"

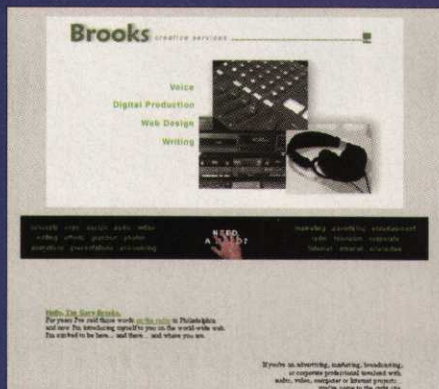
Continued on page 32

WEB WAVE

It started with a visit to a seminar at the National Golf Course Owners Association four years ago. John Gehman, superintendent/owner of the Butter Valley Golf Port in Bally, Pa., attended the meeting looking for an electronic tee sheet program for his computer. What he came away with, instead, was a vision for his course's place on the World Wide Web.

"The tee sheet seminar was a bit of a flop, but as I listened to other speakers at the conference talk about the future of the Web, I remember thinking they were on to something," Gehman says. "It's the wave of the future, and I wanted to be on the leading edge."

When he returned to Bally, Gehman called a friend who was doing Web design and asked him to construct a site for his 18-hole public course. About a year later, Butter Valley's golf instructor Gary Brooks said he could create a better site. Brooks runs a creative-services busi-



ness that does Web site design (www.gbrooks.com) in addition to his instruction duties at Butter Valley.

"Our first site was rudimentary, and I wanted to make it look a little more professional," Gehman says. "So I told Gary to go for it"

"We had so much to offer at the course that I really thought we had a good opportunity to sell the course on the Web," Brooks says. "I spent a lot of time trying to get it just right"

Brooks says the site took 270 hours to create, and the startup costs were nearly \$15,000. The site gets nearly 50 to 100 new viewers a day.

The current Web site (www.buttervalley.com) links golfers with weather conditions, all the events at the course for the year, as well as pictures of previous events. Gehman says the pictures — and the ability to post scores immediately while any of the course's tournaments are going on — build a sense of community among the golf course's patrons.

"I've received great feedback from our golfers on the site and the information it provides," Gehman says. "They're always looking for new information about the course on the site."

Gehman hopes to add features such as daily turf conditions, aeration schedules and other maintenance information. Since the site currently resides with an outside vendor, Gehman pays Brooks a fee for any updating that takes place.

"We're dealing with the birth pangs of the Internet," Gehman says. "What we will see in 10 years will be radically different. It's going to be the communication wave of the future."

Continued from page 30

Becker says. "It's up to the superintendent to be as visible as possible to make sure golfers know who they are."

Becker suggests superintendents play golf with their clients when they can or hold lawn-care seminars for them. Anything that raises the profile of the superintendent is a good idea.

Mumper says he had an annual "Beat the Mump Day" at Ravisloe CC, where he worked until taking over at Park Ridge in December 1999. Mumper chose a par 3 hole and competed in a closest-to-pin contest with individual golfers for a day.

If Mumper won, the golfer donated \$50 that went toward a special projects fund. If the player won, he or she received a \$50 credit at the pro shop. "Beat the Mump Day" raised \$1,000, \$1,500 and \$2,500, respectively, for various course projects in the last three years. It always created a buzz at the course, Mumper says, and he plans to continue the tradition at Park Ridge.

To build on face-to-face relationships, superintendents must use other avenues to communicate with golfers. E-mail will increase in importance as a method for communicating with golfers, says Oscar Miles, superintendent of The Merit Club in Libertyville, Ill. The Merit Club is also working on creating its own Web site, where Miles says he'd like to post course condition information.

"I'm trying to collect addresses of our members so I can do a e-mail updates in the future," Miles says, adding that giving golfers as much information as possible helps the superintendent in the long run. Education is the most effective way to curb poor turf practices by players, he says.

Above all, Mumper says superintendents have to remain professional when they talk to golfers.

"Save your ridicule for the bar when you talk to fellow superintendents about a golfer who asks a particularly stupid question," Mumper suggests. "As it's happening, take a deep breath and discuss with the golfer whatever the issue is. Remember, that part of your job is communication, and it will benefit you in the long run." ■

