

One Superintendent's Perspective

By **STEPHEN DINGER**
Como Golf Course



Como Golf Course, located in St. Paul's Como Park area, opened in 1925 and was re-designed in 1987 by Don Herfort.

I started working for the City of St. Paul the first summer after I graduated from High School. I have been with the Parks Department for 39 years. Most of those years have been spent on city golf courses. I started at Phalen Golf Course in the '70s under Neil Draz. I worked there for three or four years as an entry level worker. I then moved to the Highland Nine Hole Golf Course where I worked with Bob Grew, the Golf Course Superintendent (smart and tough, work was his recreation). I worked as a groundworker mowing, spraying and learning how to manage a course. After he retired in the late 1980s, I became the crew leader (Assistant) and worked with David Ksiazek until I was placed at Como Golf Course as a Golf Course Superintendent in 1989.

How did you enter the turf management industry? When I started for the City I was lucky to be moved to all different types of jobs in the Parks Department. I did everything from refuse collection to working in forestry as a tree trimmer to being a mason's helper and then as a playground groundworker. But when I started at Phalen Golf Course, I knew this was the type of work I wanted to do. I was enthusiastic to go to work and I loved learning about all the aspects of taking care of a golf course. I was able to see the difference we made to the course with our work. I have never lost my enthusiasm or the interest in the work I do.

What has been the highest point in your career? Being moved to Como as a Superintendent was a high point. But having the privilege to work with great people every day is the highest point for me. My staff has always made this an enjoyable experience. The golf courses for the city work very closely together and share staff and equipment. So working with Superintendents Denise Kispert (Highland National) and Jeff Hable (Phalen Golf) gives us a large amount of experiences to draw off of. We have a Central Service Facility that helps us with talented mechanics, trades people and support services, as we may need them. I am very grateful for all the talented people I have had the privilege to work with over the years.

What has been your lowest point? I really can't think of one thing that stands out. When I look back at the problems over the years, I also see the solutions that have come with them, and many have turned into great opportunities.

What are your greatest challenges – political, agronomic or managerial? When I began working for the City of St. Paul, from the shovel to the computer, I was able to learn how work within the system. To an outsider it may look bulky and confusing but we have wonderful people in this system that will bend over

backwards to assist you when you need help.

Agronomically every course has its challenges and Como is no different. It was built partly on an old lake bed and partly on a sand pit with a rocky moraine running through the middle, so I have plenty of different soils and managing them can be interesting. I learned a great lesson from Dr. White when he would bring over some of his classes in late summer and they would not be able to get a soil probe into the fairways more than one or two inches. He wanted them to see what they may have to deal with in the real world setting. I have learned to accept what is and go from there. Make lemonade.

What is the most difficult disease to manage on your course and how do you? We have lots of Poa in the fairways on the south side of the course that is protected by woods, so we get dollar spot in that area in the late summer. Up until last year we were able to keep it at bay with cultural methods. Last year was a very bad year and we may have to start adding some fungicidal treatments.

Is it hard to find good help in your area of the state? No. I have had very few problems with staff.

Do you have a dog on your crew? We contract out with a service that brings out dogs when the geese population gets too heavy. I think the geese learn to recognize the dog owners truck and hightail it to Como Lake until he leaves and then they come back to dine on the nice turf at Como Golf Course. It does help, but being right in the middle of Como Park we have to deal with two distinct attitudes about geese, depending on which side of Lexington Ave. you're on.

Where will our industry be in 10 years? I think it will be stronger than ever. We have seen the bottom and have nowhere to go but up.

Where would you like to be in 10 years? Retired and spending time with my lovely wife Julie and daughter Emma at Green Lake, Wisconsin in the summer and Vancouver or Portland for the winter. Maybe I can get a part time job changing cups at a near-by course.

What is your perspective of our state association and what would you change? I think we have a wonderful association. All that needs to be done is to continue filling it with enthusiastic people as has been done in the past.

Name your foursome, whom would you play with and why. I am not able to golf much, so whoever it is, it would be for the conversation more than the golf. Bill Murray, Tiger Woods, Buddha and Spencer Nelson (his family lives in my neighborhood and I talk with him sometimes last summer when I walked the dog (still sharp as a tack and great stories).

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- Stephen Dinger