

The Superintendent and the Green Chairman—Keys to Harmony

by Mike Larsen, CGCS, Superintendent, Woodmont Country Club

A successful relationship between a club and a golf course superintendent is not something that just happens. It's a relationship built on trust and confidence. The club entrusts its greatest asset, the golf course and property, to a superintendent and must feel confident that the superintendent will manage the golf course and its money to the best of his ability. The ultimate goal is to give the club the best possible playing conditions with the money provided.

Communication. When I was approached about presenting my views on the "Keys to Building a Successful Relationship between the Golf Course Superintendent and the Green Chairman and the Green Committee," I had the opportunity to sit back, close my eyes and reflect on the personal experiences and relationships I've had as a golf course superintendent these past 20 years. The first thing I did was count how many green committee chairmen I've had. Let's see—eight in 20 years—an average of two and a half years for each chair with a range of one to five years. Then I focused on their personalities, characteristics, and idiosyncrasies and I came away with some observations. All were gentlemen. All certainly had a love for the game. Some were excellent golfers, some not as skilled. Some were professional people, others directed large companies, some were self-employed. Then I began to think of how many green committee meetings I've had in the past 20 years. What was strange was that I was able to count only seven.

Seven in 20 years. I wondered—were we doing something right or something very wrong? I decided to give us the benefit of the doubt. I know this is on the low end of frequency, but some clubs are very meeting-oriented, while others are not.

The purpose of the Green Committee is to review and implement special projects, target problem areas, judge whether new product introductions might fit into your operations and discuss topics of general concern to the membership. But, the level of activity and involvement this committee sees will be determined by the working style of the green committee chair. Some chairs will have a high need for consensus, while others will prefer autonomy. I have found that some of the decisions made were never run through the committee or the board. My chair and I subscribe to the theory that it is sometimes easier to get forgiveness than it is

to get permission. The superintendent will need to evaluate the operating style of the chair and his committee, and respond accordingly.

The frequency and means by which the superintendent and the green committee interact will vary. You may find, as I have, that the superintendent's main working relationship will be with one individual—the chairman. How you communicate with your chairman will vary. You and your chairman will have a feel for what works best in your situation. Your contact with him may be daily or weekly by phone. For some, casual meetings may work best. It seems my chairman and I can get more accomplished by riding around the course early in the morning to evaluate and discuss projects. These meetings may coincide with some business my chairman may have in the vicinity

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of the club. Meetings may also occur in a more formal setting in your office with a specific topic to address. Whatever your style of communication, they must be on a regular basis, not spasmodic.

To achieve these goals, the lines of communication must remain open. There are numerous ways to cultivate this dialogue—club newsletter articles, participation in club board meetings, and club events such as opening day of golf. Opening Day is an occasion which I personally use to outline what we've accomplished and to inform about projects and programs scheduled for the coming year.

Usually interested audiences like these are rare, so it's wise to take advantage of these opportunities.

Understanding. In addition to communication, another key to building a successful green chairman/golf course superintendent relationship is understanding. This means understanding on the part of both the green committee and its chairman and on the part of the green superintendent. The more information you exchange, the more a feeling of ease and confidence will develop. However, this atmosphere of understanding and cooperation takes time to develop. Frustration is experienced by many superintendents when the position of green committee chairman changes with frequency. Quite honestly, it takes about two years to orient a new chairman and his committee. As I mentioned earlier, my average length of term for green committee chairman has been about two and a half years. There may be something to be said for longer terms for the green committee chair position.

Green committee members are usually from a professional background and it is understandable that the fields of agronomy and turfgrass management—and their associated science and terminology—are totally new to them. Sure, they all know what a good golf course should look like, and what good playing conditions are, but they can't be expected to understand specifically how you arrive at that product.

I think we superintendents all have sensed that club and committee members tend to oversimplify the responsibilities of the golf course superintendent. I mean, after all, we are dealing with grass. Club members all have lawns with grass; all you do is water it, fertilize it and mow it.

Committee members really don't understand the science and agronomics of golf course management or have a feel for the intense stress we inflict upon the turfgrasses we manage. It would be unfair of us to expect them to understand. Meetings, association

journals and technical periodicals are all avenues of information for committee members to broaden their base of understanding. The superintendents should always be available and open to answer their questions.

The superintendent's responsibility in the exchange of understanding is to be receptive to the changing priorities of each chairman and his committee. Each chair will undoubtedly have projects in mind as he assumes his position. The golf course superintendent must understand that he needs to be flexible and accommodate these projects while not compromising the condition of the golf course.

A basic key to understanding between the superintendent and the green committee is to examine the differences in approach and focus. Members focus on playability, while the superintendent's focus is on a much broader range of responsibilities. Today's superintendent is faced with an ever-increasing number of challenges. Managing the golf course is only a small part of it. There are the clubhouse grounds, swimming pools, and tennis courts and all the associated budgeting, purchasing and

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personnel matters. On a personal note, I have the added responsibility of 22 tennis courts, a six-court tennis bubble, a swimming pool, and the maintenance of 100 golf cars. Members of the green committee need to understand that the club requires the superintendent to manage multiple priorities, not just focus on the golf course.

Woodmont is a country club with golf, tennis and swimming. With clubs of this nature, it is necessary for committee members to see the whole picture. My chairman doesn't care about flowers—he readily admits it—his focus is on golf. However, at Woodmont we have a large number of flower beds and plantings. Woodmont has an older membership—65 percent are 65 or older. Many visit the club only for dinner and a walk around the grounds. The superintendent works for the whole membership and we owe just as much to the older couple who visit once a week as we do to the member who golfs four times a week. In visualizing the "whole picture," committee members hopefully see how a superintendent's responsibilities interface with golf/tennis/swimming/clubhouse grounds to the enjoyment of all club members. It is the superintendent's responsibility in this loop to set priorities within his plan of action encompassing this big picture approach. Those priorities can change from week to week, day to day, morning to afternoon and hour to hour.

Patience. It certainly is a fair statement to say that turfgrass science is not a perfect science. Sometimes I feel members believe a golf course is like a picture—it never changes. In reality, a golf course is dynamic—it is constantly

changing. Why? Because you're dealing with nature and nature is never constant. Here's where patience enters the scene.

Golf has forced us to grow turf under unnatural conditions. The reason is quite simple—there is no other sport where the playing surface itself is as critical to the game as is golf. Certainly this explains some of the emotional reactions associated with the game of golf. Members must understand that intensely managed turf is exactly that. The playing conditions they desire don't just happen, but are the result of numerous sound turfgrass management practices.

Because of this intense management, green committee members must understand the need for, importance of and timing of various cultural practices. Unfortunately, aeration is probably the most important cultural practice we employ on the golf course and is generally mandated to periods of minimal membership disruption instead of periods of maximum turfgrass benefit.

Another example of a conflict in priorities

which requires patience on the part of the golfing members and the green committee is the assembly and take-down of the Woodmont tennis bubble which usually occurs in April and September—right when all the seasonal help is unavailable. To dismantle and erect the bubble is about a week-long ordeal. My staff is absolutely stressed to the limit and some tasks on the golf course must be postponed. Patience at this time is critical and fortunately the members of Woodmont are patient, but this situation does fuel the feud between our golfers and tennis

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players. This particular conflict may be peculiar to Woodmont, but I think you all will have your own examples of when priorities must be managed and when the superintendent and committee will need to be patient.

Another area where patience is needed is the constant comparison of golf courses. Let's face it—all clubs are in competition with one another. There are so many factors to consider when making comparisons—design, playability, aesthetics and, of course, conditions. In addition, there are many variables affecting conditions: old courses with push-up greens, new courses with U.S.G.A. greens; turfgrass species—Bentgrass versus Poa greens, good versus poor drainage of both air and water; irrigation systems, and

certainly budget—personnel and equipment. Comparison should be between what clubs get for what they spend.

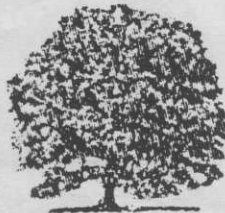
There are no instant cures or quick fixes in nature. Damaged turf, weak greens, annual overseedings and cultural practices all need time to recover, develop and mature. Superintendents can be divided into two groups—those who have had a green die and those who will. When I first entered this business, I worked at Baltimore Country Club for Dick Silvar, a man for whom I had the greatest respect. I can remember asking him if he had ever had a green that died. Without hesitation he replied, "Michael, you haven't been in this business until you have a green die."

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sponsored golf tournaments are held at some of the most respected courses in the world. Through television today's golfers are exposed to a myriad of beautiful courses every weekend—brilliantly green and manicured to perfection. These courses may take years to prepare for these events which last only one week. The public's exposure to these courses instills a feeling that all golf courses should look like that all the time. In truth, it can be quite the opposite.

In February I stopped in the golf shop and asked our golf pro and some members how they had enjoyed their recent trip to Pebble Beach. I was startled to hear them say that they were not impressed—quite disappointed in fact. They were shocked that the

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greens were all Poa, that they had to play three temporary greens and four temporary tees. Of course, all this was in preparation for the upcoming national pro-am and of course, television. But they readily admitted how disappointed they were. This just illustrates that what people perceive to be the standard of quality can in reality be quite different. It didn't matter that the Monterey area was being pounded daily by rain, nor that Pebble Beach is a public golf course—Pebble Beach had the U.S. Open in 1992 and they expected U.S. Open conditions. They all watched the tournament on TV and expected what they saw. Anything less was unacceptable. Obviously, superintendents

work toward having perfect golf courses continuously, but as I said, it's not a perfect world and turfgrass management is not a perfect science and yes, every lawyer doesn't win every case, every real estate agent doesn't close on every property and every doctor doesn't save every patient. There are variables in every business—those we can control and those we cannot. Yet perfection is what we superintendents strive for and what today's golfers demand. All of us have problems; our goal is to keep them to a minimum. These are issues superintendents realize and accept, but we need to communicate these problems readily to a green chairman in the hope that he will understand what we deal with every day and be patient when the results are not immediate.

Cryptogram

Now that summer reruns are holding your TV hostage, try becoming a secret agent yourself. Here's a simple cryptogram where one letter stands for another. An example: **VWTHITCUU**
OCVVG TU= Turfgrass Matters.
 Apostrophes, two- and three-letter words are clues. Next month we'll print the answer and names of any who send me their answers. This is a quote from a famous author.

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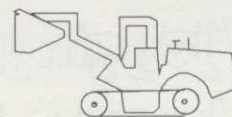
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