

10 further pitfalls of golf course maintenance

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The techniques and strategies for maintaining golf course turf continue to be better understood and improved as time passes. Some of this learning is the result of formal research done at universities, yet much of our practical knowledge comes from field experience and observation. After all, we often learn more from our mistakes than from the activities that turn out well. Let's face it, an important aspect of improving ourselves is recognising our mistakes and then learning from them.

Each facet of a golf course maintenance program overlaps and ties in with all the other components. Nevertheless, each problem area needs to be identified, evaluated, and considered individually before it can be combined with others and seen as a package.

An article in last month's *Greenkeeper International* discussed the top 10 maintenance pitfalls of greenkeepers as identified by the USGA Green Section in a survey of its staff. The article received lots of response, with the most common question being, "What are the second 10?" The staff was surveyed again, and the results follow:

11 Time on the Golf Course

The greenkeeper is hired to supervise the maintenance of the golf course. Sounds like an obvious statement, doesn't it? Well, it's amazing how often the agronomics of golf course maintenance takes a back seat to the many other hats worn by today's greenkeeper. That is, of course, until problems develop. Then, everyone wants to know what's happening to the turf, and the

primary focus, once again, is the agronomics.

Very few greenkeepers have the time or take the time to walk their golf courses daily to closely observe turf conditions. It isn't because they don't want to; most are simply pulled in too many directions. Many greenkeepers will acknowledge they are spending more and more time on the job with each passing year, but less and less time is spent actually on the course. "When I got into this business I didn't have to put in this many hours with non-turf-grass related activities," is a common response.

Is this a young man's profession? Or is it time to simplify and get back to the basics, and if so, how can we do that?

How about playing the game? How can a greenkeeper prepare the golf course for play if he or she does not play regularly? How can solid decisions and diagnoses be made without spending some time carefully scouting the course? To accomplish this, it takes more than the greenkeeper just being aware of the need. It requires an owner, president, or green committee chairperson becoming involved and encouraging, or even mandating, that the greenkeeper play weekly or at least walk the course on a regular schedule. The greenkeeper also needs support to hire specialty staff, like a secretary, a good assistant greenkeeper, an experienced foreman, irrigation and/or spray technicians, which allows for a more realistic workload so that quality time can be spent on the course. We cannot afford to lose sight of the fact that golf course maintenance still is a "hands-on" profession.

12 Documentation

Documentation involves a systematic programme of recording

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activities of importance. Record-keeping practices we see range from very good to non-existent in golf course maintenance operations. In a world that is scrutinising pesticide usage more and more, it is vitally important to record every detail leading to and including the decision to actually apply a chemical. The days of making notes on a desk blotter concerning pesticide usage are long gone, or they should be.

With the computers available today, pesticide applications, inventory status, and payroll and budget tracking all can be done quickly and professionally. Every operation is different, and the use of a computer can be as simple or complex as a particular operation may need. That's the beauty of today's personal computers. Nevertheless, there are relatively few operations that are using computers to full value. Some control their irrigation systems with computers, but most golf course maintenance operations have not tapped into this valuable resource. Computers are somewhat like golf carts – they are here to stay. If you cannot use a computer to its full potential, either hire someone who can, or take time to learn.

It is not uncommon to visit a golf course and see a nice improvement project that has been completed by the greenkeeper and staff. Projects like bunker renovation, tee additions, and even the construction of a new putting green are clearly over and above routine golf course maintenance. The documentation of improvement projects with pictures or video can be very worthwhile when, a few months later, the golfers forget what it used to look like and who actually made the improvements. A camera can be an excellent tool to help document the work being done on a golf course. It is amazing how valuable pictures can be when budgets are being considered or salaries reviewed.

Documentation is a lot like communication – you are doing it all the time. It is either planned or done by default. It will either work for you or against you. Review what you are doing in this area and take the time to lay a positive foundation for the

future. Document what you and your staff actually do!

13 The Bandwagon Syndrome

The "Bandwagon Syndrome" refers to those times we do something or try some thing just because the golf course down the road is doing it or someone told you he was. Does it really work? Is it agronomically sound for your course? It must be – isn't the highest budgeted/best golf course in town doing it? It must be the right thing to do!

An example of this would be the use of the new "lightweight rollers." It is amazing how many course officials ask about rollers. In most cases, they have heard the course down the street is using them.

"Will they make the putting surfaces faster?"

"Absolutely," is the quick response from the course down the street.

"Is there danger of surface compaction?"

A frequent answer is, "Possibly, but we haven't seen any problems yet."

Let's hope your course won't be the exception to the rule. As with most every thing in our industry, rollers are tools which can be used or abused.

What about chemicals, soil amendments, plant growth regulators, or bio-stimulants? Too often, the same reasoning is applied: If the well-known course or greenkeeper is using it, then it should work for us. However, you should ask yourself if university testing has been done. Also, has the testing been repeated enough in the field to suggest that it will work equally well at most sites? What do the Green Section agronomists think? The "Bandwagon Syndrome" can and has led to wasted time and money. In a few situations, both turf and jobs have been lost. There are no miracle cures in golf course main-

tenance. Look carefully before you leap, and be very sure of your information source. If you are not sure, be conservative and wait and see. Never hesitate to ask questions about new products or procedures. Avoid jumping onto bandwagons too quickly!

14 The Rules of Golf and Marking the Course

What value would our roads and motorways be if drivers did not follow the laws? Can you imagine what would happen if people were allowed to make up their own rules while driving their cars? It is not a pleasant thought. Golf is similar in that golf without rules is something other than the game we all love. If you do not play by the rules, you are not playing golf. It follows, then, that to properly maintain and mark the course on which the game is played, a greenkeeper must have a working knowledge of the rules.

What is the difference between a "hazard" and a "lateral hazard"? What are the options for putting a ball back into play when it has been lost in a "hazard" or "lateral hazard"? What is the procedure when a ball is hit into a pile of grass clippings waiting to be removed? Is it possible to have an illegal hole location? What is the difference between illegal and unfair? How about the so called "winter rules"? These are only a few examples of questions every greenkeeper should be able to answer. This is not an area that should be left just to the golf professional. Knowing the rules and staying up with changes is some thing we all need to actively pursue.

15 Lack of Outside Interests

There are no perfect golf courses, either in design or maintenance. As such, the job of maintaining and conditioning the golf course is never completely finished.

There is always something that needs attention, and this is why the greenkeeper is such a key component in the game of golf. Yet, no one can work 10-plus hours every day of the week for months on end without paying a price. The price may be "burnout," lack of effectiveness on the job, or eventually the pursuit of a different career. Marriages have failed and families have been shattered by the pursuit of a perfectly conditioned golf course. Every greenkeeper knows he/she must leave home to go to work, but how about leaving work to go home? Are you living to work or working to live?

Take a day off every week. Have and pursue some type of hobby or non-golf-related interest. Spend quality time with your spouse and family. Take time for refreshment and revitalisation so you can meet the needs of your family and yourself.

To accomplish these things, every greenkeeper needs the support and encouragement of management. Green chairperson, owner, course official – do not allow your greenkeeper to burn the candle at both ends. Do not allow the short-term conditioning of your golf course to cloud the long-term picture or the personal life of your greenkeeper. Continuity over the long run is more important than course conditioning on any one day.

Take or make time to rest, relax, and recharge your batteries and relieve stress. It will make you more effective, and remember – golf is, after all, a game.

16 Test Plots

The value of on-course testing cannot be overemphasised. How can you know that a new product or technique will work in your maintenance programme without doing some controlled evaluations? Controlled means working with enough area to obtain a fair evaluation without affecting the budget or the playability of the golf course. A turf nursery is a very good place to do controlled testing. Every golf course maintenance operation should have at least one turf nursery.

Leaving control (untreated)

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strips when making applications on the golf course is another good way to determine the effectiveness of the product. This makes it possible to determine if the pesticide application was really needed. Nobody particularly likes leaving control strips, but it is the only way to really know what degree of success you are achieving from a product or procedure.

Take the time to do on-course testing. Keep the boss and others who need to know informed of the results. They, too, will be interested in what is happening on their golf course. The information you gather should help save time, money, and aggravation the next time the application or procedure is carried out.

17 Keeping up with Technology

Attend local, regional, national, and even international educa-

tional conferences, field days, and seminars. Subscribe to industry magazines and read them while they are reasonably current. Take advantage of publications from BIGGA and the STRI, as well as the USGA, GCSAA, and others.

A tremendous amount of information is available, but you have to take the initiative to take advantage of it. Too often, the demands faced by today's greenkeeper will affect his/her ability to stay involved with the information gathering process. Course officials need to make sure that both time and money are available for the greenkeeper to stay

current with the fast-changing technology of our industry. Do not allow the hectic pace of day-to-day golf course maintenance to prevent you from staying informed about tomorrow.

18 Long-Range Planning

As the old adage says, "When you fail to plan, you plan to fail." This is true for course improvements as well as for maintenance. Long-range or master plans allow the greenkeeper and course officials to establish obtainable goals and objectives. This makes it possible to establish realistic budgets for

both maintenance and course improvements. A well-thought-out master plan that has been approved by those in authority can help bridge the gap in continuity when greenkeepers or course officials change. As a matter of fact, a good master plan can help increase the longevity of the greenkeeper simply because he/she has a much better idea of what is expected and where the operation is headed. Everyone benefits from this combination.

Long-range plans can include time being set aside for the greens to be aerified each year, allowing golf events to be scheduled around maintenance activities without deferring maintenance work or eliminating it altogether. There are no surprises; everyone knows when the work will be done and what to expect. The continuity and direction that are established through long-range planning pay dividends

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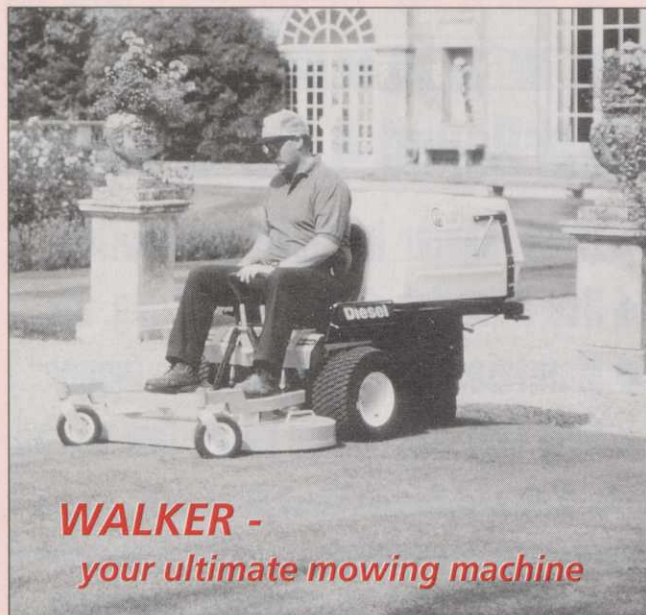
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Delegate responsibility to the people hired to assist you

in a better-managed golf course.

19 Training and Delegation

A good indication that a potential problem exists in this area is the need to have a pager, mobile phone, or two-way radio in constant use. If it is that critical that you are reachable every second of every day, maybe it's time to spread some responsibility to other key employees. This also ties in with the need to have outside interests and low-stress personal time. If the greenkeeper is carrying the entire load alone, sooner or later something will snap.

A good rule-of-thumb to follow in training key employees is to help that person learn to do all that you do. Don't be insecure about this. It takes a person with confidence in his/her ability and the capability of seeing the big picture to delegate authority. Investing in people is what life is all about. A supervisor who is good at training and delegating is respected by his/her staff and usually enjoys life a lot more. Improving the skills of training and delegating is a never-ending task. We all can improve in this area.

20 Managing Carts and Cart Paths

This ties in very closely with the eighth pitfall. That is, Amount of Play. More and more maintenance operations are installing tee-to-green golf cart path networks. While no one likes the idea of having paved surfaces on a golf course, a well-built golf cart path offers the best wear control and maintenance options where heavy cart traffic exists. Ropes, signs, and fencing can be used to help control golf cart traffic and wear, but these usually offer less than ideal results and increased maintenance costs. It is amazing how people ignore signs and ropes!

In designing a golf cart path

network, begin at the 18th green and work backwards around the course. If there is a problem area where golf cart traffic is hard to manage, begin the network design at this point. It is important to locate the cart path where it will be used. However, try to stay at least 30 feet, or 10 yards, from a green or fairway. Where possible, avoid ball landing areas, though no path location is immune to shots hitting the surface. Under the Rules of Golf, relief is given from an artificially paved surface. On the other hand, no relief is allowed from the bare ground or thinned turf that often results from concentrated golf cart traffic.

Be sure to construct a golf cart path with a good base, and preferably it should be eight feet wide. This allows maintenance equipment to use the paths and makes it possible for one cart to pass another without leaving the paved surface. Properly built and located cart paths also can be used as channels for surface water runoff when pitched or sloped or with curbing installed.

Give serious thought to the current and future usage of golf carts at your course. While cart paths do involve some cost initially, over the long run they can pay for themselves in increased cart usage, especially during inclement weather. When the course is wet but playable, the sign would read, "Golf Carts Restricted to Paths." Isn't that better than, "Course Closed to Golf Carts"?

Conclusion

This listing of the second 10 pitfalls, follows in the footsteps of the first 10 in last month's magazine. The intent has been to discuss maintenance pitfalls, as seen by Green Section agronomists. Once identified as a concern on your course, a strategy can be developed to make the necessary changes. It is never too late for change!

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