



You can never have too much advice which helps you live a little more bearably in the dark winter months

Customer *satisfaction*



For any greenkeeper worth his salt, the start of a new season is always laced with excitement for what lies ahead, while providing time to reflect on the year that has passed, to learn from (sometimes bitter) experiences and to formulate plans for combating the upcoming player onslaught.

Certainly, 1998 will go down as the year of "The Big Soak", with Mother Nature emptying more rain upon us than in recent living history, or so it seemed. Into 1999, the rain continues unabated, the hard lesson learned by many being that water still refuses to flow uphill, while for those unfortunate courses situated "below sea level", there's a lesson to be learned from the Dutch, who know a thing or two about draining lowlands, with their ingenious use of Archimedean screw pumps.

Rain-sodden courses have indeed caused many golfers to be thoroughly grumpy, especially those seven-day-a-week seniors, who like a bad whine (sic) often get bitter with age. And who do they blame for course closures, temporary greens, or tees moved a few yards away in order to protect from destructive forces? Why, it's the poor old greenkeeper, who has the nerve to fail to control the elements!

All of this greatly focuses the mind on keeping the customer satisfied, which is itself as much a skill - a learning experience, if you like - as maintaining course machinery to a required high degree of efficiency. Writing this in January, there's a gale lashing in from the east, it's pouring (again), the course is waterlogged (again), while the Sunday Telegraph

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has just published a doom and gloom article concerning no less than 90 golf courses being up for sale at knock-down prices, apparently an albatross around the necks of their present owners.

Just yesterday, though it rained too hard to play, there were a few stalwarts hanging around the clubhouse. Having first solved the world's economic problems, they rounded on me to explain, with 200,000 new players having entered the game in the past five years, why golf course casualties are so high.

"Aren't there too many courses?" they asked. Well, some clearly were built in the wrong place and certainly many spent too much, yet today more rounds are being played by more golfers than ever before, with that trend continuing on an upward spiral. New courses are still being built, and indeed doing very nicely, thank you, while very many others are undergoing more than superficial facelifts, so there aren't too many dead ones, just some that are poorly run by people who don't really want to run a golf course, just own one.

We should not be worrying about golf in decline. If a plateau is perceived, well, these things often happen before the next boom. The cold facts are that some golf courses don't

deserve to succeed; with Owner/Managers making the assumption that golfers will put up with anything just to get a game. Not anymore, they won't, for while most golfers may be hooked, they are not barmy. Like some of these clubs with FOR SALE boards out; they have fine facilities, but often are poorly managed, usually by uppity accountants. When grey-suit management enters meltdown, the cycle shows a drop in business, a cut in prices and a cut in maintenance. If that doesn't work, slash prices again and virtually eliminate maintenance. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to work this out as a recipe for disaster. Golfers have figured it out.

What they've figured out also is that they now have a very wide choice of places to play. Well-run and well-maintained courses can still charge a decent sum, and get no objections.

A poorly run facility though, be it corporate, public or member-owned, will often look for a scapegoat, with the greenkeeper the one whose head is placed on the chopping block.

Here's one worthwhile tip. By recording every single work command, including every course of action (and every reaction), you can often rescue the day. The saving grace, of course, is that poorly run golf facilities rarely get

ploughed up. Once in place, they stay; with one man's folly becoming another man's good deal. Assuming your work has been conducted with patient efficiency, continue greenkeeping, albeit with a new owner.

Before your members awaken to spring, when again they'll start those unrealistic demands for the course to mirror Augusta National, take a further look at the history of 1998. Learning from it, now might be the time to get lines of communication with the members well and truly open. You might begin by explaining exactly what a cold, raw, wet season does for the growth of the sward, explaining that April is still a winter month.

With spring and summer remaining as distant dreams, this is the time to tell players about soil temperatures, and that even you cannot force Nature to warm up before she's ready. Use bulletin boards and newsletters and never miss an opportunity to explain your views in person with any new committee incumbent, even if you view the latest committee re-shuffle as akin to re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Keep pessimistic views to yourself, but colour optimism with a large slice of realism. It won't hurt.

These first early months should also present a good opportunity to look at traffic management. You'll know the path of least resistance your members take, how they enter and exit greens and tees and how their movement effects wear. To institute traffic control measures now, by spreading the load over a wider area, rather than waiting until turf is injured beyond simple remedy in the growing season, will pay dividends, even if only 50% of your members fall in and co-operate. By simple mathematics, 50% compliance means 50% less wear.

Some greenkeepers look at bad weather as a grand opportunity to undertake some tasks best hidden from prying eyes. For example, the best cure for poor circulation around greens with too many overhanging trees is, by common consent, use of the aptly-titled chainsaw twosome: "Thunder" and "Lightning", though this year there's a new one that might take some beating - tree root wet rot!

Don't lose heart, tackle each task according to its level of irritation. While the nature of greenkeeping quite properly is to exercise patience, never forget the prayer of golfers -