

Friendly advice

Now, as you know, I am not one to criticise but there are certain things that are going to have to be said. Let us face the facts to ourselves and admit that when it comes to getting on with golf club members, some of our performances leave a great deal to be desired. Now before I contin-

ue, I have to admit that I have been less than deferential to these good people on the odd rare occasion. Still, like many of my colleagues, I am just going to have to learn a few hard lessons when it comes to public relations. I know some of you have got the punters to the stage where they honestly believe solar energy radiates from the final component of your alimentary canal but believe me, you are in the minority.

There is no doubt about it, some of us, maybe the majority of us, view the golf club member as somewhat objectionable, an object, even, of evil and depravity.

So how has this sorry state of affairs come about? Well if we travel back in time half a century or so ago we find that we were actually considered to be of the same social standing as our professional golfer friends. Both of us were one step above being in the gutter of society. But as the years have passed, the professional has risen up that ladder to get to the stage where the members give him the utmost in respect. We alas have stayed pretty much at the same level. But when you think about it, this was always inevitable, you just have to look at the life of the pro. Even those sad ones that spend

practically all of their dismal existence in those seedy back rooms of their shops perched on a mountain of pornographic literature while watching Peruvian Yak racing on Eurosport, have gained a certain approval from the membership. This is simply because they are theoretically at least able to do the one thing that nearly all club members can't, i.e. play golf to a reasonable standard.

As for the good ones, they are at the nucleus of golf club life in daily contact with all those critical key members. They own an Aladdin's cave full of the latest in golfing armoury, guaranteed to bestow the purchaser with eternal tranquillity. They are a veritable oracle of golfing technique, eager to part with this theoretical elixir for a mere 30 quid an hour. With their designer couture, hair by Antoine and sales patter honed at the finest estate agent schools they have taken on an almost God-like status within golf club society. Is it any wonder that when an attractive young female accidentally strays within the confines of a golf club, it is the assistant pro that get to fulfil their thoroughly unhygienic carnal urges on them long before any underprivileged grass cutter gets so much as a sniff in the relevant direction.

Let us now compare the life of we greenkeepers. Firstly, as is befitting to people of our class, we engage in manual work, we get dirty and sometimes drag this disease carrying filth into the clubhouse. We apparently spend vast amounts of the members' subscriptions without actually bringing anything back into the club and on top of that just when the greens were getting nice we stick all these holes in them. Add to this the temporary green factor, trolley bans, course closure, our habitual use of deadly chemicals and the fact that the course down the road is always bloody immaculate and what chance do we



have.

It's a wonder we are not pelted with rotten eggs as we put them off their strokes while driving those noisy machines everywhere.

There is no doubt about it, the life of the greenkeeper comes with built-in unpopularity.

The standard method we have always adopted in trying to gain some sort of respect, is to baffle them with science. An example would be in answer to the perennial question; "Why have you spiked the greens?" Our answer would go something like; "So as to re-establish aerobic conditions thereby encouraging beneficial micro-organisms capable of secreting enzymes specific to the breakdown of lignin which, as you know, is inherent within the organic layers of a modified podzol."

This type of retort if used to excess, can lead the member into the belief that their Head Greenkeeper has spent too much time in the chemical store. I have worked for a Head Greenkeeper in the past who always used this format of conversation when faced with committee's question time. The result was they pressurised him out and went to great lengths to replace him with an utter moron that didn't know a fescue from a fuchsia and whose drunken monosyllabic conversation consisted primarily of expletives.

So what else can we do to drag ourselves out of this sea of loathing. Well it's just an idea but may I be so bold as to suggest we be nice to them. That's right, strange, alien even somewhat perverse though it may seem, one way in which we could gain some respect from the golfers is by engaging in social pleasantries with them. "Networking" I believe is the modern day terminology for this activity and I understand it is now considered essential for anyone aiming to advance within their chosen career.

To examine my theories further, let me paint a hypothetical picture. Imagine, if you will, a fairly typical greenkeeper who gets on reasonably well with the membership as a whole. Unfortunately though he gets the odd bit of grief from the club's better golfers who insist on warp factor stimpmeter readings, the Captain who has convinced himself he is a world authority on turf management and the treasurer who would insist that the course and all the main greens remain open in a Biblical flood. On their own they are relatively harmless but they play golf with other people and like nothing better than to have a good old moan at the poor Head Greenkeeper's expense.

Over a period of time they build their own little groups all of which spread further rumours of the greenkeepers incompetence until slowly, imperceptibly life becomes increasingly stressful for the poor unfortunate. The problem is, as we know this

picture is not so hypothetical and is indeed happening to literally 100's of us all over the world.

But what if this greenkeeper came into work one day and as well as his cheery wave to the regular golfers he sees he also has a little chat to them when they get back to the clubhouse. "How was your game today?" he may ask. Believe me, to a golfer the most important subject in the known universe is his golf game and so he will relish the prospect of detailing every aspect of his talents to the greenkeeper in question. In reality of course the golfers' golf game is the most boring subject known to mankind but if that greenkeeper can appear to show genuine interest, he will quickly develop a certain rapport and so the first steps in networking will have been taken.

That mutual regard can then be developed and expanded to other members of the club. They may not be the key members but the greenkeeper will start to get allies on his side. What if he then started to play a bit of golf himself at the weekends. He does not have to play with the members themselves, it is when he is in the clubhouse with them before and after that the good work could be done. He could go from one group to another and spotting a previously networked face would ask "How are things going?", "How did you play? I saw your shot on the 16th today. That was impressive."

It does not matter if he is unfamiliar with the other members of that group; he will be drawn in and so will build up further associations some of who may prove to be very useful in the future. Eventually he can become pally with quite a few of the regular members that have so much influence on the powers that be and slowly that criticism he was previously getting could decrease or start to fall on deaf ears. After all no one likes to hear a friend being slagged off behind his back.

Things will really be starting to happen when the greenkeeper can get it to the stage where he can engage in good humoured leg pulling. The above exchange of words would then be replaced with something like "How are you doing you old git, still hacking up my course? I saw your shot on the 16th today, nice fluke." If he can get it to that stage and

have them respond in the same way, then he knows he has got it cracked.

Now I know what you are thinking, the above scenario would be impossible at your club and in some cases you may well be right. But why not give it a try, the professional does it, so might the secretary, so why not us. The key is slowly at first, build things up and let them dictate the pace but always make the effort. So then what would happen to all those people that gave our poor greenkeeper so much aggravation in the past. Well, either they too will have been incorporated into the greenkeeper's network, or they will simply be so outnumbered that they will be disregarded as whingeing old products of flatulence.

All right, maybe I am being a tad idealistic but a few friends are always better than none at all. It does not matter how appalling your club is, there is always some form of networking that can be done.

Can I add some further advice on this subject? Firstly target those key individuals at your club. The professional is certainly one because of the influence that he generates but also the club's good players and all of your committee. Never say anything bad about people at your club as it will simply result in mistrust. Other people may do it all the time but they are usually the unpopular ones and it is best not to associate yourself with them. When dealing with the Lady Captain and her colleagues remember flattery will get you everywhere but never make the

mistake of giving the impression you have a physical interest in her. The consequences of this are too horrific to contemplate.

This may appear controversial but I suggest you never ask anyone to repair a pitchmark or replace a divot. It does not matter how nicely you ask them, they will always resent you for it. Just turn a blind eye and do it yourself. Put signs up everywhere or write little articles in their newsletter but never target individuals in this way, it's asking for trouble. I know some of us have rejoiced in the ritual put-down of golfers that this situation offers but remember, they are not the enemy. If someone comes up to you with a suggestion always try to give it respect especially if he is a member of standing. It does not matter how stupid the suggestion is and we all know just how stupid they can get, just try to be as diplomatic as possible.

I could go on but I am sure you could all come up with your own techniques. I am not promising the end of all your woes but give it a go; it may just help, it certainly helped me.

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