

Managing a Golf Course

The **second** of a series of five articles detailing duties of the modern day golf Course Manager

Managing and Taking Control

“If the responsibility for the management of the golf course rests on one individual the benefits to the golf course and therefore the golf club as a whole are immense.”

That statement may seem rather obvious to people who accept the concept of management responsibility, indeed many who believe in this simple principal are officials within our golf clubs.

So why is it that in the vast majority of golf clubs, golf course management responsibilities appear to be ill defined, and even worse shared between staff, officials and/or committees?

In other words when things go wrong no-one knows who to blame and the easy answer is to blame the person “in charge” of, but not necessarily responsible for, the golf course.

This person is invariably the Head Greenkeeper, or in some cases it is a Course Manager, however when this is the case it more than likely turns out that the person may be a Course Manager in name only and is not “managing” at all, but merely doing as they are told.

In my experience if no one person is held responsible for something being done then it will most probably not get done at all!

There are many varied management structures in place in golf clubs but no matter what structure you may have I would advocate that there must be one person responsible for the management of the golf course - and it would seem the most likely name for that person would be a “Course Manager” because it best describes what that person does and what that person is responsible for.

The reason that this “ideal” scenario is far from common place at the moment quite frankly is that there are insufficient numbers of fully qualified, competent Course Managers to go round.

Some of my colleagues may balk at that observation but I would suggest that those who do are the ones who do not carry out all of the necessary duties, which will be detailed in this series of articles.

Whenever I hear of problems on golf courses they invariably result from ill defined areas of responsibility, and this proves to me why there are problems - we as Course Managers must take responsibility for the management of the golf course in all its varied aspects, which include difficult as well as easy times - it is all too easy to hide when things are not going well but this only delays the inevitable.

My belief is therefore that you must have a Course Manager fully responsible for the management of the golf course.

There may be managing committees and managing sub committees (quite rightly in my view) but the responsibility for the golf course must rest with the Course Manager.

Over this series of articles I will cover what I believe to be the minimum requirement/remit/job description of that person.

Strides in the education and training available to greenkeepers over the past 15 years or so have been exceptional thanks to both the Greekeepers' Training Committee and BIGGA, our Professional Association, who have both given, and will continue to give, good advice and guidance.

There is therefore no excuse for not finding the relevant training to develop the necessary competency levels and skills required to be a successful and effective golf Course Manager.

TAKING A MAJOR ROLE IN THE FORMULATION OF POLICY

After reading my preamble some may think I advocate that I can do what I want when I want - not true. Indeed if I did I am sure either the course or my employer would suffer in the long term - we all need guidance and parameters in which to operate effectively. That is why having a policy in place is absolutely essential.

So what is policy?

Briefly explained it is an agreed system in which we work - note the word “agreed” - the club sets policy - not the Course Manager.

That point is extremely important - we may think the course is ours (a certain personal pride is no bad thing) but it belongs to the members and we are employed by those members to carry out their instructions.

That said however because we are trained to manage golf courses, and possess the knowledge, expertise and above all experience, to avoid future disasters - we must be involved, and indeed take a major role in the setting up of such a policy.

If, for example, the club aimed to have a policy of no aeration “we don't want all those holes all over the greens disrupting our putts” and lots of water so that “we can stop the ball on the green more easily” - it would be the Course Manager's duty to convince the club of the catastrophic results, and that a different policy, based on proven course management principals, should be adopted.

In this way policy is set and the Course Manager is responsible for that policy being carried out.

I do not have the space to go into every detail of what should be within the agreed policy, but suffice to say it should cover every area of the course from greens to conservation areas, to clubhouse surrounds and car parks.

It should also contain all staff and committee responsibilities. This may sound daunting at first but believe me if policy is set out at the beginning your working relationship with the club will be much more amicable and workable.

The biggest aggravation I hear from colleagues is that the committee/officialdom, General Manager/Secretary (or all of them!) are always “interfering” in the work on the course.

If you set policy and work within it there is no need for any interference - everyone knows what the aims are, and how they will be achieved.

The course will be managed in a way which the club can understand and relate to, and in the case of a written “golf course policy statement” is clearly defined and documented.

TO OVERSEE THE SHORT, MEDIUM, AND LONG TERM MAINTENANCE OF THE GOLF COURSE WHICH IS DICTATED BY THAT POLICY

This covers the common sense decisions made by us, mostly without even realising it, on a day to day/week to week/month to month basis.

It covers decisions on staff working singly, in pairs, in groups, using extra hours effectively and managing your staffs time as well as your own, e.g. two or three tasks may be carried out at the same time thus making obvious savings, not only in time but also in machinery wear and fuel costs.

I also believe that it is essential to re-evaluate how/when we do anything on the golf course on a regular basis - there is always a better way no matter how well we think we do it already.

The most important word in the previous heading is "oversee" - Course Managers are employed to manage, not to sit on equipment cutting grass all day every day - you save your employer a considerable amount of aggravation and therefore money because you think and manage.

It is one of my beliefs however that we must earn the respect of our staff by not only being capable of doing any task we ask of our staff (no matter how menial) but also assisting staff where and when appropriate.

What we have to do is find the balance between overseeing, administration and the physical use of our own labour as part of the overall course staff, so that the course is run as efficiently as possible.

Overseeing should not mean spying on staff, this is time wasting and counterproductive - in my experience staff respond extremely well to trust.

TO PRESENT AND IMPLEMENT WORK SCHEDULES

The Course Manager must be capable of assessing the duration of every task on the golf course and convey this information as and when necessary.

This can take many forms but can be broken down into the four seasons where particular types of work schedules are identified as well as a general schedule on day to day tasks.

The largest schedule will probably be the annual Winter Programme which is very different from the day to day work which is carried out during the main playing season and is presented and approved well before the actual work commences.

I have found a "three part system" helpful in outlining what must be done on an annual basis - this necessary annual work (part 1) is often forgotten in favour of some exciting new tee or bunker project and this gives you an opportunity to let everyone know that if you don't do this on an annual basis the course will suffer.

For this reason the following parts are in order of priority.

Part 1 Necessary Annual Course Maintenance

- Checking course drainage
- Checking trees - stakes, ties, lopping etc.
- Checking replacing bridges
- Refurbishment of course equipment/furniture etc.
- Machinery annual overhauls and maintenance
- Health & Safety up dates etc. etc.

Part 2 Agreed Priority Work

The committee/officialdom, General Manager/Secretary would be expected to have more of an input in this section.

The work agreed to be carried out should be the result of constructive feed back from the membership on what improvements they would like to see on the golf course (if you have been communicating well with the general membership you will probably know what this will entail).

Part 3 Golf Course Alterations and Major Projects

Following a golf course architect's appraisal this section would cover improvements to the golf course in design terms e.g. movement of bunkers, tee or green realignment etc.

It may also cover major drainage or pathway projects etc.

The Winter Programme preamble must state when it starts and when it will be completed as well as stating how many staff will be involved and how that staff will be allocated to which project.

Ideally a master plan will have been prepared - probably as part of the "golf course policy statement" so that the Winter Programme is not viewed in isolation but part of an overall strategy looking well into the future.

Regular course reports to the club must be produced throughout the year as a form of work schedule covering progress and work envisaged so that committees and members are kept well informed on what has/what is/what will be carried out on the course on their behalf (more detail on this area under the future heading of "communication").

Forward planning is so important in ensuring things run smoothly for ourselves and our staff as well as the membership.

Without going into any great detail written schedules must be kept in an open form with access for all staff which is up dated on a daily/weekly/monthly basis so that everyone knows what is planned for today/tomorrow/next week/next month.

This is in addition to year planners, holiday schedules, fixture lists, etc. - in this way the allocation of staff, materials, and equipment will be as efficient as possible.

In the real world however things change - in our case the weather is mostly in control of what we do and when we do it - but this should not be used as an excuse for not taking the time and effort to plan ahead.

TO PRESENT AND IMPLEMENT MACHINERY MAINTENANCE PROGRAMMES

A fully detailed machinery maintenance schedule is very reliant on sufficient finance - I will therefore cover this area more fully under the next article heading of "controlling finances".

I will, however, cover two important points at this time. An accurate up to date machinery and equipment inventory is absolutely vital and is the responsibility of the Course Manager.

An efficient, clean, warm, tidy, and well designed workshop where all tools and equipment are kept as well as good, comfortable canteen/rest facilities for all staff sets the scene for the whole establishment.

In all the visits to golf clubs I have made the condition of the course is almost always directly related to the condition of the workshops and staff facilities.

KEEPING ACCURATE RECORDS

My comments within this heading in my last series of articles mentioned the help of the Health & Safety Executive in this area - probably meaning the fear factor which certainly made me aware of the need to keep accurate records.

Health & Safety matters take up a considerable amount of our time now and I will cover this in more detail in the final article of the series - records relating to Health & Safety will include Health & Safety policy documents and records of updates, risk assessments, COSSH, machinery repair and servicing etc.

Probably the best "to hand" record is the diary - both written and electronic. We as a staff could not operate efficiently without relating to diary entries and the information it gives us - also should you move on it is a formidable record of everything which has gone on in the name of golf course management and is extremely helpful to the next Course Manager in making decisions on future maintenance.

Lastly, there must be an accurate plan of the golf course with all underground services clearly illustrated - it is amazing how many golf courses still do not possess this necessary documentation and only find out when a major contractor arrives to dig holes - you can imagine what happens when you're not sure what is underground.

Expenditure records will be covered under "controlling finances".

KEEPING UP TO DATE WITH MODERN METHODS, MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT

Whenever I turn round there is yet another new material or piece of equipment or machinery and no matter how tedious it may be it is our duty to keep up with developments in all areas.

The best way I have found is to meet colleagues at every possible opportunity, both in the line of business, e.g. BTME, Education Conferences, seminars etc. as well as semi-social occasions, such as BIGGA golf days etc.

The most obvious occasions to see and talk about products and services would probably be demonstrations and trade days, but I still find it more helpful talking to colleagues when making buying decisions - I would not even consider buying any product without first discussing it with someone who may have used or trialed it before.

The amount of product information now is mind boggling but we owe it to our employer to at least consider alternatives to improve golf course conditions and if that means wading through every book, circular, article, flyer etc. then so be it.

Today's golfing member deserves an efficiently run golf course for the subscription paid and more and more of these members are questioning where their money is being spent.

A Course Manager totally responsible for the golf course is I believe the only way to ensure that requirement is met in future.

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