

Performing 'Triage' in Today's Golf Market

The current golf market in the United States offers challenges to those of us that make a living in the golf business. The opening of many new golf courses has created a lot of choices for the slowly growing golfing public. In some cases, too many choices. The fallout is upon us.

In this newly competitive market it behoves those of us in the business of golf to examine how we should respond to these challenges. All of us find ourselves in the business of 'golf triage'. Just like in medical practice, those of us who successfully perform triage will be the ones that survive.

Golf courses in the Midwestern United States have seen a steady decline in their play from peaks of 50,000 rounds a year in the mid-Nineties to the 35,000 – 40,000 range today. Golf course operators are searching for answers. They are collectively asking themselves what they need to do to return to the glory years.

The natural reaction might be to reduce the operational costs of the golf course. 'Cutting operational costs' might suggest cutting staff or cutting budgets, which means reducing services, or reducing the quality of the golf course. This may be very tempting, but I offer adamant, DON'T DO IT, to those considering this path. In a highly competitive golf course market, service and quality are even more important than ever.

Golf courses may be feeling the crunch for a variety of reasons. The first responder on the scene of a struggling golf course must perform triage and ascertain the reasons behind a drop in play. From a golf course architect's perspective the following glaring issues must be considered in the triage assessment:

Infrastructure

In the Midwestern United States, successful golf fiscal years are made or broken by weekend play. Poor weather on several key weekends can ruin a season. Very little money is ever made when the golf course is closed.

The bad news is that Donald Ross himself couldn't design a weatherproof golf course. Nonetheless, the infrastructure and design of the golf course directly impacts on the operator's ability to get golfers back on the golf course after bad weather.

Drainage improvements, grading to improve surface drainage and installation of cart paths are all capital improvements that will enhance the ability of the golf course to recover. Adding subsurface drainage suggests \$500,000 – \$1,000,000 in renovation. Regrading and constructing drainage ponds and renovating greens and tees suggests between one to three million in renovation costs. Adding a cart path to establish a close-to-full-length golf course cart path system could range between \$100,000 - \$250,000.

Turf Quality/Maintenance

The perceived quality of the golf course is most directly affected by maintenance. Irrigation, though technically infrastructure, is the backbone of the maintenance of the golf course and the superintendent's ability to maintain quality turf. From a turf management and labour allocation standpoint an



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outdated irrigation system is a losing proposition. Triage analysis: take the bitter economic pill upfront to save the patient. A new irrigation system costs \$450,000 – \$1.2 million.

Maintenance headaches such as poorly drained bunkers, maintaining steep slopes, and tree/turf conflicts need to be eliminated. An assessment of labour allocation to problem areas will quickly suggest where changes should be made. Generally a minor upfront cost will be more than offset by the saved labour costs from eliminating these problems.

Opportunities may exist to reduce maintenance. Many golf courses could eliminate 10 – 20 acres from their mowing operation. Fescue or native grasses can be planted as a complement to the manicured turf areas. Done properly, natural areas can enhance the look of a golf course such as at Shinnecock Hills Golf Club and The Ocean Course at Kiawah Island. Done improperly, the golfing public sees un-maintained weed patches.

CASE STUDY PROJECT

Highland Park Golf Course is an 18-hole course owned and managed by the City of St. Paul, Minnesota. The golf course opened in 1927. It was a parkland style golf course with small greens and tees. There were major drainage issues. The outstanding physical characteristic of the golf course was the significant number of mature deciduous trees on the property.

The course is located in the Highland Park neighbourhood of St. Paul. The neighbourhood takes a keen interest in the value of the forested green space that the golf course provides.

A key landmark at the Highland Park Golf Course is the clubhouse. Constructed in 1929, the building was designed by Clarence Wigington, the first licensed African American architect in Minnesota. Mr. Wigington was an employee of the City of St. Paul from 1915 – 1949.

Background to improvements

Highland Park Golf Course had three major issues:

- Major drainage problems throughout the entire northwest portion of the course.
- A small practice range.
- Poor operations from the historic clubhouse.

Design solution

As a result of its triage process, which involved a golf committee that included the golfing public, Highland Park residents, city staff and the golf course architects, the City of St. Paul elected to take bold action to resolve their golf course issues. The redesign of the course allowed the City of St. Paul to accomplish the following:

- Develop a safe practice range that grew from 15 practice stations to 45 in number.
- Eliminate drainage problems with the construction of nine ponds and major subsurface drainage installation.
- Increase green size from 4,230sq ft average to 5,800sq ft average.
- Increase overall tee size by 36,000sq ft.
- Increase golf course yardage from 6,200 yards to 6,600 yards.
- Re-establish the historic clubhouse as the centre of golf course operations with visibility of 1 and 10 tees and 9 and 18 greens.
- Upgrade the turf on greens, tees and fairways.

Paul Miller, from Woodbury, Minnesota, USA, writes about current golf issues from his perspective as a golf course architect.



Count on it.

- Install a new irrigation system.
- Upgrade the playing challenge with added sand bunkers and strategic golf course design.
- Provide multiple tees that allow the course to be played at varying playing lengths.
- Use the existing trees as dramatic features on newly routed golf holes while removing poor quality trees that were aesthetic and maintenance headaches.

Drainage

The drainage improvements at Highland Park resulted from a hydrology study that indicated a high level of ground water in the area downhill from two leaking city water tanks. The design solution was to construct a series of 10 interconnected ponds that drain by gravity to the lowest pond that overflows into the city storm sewer. In a double-the-bang-for-your-buck solution, the irrigation system is connected to the ponds to use the excess groundwater as an irrigation source.

Greens

The greens were designed to provide maximum pin settings and variety of challenge at their average of 5,500sq ft. The greens have improved bentgrass species. Drainage was installed at 20 feet on centre. All 18 greens were rebuilt with 12in of USGA greensmix.

Tees

All the tees were rebuilt with 4in of USGA greensmix. The tees were designed to provide challenge at a variety of playing lengths for the golf course. The tees were sized to allow improved maintenance. The tee space for each golf hole averages 5,200sq ft. This is an increase of 2,000sq ft of tee space per golf hole.

Bunkers

38 new bunkers were constructed to update the playing challenge at Highland. The bunker square footage increased from 14,000sq ft to 69,000sq ft. The new bunkers provide playing cues for tee shots and add strategy to the approach shots.

Low Maintenance Areas

Almost eight acres on the golf course will be designated to low maintenance fescue areas. The natural areas will complement the features of the golf course.

Practice Range

An exciting new practice range is part of the improvements at Highland National. The range will be a major revenue producer. The practice range has



45 practice stations. It is serviced by its own parking lot so that golfers not playing golf can easily access the range. Two practice greens were constructed that double the amount of practice putting green area.

Clubhouse

The new routing takes advantage of the historical clubhouse. Hole 18, a new par 4, plays directly towards the clubhouse. A new clubhouse veranda takes advantage of a view into the green of Hole 18. A future clubhouse renovation will update the interior of the clubhouse for golf course operations.

Summary

The major goal for the Highland Park renovation was to develop a championship level golf course that will be the jewel of the City of St. Paul's golf offerings. To achieve this aim, the City of St. Paul was willing to expend the money and labour resources to accomplish this objective.

The resulting golf course will significantly update the challenge of the golf course, improve the infrastructure and improve the quality of the turf. The new golf course routing, the improved greens, tees and bunkers and the expanded practice facility should allow the newly dubbed 'Highland National Golf Course' to forcefully secure its position in the competitive golf course market that we in the United States golf course industry find to be the reality in 2005.

Those of us in the golf triage business have a vested interest in the results. Here's to a 'healthy' golf market in 2005!

