

# GOOD MAINTENANCE IS THE KEY TO LONG-TERM SUCCESS

Investing in, and getting a return on, a golf course project is not an exact science. There is plenty of evidence from around the world of courses being constructed and then, within a relatively short period, changing hands two or three times before any profits are realised from the business.

As you would expect, there may be many contributing factors behind the success or failure of a golf course. An ill-conceived business plan with unrealistic financial expectations, or over-investment during the design and construction phase, will increase the pressures on the day-to-day operation of the course. Similarly, poor quality of service is often identified as a reason for low levels of repeat business from non-members.



However, one aspect that is often not given due consideration during the early planning stages, and subsequently during operation, is long-term course maintenance. Although it should be recognised as a fundamental element of all golf course operations, maintenance is often relegated on the list of priorities behind clubhouse design or renovation.

A good maintenance regime will contribute to the long-term success of the business. However, problems with the course caused by poor design or construction will increase the pressures on the maintenance staff, quite possibly leading to high levels of reinvestment before the course can realise its true potential.

The simple fact is that developers must take into account the true maintenance requirements of the course when they are planning and budgeting. If a course cannot be maintained to the standards of the developer, course architect or paying customer, then it is unlikely to remain as intended and is never going to become the financial success envisaged.

So what course elements impact so heavily on the level of maintenance required?

The first and most obvious is the type of course that is to be built. Golf courses come in a number of styles and each one requires different levels of maintenance. A traditional links course like Portmarnock, in Ireland, or The Old Course at St Andrews, requires different levels of input (eg, fertilisers, water, manpower) compared to courses such as Wentworth or Valderrama.

Similarly, the intended customer base may well determine the level of maintenance. A municipal course with £20 green fees is unlikely to be presented to the same level as a high-end private members club, or a 5-star resort course charging in excess of £200 per round. Therefore the budget allocated for maintenance must reflect the expectations of the customer.

Golf course architects have a responsibility to their clients to explain the initial construction cost and long-term maintenance cost of their design features. For example, the number and style of bunkers will make a significant difference to the maintenance budget. If bunkers cannot be prepared using a ride-on bunker rake, and must be done manually, this will significantly increase the labour bill for the course, a problem in areas of the world where labour is getting increasingly expensive.

Likewise, if the style of the course requires a lot of definition between the playing areas – that is, three or four different heights of cut – this will increase the budget required for machinery.

A brief list of other course elements that impact on maintenance would also include:

- The number of trees on the course (shade affecting grass coverage, as well as leaf collection)
- Degree of slopes (machines are generally limited to 21 degree slopes to comply with health and safety regulations)
- The total irrigated area (is it limited to the greens and tees or does it extend to fairways and even the rough?)
- The extent of other non-playing but maintained areas such as landscapes or practice facilities and so forth

To this list we can also add the choice of grass type. This is a contentious subject and one that has been addressed in many forums by experts from around the world. There are those that are committed to the traditional, indigenous grass varieties, and others to exploring the opportunities afforded by the hybrid grass types on offer. The key point is that everyone involved must understand the implications of their choice both in the short and the long term.

Seashore Paspallum is a salt-tolerant grass species originating from the dunes of South Africa. It has been seen by some as an answer to the issue of growing grass for golf in areas with limited potable water resources. However, although it will indeed tolerate high levels of salt in the water, the soil profile itself still requires the salts to be removed through leaching using 'clean' water. If the salts are not removed, over time it is likely to cause a breakdown in the soil structure itself.

It is also yet to be fully understood what the long-term implications of using water with a very high salt content will have on irrigation system components and maintenance machinery. We may not know the definitive answer to this for another 10 to 20 years, but it is safe to say that there will be hidden costs associated with the use of Paspallum.



Spring city



Ride on bunker rake at K club



Watering at Pinehurst



**By Andrew Brown**

There is also no doubt that changes in climate and stricter regulations governing the use of fertilisers and chemicals will cause a review of suitable grass types over the next decade.

The simple point for any prospective golf developer to remember is that whatever the architect says, the more detail that is designed into the course, the more the costs of maintaining the course will rise. Maintaining a golf course must be effective, efficient, economic and above all safe. If a course cannot be maintained using these basic principles then it will either have to be changed or it will fail altogether.

The biggest issues facing golf courses and golf course development are environmental and economic. The drive to find new markets and financial opportunities for golf must be balanced by the real environmental issues we face today. If this balance is not respected then we will see a rise in anti-golf opinion and further restrictions being imposed from local, national or regional governments.

As mentioned earlier, from an economic viewpoint there is also a balance to strike between the level of investment and the return on that investment. The return comes from a combination of membership take-up (if part of the economic model) daily green fee business, and other money-generating activities held at the facility. To maximise the return a club must understand its customers' expectations.

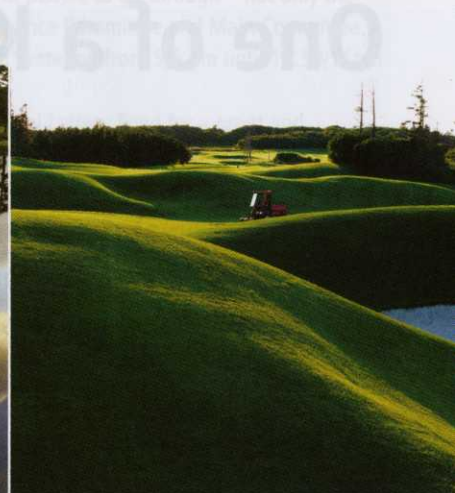
These vary depending on what the customer is looking for from the golf club. Few if any private, male-orientated clubs are being built today. Instead we are seeing more daily fee courses which want to offer the casual golfer the club member's experience without the long-term commitment.

Clubs face a challenge as they compete with others in the area for the same business. This means that each aspect of the club has to be right: from the initial tee-booking process and welcome received on arrival, to the club house facilities for changing and the dining options before and after the round of golf. But of course it doesn't stop at the clubhouse. The experience the golfer has on the course is the single factor that will determine whether they return for a second round in the future.

So what is the golfer looking for when he or she is out on the course? Well I believe it comes down to two words: quality and consistency. That does not mean that every course should be like Augusta in April or Valderrama in September. Neither does it mean that every course should be the same. What it does mean though is that a golfer wants to see a quality of preparation that allows them to enjoy the experience of the course and play a round of golf that won't have them pulling their hair out. Poor greens or severely-penal rough are not going to make any golfer return in a hurry!



**Bears Club**



**PEI Canada**

The challenge for the Course Manager is to achieve these dual goals of quality and consistency within the tight constraints of their financial budget and time. The continuous need to do more with less! To meet this challenge the maintenance staff must have good levels of training and education, high quality, productive equipment to use on the course and good support and advice from the other professionals working with the club, be they agronomists, architects, irrigation designers, contractors or suppliers.

The proliferation of legislation affecting what can and cannot be done on a golf course is now taking up a significant amount of the Course Manager's time. A short but by no means exhaustive list of some of the legal paperwork a club must deal with illustrates the problem:

- CDM (Construction Design and Management)
- COSHH (Control of Substances Hazardous to Health)
- ROPS (Roll Over Protection Systems on machinery)
- EIA (Environmental Impact Assessments)
- CAMS or similar (Catchment Abstraction Management Strategy – affecting the ability to abstract water for use in irrigation systems in the UK)

This item on the list has become particularly relevant today. The increasing pressure on water has led to many courses experiencing restrictions for the first time since the mid-1970s. This pressure is certainly not going to go away in the short term and is more likely to increase. Clubs have recognised the need for a well thought out water management plan to ensure they can adequately justify their water use. Failure to do this could result in further severe restrictions being imposed and even a loss of abstraction rights.

The availability of a reliable water supply is a key factor in the long-term viability of a course. Golf management companies looking to add to their portfolio are unlikely to consider an investment in a club that cannot guarantee its water for at least the medium term. In southern Europe we have already seen developments delayed and even cancelled due to a perceived lack of an available supply, despite the intended use of treated effluent or desalinated water.

Course maintenance is a fundamental component of every golf facility. For the course to reach its full potential it should be treated with as much attention to detail as any other aspect of the business right from the initial planning stage through to the on-going operational strategy. If developers, investors and facility managers understand this and commit sufficient resources, they are far more likely to end up with a sustainable course, in all senses of the word, that they can be proud of.

*Andrew Brown is Corporate Accounts Manager for Toro Europe.*



**Pretty Golf**