

Enhancing the Perception and Status of the Golf Course Superintendent

by Jim Anderson

I am a member at Sunset Ridge Country Club in Northbrook, Illinois. When I was originally asked to provide a club member's point-of-view on those things that would enhance the perception and status of the golf course superintendent, I immediately wondered if my opinions were of any consequence. Upon reflection, however, I came to realize that we play an important part in your daily equation. Although perhaps a necessary evil, it is probably well that you, at least, address the issue of how the members view your profession.

As I began to put my thoughts together for this presentation, I was reminded of an article I wrote years ago for the **Bull Sheet**, which is the newsletter for the Midwest Association of Golf Course Superintendents. At the time, I was chairman of my club's Grounds and Green Committee and I think the opening paragraph of that article nicely sums up the issue of perception and status. Let me read that paragraph to you:

"Thirty years ago, the course I played on was absolutely state-of-the-art in terms of maintenance. It was held up as a shining example of what was great about Chicagoland golf courses". I still play that same golf course and if you transplanted those conditions of 30 years ago to our course today, you would have a membership revolt. The curious thing about this fact is that most of the members don't know it. To them, the golf course has always been the same. Fairways have always been lush, lined by mature trees providing wonderful lines of sight, lightning fast greens, which held even that 2 iron that never got more than 3 feet off the ground.

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"How does it happen that a golf course can be transformed, literally before the eyes of the people that play it with no upheaval and no major watershed event to demand such change? Therein lies the golf course superintendent's art, because these things don't just happen. They are planned, committed to, sold to the membership and executed."

What the above describes is exactly what happened at Sunset Ridge Country Club over a period of 30 years and my point to you is that if the members aren't aware it's happening, then it's a certainty that no one is getting credit for carrying it out. How then, does one improve the perception, and as a result the status of the golf course superintendent?

Start by becoming visible. It's not longer possible for a golf course superintendent to simply adopt the attitude which says, "Leave me alone and let me do my job." You must be willing to become visible around your golf course. You are a significant part of golf course management and managers must be in evidence.

Secondly, you must provide leadership to your Grounds and Green Chairman, as well as your Grounds and Green Committee. Not only does your chairman and his committee men need leadership, they want it. These are a group of amateurs dealing out of their element. They are looking for guidance, but rest assured if they don't receive it, they will step into the void and do things about which you will often disagree. At Sunset Ridge Country Club, we have had a long range Grounds and Green Committee for over 30 years. It is comprised of all former Grounds and Green Chairmen, as well as the head golf professional and the grounds and green superintendent. It is an experienced and distinguished group. Even given its longevity, however, we constantly look to our superintendent to tell us what to do. The more our superintendent gives his professional advice, the better we are.

Manage in fact as well as in deeds. If you find yourself standing around with a shovel or rake in hand, you are not giving your golf course the best utilization of your time and education. You have all spent years learning highly sophisticated processes and management skills. If you are personally solving one crisis, which others on your staff could handle, you are virtually assured that there are 3 others presently going untended on your golf course. As it relates to status: dress, act and office like a professional. If you office in "the barn" and dress like you are ready to get the crops out of the field, then unfortunately that is probably how you will be treated. This fact of life, by the way, is not unique to your profession. I've always told young sales people who work for me that they should not dress for their current job, but rather for the one they want. It's important for people to be able to visualize you as handling the next level of responsibility.

Perhaps the single most important aspect of enhancing your perception and status involves the area of communication. You have to communicate both on a narrow focus to the Board of Directors and a broad basis to the membership as a whole. As it relates to the board, you should make periodic appearances before them. If they don't ask you, then ask them. I can't imagine a Board of Directors of a golf course in America that would not like to hear from its golf course superintendent on the subject they hold most dear to their hearts. Tell them about your budget, your plans and your problems. If you don't appear before them, you are by default, counting on your Green Chairman to do your communication for you. Some Green Chairmen are going to be good at this and others are going to be not so good. Don't leave your destiny in the hands of someone else. Concerning the membership as a whole, communicate them in writing and communicate several times a year. Somewhere out there is the next Board of Directors, the next group of officers, and your next Grounds and Green Chairman. Start making them aware now of your skills and your job responsibilities. Convey the following kinds of things:

1. Discuss with them the issue of playability versus aesthetics, hard versus soft, brown versus green, fast versus smooth.

2. Talk to them about your maintenance programs, what, when, where and why. Parenthetically, what comes first at your golf course, the maintenance schedule or the tournament schedule?

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3. Communicate your philosophy. Point out what has been accomplished over a period of time. This should be living proof of your philosophy.

4. Talk to your membership and your board about golf course integrity issues. We are all amateur golf course architects. Someone has to hold the line at each golf course against the ravages of a succession of Greens' Chairmen pet projects. In Chicagoland, we are blessed with enumerable, wonderful parkland golf courses. They are hallmarked by wonderful grass, impeccable manicuring, mature trees and flat sweeping terrain. These golf courses have a heritage and a tradition and should not become quasi-TPC golf courses. Give your golf course direction in this area.

Finally, deal with change, It's like become visible. It's part of the reality of your job. Accommodate change and embrace it, but as mentioned above as it relates to golf course architecture, don't lose your perspective. We pay for your ability to look back, as well as your ability to look forward. It's part of what makes you a pro. I might mention by the way, that all of these things have nothing to do with job security, but rather have lots to do with job satisfaction. If you communicate and tell your membership why you want to do various things, you will be allowed to get done what you want to get done.

In reviewing these comments, I realize there is not much startling information being conveyed. In simple review:

1. Become visible.
2. Be prepared to be the leader of your Grounds and Green Committee.
3. Be a manager not just a doer.
4. Communicate on both a narrow and a broad basis.
5. Accommodate change.

At Sunset Ridge Country Club, we are the grateful recipient of an astounding 63 years of consecutive stewardship of our golf course, residing in 2 individuals. Dennis Wilson, our present superintendent, and his uncle, Domenic Grotti, collectively have spent 75 years tending our grounds. As a member, I get the clear advantage of their contribution to our golf course. As it relates to this discussion, it gives me the perspective of what can be accomplished if the golf course superintendent is a strong and assertive part of a golf courses' management team.

Editor's Note: Jim Anderson gave this as a speech in the fall of 1992 at the ITF meeting.



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