

Golf Course Ownership: It's Not All Luxurious and Fun!



The clubhouse at Spring Valley Golf Club in Spring Valley, Wisconsin, a small town located five miles off of I-94 between Eau Claire and Minneapolis-St. Paul.

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Have you ever sat at your desk and wondered what it would be like to own your own golf facility? Isn't that just the ultimate goal? I once had the same dream.

When we were looking to buy a facility, we wanted it to be a family operation including my parents, myself, my wife and later, our children. While we searched and searched for a facility, I was the first assistant superintendent at Seven Bridges Golf Club under Don Ferreri. While at Seven Bridges, I was involved in the construction and grow-in phase, so I felt I had a good understanding of what it takes to have a championship facility and that I would translate this knowledge to the facility I would someday own. After I had spent five-and-a-half years as the first assistant at Seven Bridges, we finally purchased a facility in northwest Wisconsin.

Our facility had scenic terrain with a mixture of hardwoods

and pines lining every hole. The clubhouse was in desperate need of updating. It still had the late '60s/early '70s wagon wheel lights, dirty carpet, dark paint and wallpaper. Needless to say, I was busy being Bob Vila during the

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first four months before opening. The course was in about the same condition. All of the equipment rarely had maintenance done to it, and boy, did it show. (Band-Aids and bubble gum only work so long for equipment repairs.)

Most of the equipment would probably have fit into a two-car garage, but it was a start. So our first order of business was to talk to equipment vendors and see what they had to offer.

As opening day of the 1996 golf season drew closer, the snow just kept falling and falling. I figured that since this was northern Wisconsin, not Chicagoland, the opening of the golf season would be later by a week or two—NOT! The end of March brought in a freak winter snowstorm that dropped a foot-and-a-half of snow and pushed opening day back three weeks on the front nine and four weeks on the back nine. It was amazing. I never realized how much money bad weather cost golf facilities until it was mine taking the hit. Bank notes, leases, payroll, payroll taxes, chemical and fertilizer bills, maintenance and repair of equipment, food for the restaurant and electricity, all came out of the same checkbook. Needless to say, the checkbook was mighty thin for a while until we finally opened.

We were definitely a limited-budget facility and we tried to do a lot without sacrificing the quality of the course. Our budget for 18 holes was a minimal \$115,000: tiny by comparison to what I'm used to in Chicago, but adequate for our 120-acre, 18-hole facility in northwest Wisconsin. Fungicides were rarely needed, insecticides almost nonexistent, herbicides applied in the spring and fertilizing done on an as-needed basis. These factors together combined to bring us a quality facility on a limited budget—a very limited budget.

In order to have funds to improve the course, we all agreed to take on more responsibilities and thereby save on our payroll, so our days were filled, spare time unheard of. Once the golf season started, my first order of business at sunrise everyday was moving and staging the golf carts for the day's use, then off to check greens and change cups . . . then on to whatever construction project or

mechanical need was pressing at the time. By the end of the day, I was needed to park carts and then water at night with our manual

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irrigation system, which meant my day concluded around 10 p.m. We usually reserved weekends for family time, or what we

called family time. I ran the pro shop and my wife bartended and that was our quality family time, while my parents stayed home and babysat our one-year-old daughter. As summer seemed to drag on, I looked forward to fall when my hectic schedule would slow down. During the fall and winter months, I was actually able to get some decent sleep and recuperate my worn out, frazzled brain and muscles.

An owner must take responsibility for a multitude of hidden concerns that a superintendent need not. The biggest concern, in my opinion, was covering the expenses for the whole establishment, including the restaurant, bar, pro shop, golf course and of course, the mighty taxes. The minor concerns seemed just as important, such as a full tee sheet and golfers late for their tee times, a bartender not showing up for his/her shift, the food delivery

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When the author and his family purchased Spring Valley, the place was in decline. Vision, knowledge and old-fashioned hard work paid off. "We turned it into a profitable business," notes Mark. Indeed, in 1998 Golf Digest nominated Spring Valley as best and most beautiful in western Wisconsin. Here is hole #10, a 302-yard par 4.


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arriving late for the party booked for that evening, or the ice machine breaking down on a 90° day when the tee sheet is full of golfers. No matter how big or small the concern may be, the owner needs to recognize and fix it.

The life of an owner/superintendent is a hard one, working seven days a week for months on end and dealing with every aspect of the golf facility, not just the grounds. The long, 14-hour-plus

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days for seven or eight months a year took a toll on both our families. After two-and-a-half years of running our facility, we decided to sell and return to a "normal life." I do believe those years helped me realize that just because you own a facility, does not mean your life is luxurious and fun. I am definitely a happier person being back in the Chicago area as an assistant superintendent at Ruffled Feathers Golf Club in Lemont. 



Hole #6, par 5, 565 yards.



Hole #9, par 4, 370 yards.



Hole #8, par 4, 375 yards.