



# A House of Cards

*It's summer in Chicago and time to kick back with a cold beverage and a good book—unless you are a golf course superintendent.*

*This business has evolved into a complex array of management challenges. The heightened expectations regarding course conditions have had the effect of making every single aspect of this job more complicated than it used to be—especially when things go wrong!*

All that planning and preparation last winter is being put to the test. The juggernaut that is your maintenance operation is chugging along at full steam. The air is thick and heavy so disease scouting is a daily agenda item and the sprayer needs to be packed in ice to cool it down for the next day's work. Irrigation operations are in full swing and the heat is taking its toll on the equipment. The shop is in a constant state of turmoil and a mess. Tempers are frayed, people are getting tired and cranky. Cutworms lurk and grubs are right around the corner.

Let's party!

No, I'm not kidding—have a party!

Break out the grill, ice down some pop, set up some tables and bring the staff in for a midsummer party. Everybody needs a break from the routine and a few laughs. Most important—invite the boss and the greens committee. They need a break too.

\* \* \* \* \*

I grabbed a six-pack and headed over to visit my friend Budweiser; he's the nuts-and-bolts guy who runs a small, privately-owned, public operation doing the spraying, equipment maintenance and irrigation all by himself. His summer staff tops out at eight and his Hispanic crew is a close-knit extended family. He and I are roughly the same age and he can run circles around me. I like to check in on him periodically because nobody I know gets more done with less than he, and I always learn something. He is "old-school."

I pulled into the shop yard and I knew immediately something was not right. While not exactly pristine, his shop is usually very organized. Now it looked like Baghdad. I parked my truck next to his and went into his office. Paper littered his usually immaculate desk, and trash was overflowing the wastebasket. He looked up from his work and gave me a look.

"Hey Bud, how's it going?"

"Been better." (Budweiser is a man of few words.)

"Looks like it's been a rugged summer for you."

"Yep."

"What happened?"

"Pancreaticitis."

"You?"

"Yep."

"You okay?"

"Yep."

"Were you laid up?"

"Yep."

"How long?"

"Ten days."

"Who ran the show while you were down?"

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"The boss and his kid."

"This is what you came back to?"

"Yep."

"How long you been back at work?"

"Third day back."

And so it went, back and forth, until I learned all of the sordid details surrounding the decline of Bud and his golf course. We took a brief tour and while the crew kept up with the mowing and course set-up, the greens were in a bad way. I had never seen things so bad at Bud's place.

I mumbled something about him calling for someone to lend a hand, and one look at Bud's face told me it was like offering John Wayne help to get on his horse.

Heading home I realized I learned something from Bud again.

One person cannot do this job alone anymore.

Time was, not so long ago, that many golf courses were able to survive and even thrive with a "greenskeeper" and a crew of seasonal laborers. Irrigation systems were manual or

controlled by mechanical timers that a judicious tap with a ball peen hammer could often repair. Machinery was simpler, lots of belts and sprockets. Disease management was . . . let's just say less complicated. The skill of the greenskeeper was the cornerstone to the conditions on the golf course, especially when the stresses of summer weighed in the equation.

Bud went down without adequate back-up at the worst time of the year and ended up with the second-worst thing that can happen to a super: returning to a disaster and trying to recover turf during the summer.

I know I've said this before, but it bears repeating. This business has evolved into a complex array of management challenges. The heightened expectations regarding course conditions have had the effect of making every single aspect of this job more complicated than it used to be—especially when things go wrong! If it has a moving part, it WILL break and you're going to need more than a ball peen hammer to fix it.

Personnel matters—easier or harder?

Regulatory compliance—easier or harder?

Equipment maintenance . . . pest management . . . licensing . . . safety . . . UST . . . etc.

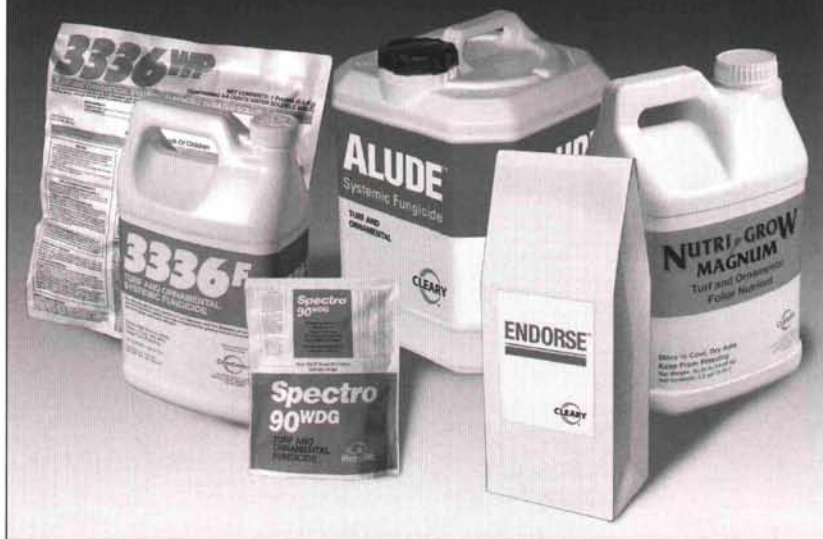
Sure we have some great tools: better seed choices, lots of neat new pest-control options, efficient water-saving irrigation systems, quiet reliable equipment, but it's a lot to keep on top of all by yourself.

Bud will be the first to admit that his situation was a house of cards. In fact, his plan is to use this fiasco to lobby for some money to hire some skilled help.

Oh, by the way—if you're wondering what the first worst thing is that can happen to a super. It's what happened to Bud, but returning to find the golf course in better shape than before you left.



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