

Project Your Image Over The Mist

"Infinite toil would not enable you to sweep away a mist; but by ascending a little you may often look over it altogether" (Arthur Helps)

A little-known quote from a man we have never met but what a profound effect it could have on our efforts to become the recognized professionals we all aspire to become. To lift ourselves above the feeble attempts to convince our members and colleagues that we deserve much more than we get. Just calling ourselves professionals and telling each other we are does not a professional make.

How many meetings have you had with fellow Superintendents who begin their acquaintance with some remark like, "I have a pretty good layout but the membership won't let me have the money to do the job," or "We just have to get the job done with what we have because our members can't afford to raise the dues." To add to his martyrdom, some announced EXPERT gets up at your local meeting and spends 30-45 minutes telling you those members expect you to maintain that rock-pile in tournament condition with the same budget as last year and you are just going to have to learn how to accomplish this as professional superintendents. Have you ever met an EXPERT in the field of Turf Management — Superintendents, as you know, are not classed as EXPERTS — who didn't say you were the greatest bunch of guys in the world? Then in the next breath, they're telling you that you just have to learn to do more with less. It occurs to me that these individuals may be experts in Rhetoric but something less than knowledgeable in the field of Turf Management.

Here we are down in the mist sweeping away like mad but to no avail. Any man who can claim to give his members a better course (with today's labor, material, and equipment costs) for the same money has lost touch with the industry or has a membership that will not long accept his quality of maintenance. We may even consider the possibility that his past efforts have been less than professional if he can suddenly produce results with the same budget.

By AL FRENETTE



This brings us back to the purpose of our discussion. In order to see above the mist, we must recognize that our industry is part of the free enterprise system. We do not enjoy subsidies, tax exemptions, or federal grants. We must operate within the economic realities of the business world; which means competing for labor, paying the going price for equipment and materials and providing the fringe benefits that go with operating any business.

Determine the needs of your membership. What quality do they want? Once this is understood, all related efforts must be approached realistically. Determining the needs of your membership should be a continuing process. Listen to the ideas and complaints of each individual member. Be receptive to constructive criticism. Be prepared to reconcile even the most ridiculous suggestions to maintain harmony.

Prepare your requirements and justifications and then be prepared to make a convincing presentation. For clarity, let's consider some of the items that might be in your presentation:

Labor - This is the largest percentage item in the budget but has traditionally been the least realistic. We have agonized for years with less than adequate personnel because this has been the way IT IS. It is time to recognize that the job is not going to get done properly without skilled technicians who can be encouraged to stay with the club. They should be paid competitive wages and provided with reasonable fringe benefits as added incentives.

Training programs must be organized on a State or Regional level to provide a pool of apprentices prepared to fit into the routine of turf maintenance procedures.

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State Superintendents' associations can be the leaders in such a program with benefits equal to or surpassing existing halfhearted research efforts. What better trade for a young man to pursue in one of the local Vo-tech schools? You, the superintendent, not the club, will be the one to initiate such a training program.

For years, labor has been recognized as the main problem within the profession. Solving this problem will certainly help raise us above the mist.

Consider two areas where many of us give too little thought to our responsibility as professional superintendents; preparing the assistant and training the turf student:

The Assistant - Once we have made the decision to employ an assistant, our responsibility is twofold: (1) Provide the individual with the opportunity to learn all he can to prepare himself for the time he becomes a superintendent, and (2) Provide your membership with a competent individual who can maintain continuity in the daily operation of the course in the absence of the superintendent due to superintendent meetings, vacations, illness or other emergency.

The Turf Student - You may decide to employ turf students to supplement your seasonal crew. In doing so, you have accepted a responsibility to the student and to his or her school. The student expects to participate in a varied host of disciplines. He or she does not anticipate spending the placement training period just riding a tractor or raking bunkers. They hope to have the opportunity to engage in every procedure on the course.

The superintendent and his assistant should afford the student a chance to learn each skill on the course. In addition, the student should be required to exhibit his or her understanding of the disciplines studied in school such as:

- Turf and weed identification
- Tree and shrub identification
- Lime and fertilization programs
- Safety in the use, handling, storage, and disposal of pesticides
- Calibration of application equipment
- Preventive maintenance procedures

Once the student has been exposed to the various duties on the course and given a reasonable time to comprehend the HOW and, most importantly, the WHY, the superintendent has the responsibility to accurately evaluate each student. This is a commitment made to the school when he accepts a student for employment. To do less would allow unqualified individuals to enter the field and further dilute our efforts to be professional.

These two areas will increase your duties and cut into your free time. However, it will also raise you above the mist and expose you as a professional. Often we are hesitant to share our knowledge and experience with young people entering the field. This is inconsistent with our efforts to conduct conferences, seminars, and local meetings to share ideas and experiences.

Materials and Supplies - This is an area in which we are reluctant to thoroughly investigate alternatives. It is easy to check price lists or make a phone call and insert a figure. Better yet, the easy way out for many unprofessional superintendents is to just add 10% to last year's figures. Although more troublesome, a complete breakdown of unit prices can save 6-10% of many items used on the course. Breakdown of unit cost does not only mean cost per gallon, pound, etc. but cost of handling, application, storage, value of technical service and availability.

Too often, we use what the fellow down the street uses because it must be good and besides; that's easier than coming up with your own programs. Then there is the Black Magic peddler who has a catalog two feet thick with every answer to your golf course problems. If you really want to know what his products are worth, ask him to see a label. That Cadillac will soon be out of your driveway. How about the guy on the phone from New York or Chicago who has the answer to your weed problems? The only answers this guy has are the ones written on a prepared sheet in front of him. When you talk to this fellow, you are really down in the mist; with a worn broom. When you walk in a materials storage area cluttered with 55 gallon drums of water, from these high pressure sales tactics, question the superintendent's professionalism.

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When you list a material or supply item on the budget know what you are buying, what it can or cannot do for you, and that it is the best value available. Analyze the amount of active ingredients and reduce it to cost per unit or cost per application. Determine your requirements, contact your reputable suppliers, discuss optional materials, price rates and then make your decision in a professional manner.

Maintenance - This is probably the least predictable of all items in the management process. It would appear that no amount of historical recording, equipment record keeping or daily preventative maintenance can accurately predict future requirements. There seems to be one reasonable procedure that will minimize maintenance costs - diligent operator training and supervision. Most generally we are content to acquaint a man with a machine, show him the controls and then turn him loose. This is not proper operator training and supervision. Proper training programs produce better work habits and less down-time due to carelessness.

Then we regularly spot the article in a trade journal concerning repair or replace. There are as many formulas for solving this problem as articles. Manufacturers give us estimates of expected equipment life and trade articles show us equipment still in use that is 30 years old. Somewhere in between we must find the answer to good preventative maintenance, operator diligence and periodic overhaul. This must be accomplished by the superintendent committing himself to some basic principles:

Inventory all available equipment and list its condition.
(Show purchase dates & prices)

Get rid of your "junk pile". Junk is worth cash.

Put all equipment in operable condition or scrap it.

Determine the equipment required to get the job done and prepare your justification for its purchase.

I can hear the outcry, "That's okay for you guys with big budgets but how about us superintendents at the small 9-hole courses?" The question here is not one of affluence of the club but of the degree of professionalism of the individual superintendent. We are speaking of rising above that mist to see the reality of our profession. Being employed at a small club is not an excuse for ineptness.

Irrigation - An item that is coming of age and yet one of the least understood expenditures on the course. Members are completely at the mercy of the fast talkers. We ask why the superintendent is not in a stronger position to assist the club in selecting their irrigation system. Most of us know the answer. We are not acquiring the knowledge necessary to understand the many problems associated with planning the system.

Who should be more concerned with such information as layout, pipe sizing, distribution, pumping stations, automation and specifications than the Golf Course Superintendent? The Architect? (He can advise but generally is not qualified), the Contractor? (He is qualified and knowledgeable but not committed to the interest of the club), the Irrigation Consultant? (He is self-employed to operate over a wide area and mostly not available), and last but not least, the Club member, who is a local plumber? We have all seen the result of a plumber's spigot-system.

It behooves the professional superintendent to make himself aware of irrigation principles, design, performance, installation and automation along with the up to date equipment available. The choice is ours; we can take an active part in the acquisition of a new system or gripe about what a lousy system someone else stuck our club with and left us to straighten out.

Landscaping - We all have members who want to see the course progress aesthetically. This means take no trees out but add trees everywhere. Shrubs around all tees, to add to our maintenance headaches and trees over every green to provide shade and roots for added problems. Usually we end up with trash trees such as Sweetgum, Poplar and occasionally some Hickory. The professional superintendent should be familiar with the plant materials indigenous to his locale and their characteristics. This is where the help of a Landscape Architect comes in handy. Develop a friendship and seek his advise on maintenance-free materials.

If a tree program is to be established, get the help of a competent Golf Course Architect to prepare a Master Plan. Once approved, such a program can be carried out in stages as priorities dictate. The professional superintendent does not haphazardly start planting trees without thought to the game, maintenance or aesthetics. What you may consider a masterpiece this year could end up as a nightmare in the course of 8 - 10 years.

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Pictured above, left to right; Mr. R. T. Jones, Mrs. Jones, Dorris Burton, Past Association President Tom Burton and Mrs. Eileene Goodman, General Manager, Coral Ridge.

South Florida Turf and our Association is better for the six active years Tom Burton has worked among us.

Tom has been associated with Coral Ridge Country Club and Robert Trent Jones, world-renowned golf course architect.

To wish the Burtons well Mr. and Mrs. Jones invited the entire membership to a Club Reception on November 24, 1978.

We join in wishing Tom well in his new position with the famous Sea Island Golf Club, St. Simons Island, Georgia.



PROJECT YOUR IMAGE (Continued)

Construction and Reconstruction - According to the GCSAA Organizational Job Description, the superintendent is an expert in this area. The question is; Where does he acquire this expertise? It certainly isn't as routine as mowing or spraying. Most generally, the average superintendent never gets the opportunity to gain the experience necessary. He may, in a career, become involved in actual supervision or construction of various phases but not the complete picture.

It would seem that the aspiring professional would make the extra effort to learn accepted fundamentals of good construction. Visit the course being built in your area and ask questions. Observe methods and results. Do not accept all that you see or hear at face value. Try to glean information from the architect, contractor and superintendent. Question your USGA representative. This type of investigation is what will raise you above the mist and enable you to see it altogether.

Conclusions - This writer hopes that these words will encourage you to consider your role as a member of this profession. The word professional denotes one who has explored all aspects of his profession and has prepared himself for problems which he will face and be required to make an intelligent decision.

The fact that a club hires someone to take care of its golf course and calls him a superintendent, greenkeeper, etc. has no meaning unless the individual knows what he is and what his capabilities are to accomplish the myraid of tasks which he shall face. Joining an organization does not change your status unless you have accepted the responsibility to prepare yourself for the profession you have chosen. Make the most of your association with fellow superintendents. It will help broaden your professional horizons.

Remember! You will never be a professional Golf Course Superintendent until your fellow superintendents, your membership and the general public recognize and accept you as one.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

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