

Golf Course Vandalism - Manager's Nightmare

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It's 2:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning and you are awakened by the ring of your telephone. A voice on the other end of the line informs you that it is a local law enforcement department and that your golf course has just been vandalized by an automobile. You are asked to come to the golf course to give the police or sheriff an estimate of the cost of the damage. If the damage is over \$1,000 it's classified as a felony; less than \$1,000 is a misdemeanor. If you are a golf course manager or superintendent, the chances are you have experienced one or more similar types of situations as mentioned above.

The City of Orlando has only been in the municipal golf course business for a little over one year, and already we have been vandalized in excess of 30 times. Stolen flags, tee markers, golf carts, damaged greens, tees and fairways, burglaries and "doughnuts" spun by vehicles are among the most frequent types of incidents experienced. Our golf course is in the middle of a residential area with literally hundreds of vehicular access points. You must cross seven public streets to play the 18 holes. Of the 30 vandalism cases against Dubsdread, we have solved and/or prosecuted five. Total cost of damage is estimated at \$20,000, of which we have been awarded \$3,000 restitution by local courts of law. We still have two cases pending for vehicular vandalism which could result in an additional \$3,500 in restitution.

Each golf facility manager must decide if it is worth investing time, money and energy in a program to curb vandalism on the basis of local experience. It is a hard, cold fact that damage, beyond inevitable wear and tear, has been and continues to be a very costly problem for golf courses. It is costly not only in dollars spent on maintenance, repair and replacement, but also in terms of lowered staff morale, and perhaps most important of all, in lost income because of playing conditions which are unsightly as well as inferior, for periods of time ranging from two or three hours to four or five months. When greens or tees are seriously damaged as Dubsdread's were in February of this year (\$5,800 in damage by several vehicles) it adversely affects playing conditions for as long as four or five months because during the winter dormant season, damaged grass will take much longer to recover.

Even the most imaginative strategy will not eliminate the vandalism problem. However, damage can be reduced and most of us have at our disposal the means to reduce it. Being a municipal golf course, we have the advantage of calling upon various City departments for assistance. For instance, our Police Department in conjunction with the Orange County Sheriff's Department, was able to apprehend one person in the act of spinning doughnuts with his automobile on number 7 fairway and who was apparently heading towards number 7 green when the

Sheriff's helicopter spotted his car with flood lights from overhead and followed him to his residence where he was arrested and charged with criminal mischief. Another person in an automobile was arrested when spotted by a police stake-out on the golf course.

The City Street Department and Engineering Department are currently assisting us in determining on which holes we can best use large drainage ditches to deter automobiles as well as assist in our drainage problems. Our Parks Department is assisting us in providing shrubs and bushes at certain locations on the golf course in order to deter automobiles from entering the golf course.

We have just completed a detailed hole-by-hole study of our golf course which is an 18-hole, 6,222 yard course with driving range, practice putting greens, etc., totaling 115 acres. The purpose of this study was to ascertain the best way to prevent or discourage vandals from damaging the course with automobiles, trucks, motorcycles, mopeds, etc. Unfortunately there is no simple solution. Each hole has its particular characteristics and must be considered individually. For instance, a chain link fence may be appropriate beside one fairway which may be adjacent to a street. However, this type of fence cannot be used on another fairway because it will interfere with play. At Dubsdread Golf Course we are convinced we will have to use a combination of chain link fence, ranch-type fence, ditches, utility poles laying on the ground, poles placed in the ground, chains attached to posts and between trees lining fairways, and curbing, to discourage vehicular vandalism. It is estimated that the cost of this work will be approximately \$20,000. This seems like an excessive amount to prevent vandalism, until you stop to realize that if you lose two or three greens because of vandalism you will spend that much replacing them if the damage is severe.

In summarizing I might add that after numerous cases of unpublicized vandalism against our golf facility, we decided to ask the news media to assist us in informing the public of this senseless but very costly type of crime being committed against golf courses throughout the country. We also solicited the assistance of local residents bordering the golf course to immediately report any unusual lights or sound on the golf course. The immediate citizen response was actually overwhelming. A group of our regular golfers pledged a \$300.00 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the vandals and we were also able to provide a reward through the Orlando Police Department Crime Watch Program. Once these rewards were publicized, we immediately received approximately ten telephone calls from informants referring not only to our most recent incident but also referring to vandalism committed against our course as far back as six months ago. ■