

# WHO SAID "The Grass Is Always Greener . . ."

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It is a little-known fact that the enlightened philosopher who once said, "the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence," was actually a widely travelled suburban golfer! In fact, according to rumor, that quote is taken from a verse he once wrote:

*The grass is always greener,  
the trees are always taller, the budget is always lower,  
the fairways always shorter,  
the greens always faster,  
and the turf is always more dense  
on the other side of the fence.*

Human nature, being what it is, it seems inevitable that golfers will compare one golf course to another. Golf course superintendents, aware of the burden these comparisons create, often ask what can be done to prevent them. The answer is simple. Nothing!

What can be done, however, is to point out variables that make fair comparisons difficult, if not impossible. For example, two theorems immediately come to mind.

No golf course is identical to any other.

No golf course will always be in excellent condition.

If today's golfers consider these statements, fewer repercussions would result from the inevitable comparison.

Begin with the hypotheses. "No golf course is identical to any other golf course." That every course is built on an entirely different site should make this statement obvious. Even courses that share common boundaries often contend with different conditions. Varying soil conditions, alone, usually dictate subtle differences in maintenance programs. As soil types and terrain become more divergent between one course and another, so may the maintenance practices needed to keep each course in good shape.

Poor drainage is usually a major factor in course upkeep; it affects soil compaction, turfgrass wear, and disease and results in weak turf and the need for more intensive maintenance. Naturally, drainage problems must be corrected.

On a broad scale, climate has a dramatic effect of what can be done with any maintenance program. Cries for bentgrass greens in the South and bermudagrass fairways in the North are common and require tactful handling by golf course superintendents. More realistically, growing and keeping *Poa annua* requires different techniques in every region of the country, requiring much local knowledge. Even on a local level, prevailing winds, altitude, or the presence of large bodies of water can influence the main-

tenance of one golf course differently from one just a few miles away.

Finally there is the actual layout of the golf course, almost any course would pale in comparison with Pebble Beach, Winged Foot, or Augusta National, regardless of the quality of the maintenance program. When a golfer says, "Why can't our greens and fairways be like those at Ultimate Links Golf Course," chances are he's more infatuated with the layout or site than the conditions of greens and fairways. And any golfer who plays a course for the first time is likely to give that course the benefit of the doubt as far as maintenance is concerned, thus invalidating many comparisons.

Not all golf courses are maintained equally. Some are obviously kept in better condition and this reflects the resources of the club and the tools available to the superintendent. When blessed with decent site conditions and good drainage, a superintendent can expect success with a maintenance program if he has a good irrigation system, an adequate supply of equipment and labor, and a sufficient operating budget. Without these essential tools, little consistency can be expected.

Few golfers appreciate the need for a good automatic irrigation system. The ability to apply water when and where it is needed and in the quantities desired is essential, especially as cutting heights inch fractionally downwards. Outdated manual systems make it very difficult to syringe during stressful weather and usually result in overwatering low areas or underwatering the high spots. Too many superintendents are forced to make the best of a bad situation by having to irrigate with an inadequate water supply, a weak pump house and poor pressure, weak or corroded pipe, or worn heads and poor coverage. Some are still dragging hoses and sprinklers to irrigate their greens and tees. Is it any wonder that these courses suffer in comparison to others?

The need for an adequate equipment inventory and labor supply is probably more obvious to most golfers, although they usually have no idea of how much is involved. Every course should establish a good program for replacing old equipment and acquiring new pieces on a timely basis. The number of workers will dictate the extent to which maintenance programs can be followed and grooming items can be carried out.

Finally the superintendent must be provided with a reasonable operating budget if he is to bring out the best in the golf course. Determining the actual figure required for a good budget is a real task. Due in part to some of the

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variables already discussed, a reasonable budget for one course might not be adequate for another. One thing is for sure . . . trying to compare one budget to another by looking only at the bottom line is mis-leading. Many maintenance budgets include such odd items as golf cart repair, score cards and pencils, golf shop electricity, property taxes, etc. Be sure to compare apples to apples and oranges to oranges if you must compare at all.

Other items affect turf quality and influence subsequent comparisons.

The species and varieties of grasses represent one such category. For example, on fairways in northern climates one will find bentgrass, perennial ryegrass, Kentucky bluegrass and/or annual bluegrass on a particular course. Each requires specialized treatment with respect to fertilization, pest control, cultivation, overseeding, irrigation, and cutting height. The cost of maintaining each species will be different, and their playing characteristics can vary widely depending on the weather and the season.

Another of the intangibles is the presence or absence of trees. Most people consider trees only as items of beauty or hazards to avoid during play; few appreciate their effects on turf and the maintenance of the course. Too many trees in the wrong places, common on many courses, can shade the turf, block air movement, and produce surface roots that affect playability and compete with the turf for water and nutrients. It is time-consuming to mow around trees, their roots frequently plug up drain lines, and leaf removal in the fall can be a major and costly budget item. Finally, the trees themselves often require routine irrigation, fertilization, pest control, and pruning.

The extent to which golf carts are used also contributes to appearance and condition. The club policy with respect to cart path construction, the use of carts on fairways, allowing carts out during wet weather or when the turf is dormant, and the number of cart rounds per year will affect the health of the turf and maintenance program.

The amount of play is another consideration. Small soil-based greens and tees are especially vulnerable to the effect of heavy play, although any course that experiences many rounds of golf is likely to require more intensive maintenance and a larger budget than a comparable course with less play. The amount of play during the winter, when the turf is dormant, is often as important as the play the course receives during the entire growing season. Heavy winter play can be devastating and should be avoided whenever possible.

The demands of the golfers themselves and the standards they set for the course are other intangibles. Demands for lush green grass, short roughs, and soft greens will produce a different golf course and leave a different impression than if the members desire firm closely cut fairways, U.S. Open rough, and firm, fast greens. Other variables include demands for fairway contouring, immaculate manicuring, flower beds, water coolers by every tee, and tree planting.

Now for the second of the two original hypotheses that, "No golf course will always be in excellent condition."

Most unfair comparisons are the result of a golfer's very heavy exposure to his home course and very limited exposure to the other course. If a golfer plays his home course often enough, he is bound to see it at some time in poor condition, if for no other reason than the weather. Flooding winter damage, wind storms, or an irrigation breakdown during 100-degree weather will happen to every golf course. However, if he plays Ultimate Links Golf Course once a year, in late September, it may indeed always seem to be in great shape.

This was brought to light recently during a visit to Deadly Fast Country club, when a Green Chairman asked, "Why can't our greens be as fast as those at Just-As-Fast Country Club?" On a subsequent visit to Just-As-Fast Country Club, their Green Chairman asked, "Why can't our greens be as fast as those at Deadly Fast Country Club?" In following up on this strange turn of events, it seems that each Green Chairman had played the other's course on member-guest weekend. Not surprisingly, each superintendent had done a yeoman's job of grooming his course and double cutting greens prior to the event.

The other story, which is familiar to every golf course superintendent, concerns television golf. All that need happen is for television cameras to focus on Augusta National on a spectacular spring weekend, and practically every superintendent will head for the nearest hideaway for the next several weeks, hoping to avoid the inevitable question, "Why can't our golf course . . ."

Week after week, the television viewer is treated to beautiful, usually high-budget golf courses that are groomed for their one big event of the year. The problem is that the viewers don't see the same course each week. They see only the course that has peaked, much as Deadly Fast Country Club does for its member-guest, for television, and an important professional tournament during a single week of the year. The members at these clubs know that the course does not look and play the same way throughout the season. Any living entity, whether it be a football quarterback, a race horse, or turf on a golf course, cannot be expected to perform as precisely and predictably as a machine. Each will have its good days and its bad, and each will peak at certain times.

The one important secret ingredient missing from this discussion thus far is the golf course superintendent. Superintendents are only human and as variable as the golf courses they manage. Each has his special strengths and weaknesses, and some are more suited to certain types of courses than to others. As a group, however, they represent a dedicated, professional company. When golfers compare courses, they often state it in such a way as to suggest that there is some human failing on the part of the superintendent that should be blamed. As we are all human and capable of mistakes, or misjudgements, this could be true. However, it is probably apparent from this review that many other factors play a role in any problems or concerns being experienced on a particular course.

Thus, when golfers get the urge to criticize their course or compare it to another, they should first stop and think about the site, the tools, and the intangibles that so greatly influence the way any course can be maintained. After considering these elements, they then might conclude that the grass is actually greener on *their* side of the fence. ■