

THE GAME

and the Golf Course Superintendent

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I ask you, what is more important to any golf club or course, or to those who play there, than a friendly understanding by the golfers of the course superintendent's role, their recognition of his various problems, and their appreciation of his contributions to their enjoyment of the game?

To encourage that understanding, recognition, and appreciation, I would like to tell what I think most golfers should know about their course superintendent and what he does for their course and for them, because I greatly respect the superintendent's role and I doubt that he gets the credit that he deserves. I want to do something about it.

As past Chairman of the USGA Green Section Committee, and having been on and off the Executive Committee for the past 20 years, I am confident that the USGA shares my views. Here they are, in no particular order; some are obvious, but I'll list them anyway:

- The golf course superintendent is charged with the responsibility for the care of the most important asset that a club possesses, which is the golf course itself.
- The superintendent's job is difficult at best, and even worse at times, in that his results are influenced by weather and other factors beyond his control, and complicated by human nature.
- The superintendent's performance cannot be quantified. His expenditures can be checked against the budget, but there is no Stimpmeter or other numerical means to measure how successful or unsuccessful, or how lucky or unlucky, he has been in caring for his course.
- The final test is the degree of satisfaction of those who play his course — which is such a subjective consideration that the superintendent simply cannot please all of the people all of the time. For example, I happen to like firm, fast greens and closely cut fairways, regardless of color, whereas my wife may prefer soft greens of medium pace and lush, green fairways — but that's because she is better at tennis than golf.
- For these and other reasons, everyone who plays at his course should give the superintendent the benefit of any doubt. After all, he certainly knows more about the golf course than they do as a group, and probably more than any one person who plays there — unless, that is, the superintendent has the disadvantage of not himself being a golfer, or of not playing occasionally on the course for which he is responsible. The superintendent should be a golfer — not necessarily a good one, like Bob Mitchell of The Greenbrier or Bill Whitaker of Seminole — but a regular player of the game who understands and respects it. I happen to be a member of both

of those clubs, and I know that their courses' outstanding playing characteristics have been enhanced by Bob's and Bill's expert knowledge and love of the game even more than by the demonstrated ability of each of them to play it well. Bob Mitchell is a former President of the Golf Course Superintendents Association. He is now Director of Grounds at The Greenbrier and a regular competitor in the West Virginia Amateur. Bill Whitaker is a past National Lefthanders Champion and former regular Army sergeant who handles his men effectively. Bill studies Seminole's greens by Stimpmeter readings, but also by his own putting practice as he checks various greens after they have been mowed — which may be why he putts so well, at least on smooth, fast surfaces, like Seminole's. The superintendent's personal involvement in the game will be well known to the golfers at his course. You can be sure that Messrs. Michell and Whitaker, as outstanding superintendents, have even more credibility because they are respected also as golfers.

- Recently I was pleased to learn that when the board of my home club, in Huntington, West Virginia, was searching for a superintendent, they were able to recruit Dean Watkins from nearby Berry Hills, in Charleston, who not only plays the game reasonably well, but is also President of the West Virginia Section of the GCSAA.
- I think the superintendent should have a continuity of contact with someone representing the club's board or its ownership who ideally should have some knowledge of agronomy, but certainly a love for the game and an abiding interest in good course conditions. Such a green or course committee chairman should not be replaced so long as he is responsibly discharging his duties and the course shows it. His most important function may be to communicate with the superintendent and to support him. The superintendent has a lonely job and he needs someone in authority with whom to discuss things and even vent his frustrations, which are inevitable.
- At best, however, club boards come and go, and sooner or later the green or course committee chairman may go, too, while the superintendent is still there. Because of this turnover of club officials, it is up to the superintendent from year to year to assert the strongest single influence on the playability of his course. Other things being equal, his essential role as keeper of the playing standards makes the critical difference in any comparison of golf courses and, in the end, of superintendents. I would bet that at the courses with the best playability, the superintendents either play golf there regularly or at least are serious students of the game as well as of their own profession.
- The most successful superintendents keep up with developments of the game and their profession by using all available resources. They are active in their professional associations at various levels, they attend educa-

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tional programs and field days, and they patronize the USGA Green Section Turf Advisory Service or some other competent technical consulting service — though I am obviously partial to the TAS and don't know that any other consultant can match the Green Section's variety of services. Also, I know all the USGA Green Section personnel and have a high regard for their abilities and dedication. Whichever consultant is retained, I hope and trust that he won't be intimidated by the superintendent or otherwise inhibited from making his most objective and constructive professional observations and suggestions. Anything less than a completely honest assessment by the consultant is an unconscionable waste of everyone's time and money and, in the long run, is unproductive for all concerned.

- Golfers should be made aware of the superintendent's managerial and technical skills and responsibilities. Few of them appreciate that he is responsible for 100 or more acres of valuable property, a six-figure budget, a six-figure equipment inventory, and a crew from a half-dozen to two dozen or more workers. In addition, he must have technical competence in the art and science of turfgrass management — a complicated and changing field, which is why his education must be a never-ending process. That's another reason why, if I were a superintendent, I wouldn't risk trying to go it alone without the periodic second opinion of a competent consultant, if for no other reason than preventive maintenance.

- So the superintendent is a manager of men, money, and turf — really a master of all trades and a daily problem-solver in a multitude of technical and professional skills. He must be a specialist in all of the wide categories of turfgrass management. His job is inevitably one of "crisis management," as well as careful planning for each day, week, month, and year. He must be a budget expert, purchasing agent, diplomat, and personnel manager, capable of dealing effectively with people of all levels, from minimum wage employees to club officials and members. He must be a keen observer of Nature (as well as of human nature), a chemist and a practical scientist, and in this respect, too, his role is changing. No longer can he get by with limited tools or supplies or scientific knowledge; in the modern world he needs better equipment and must be sophisticated in its use. As we all know, he will soon have to be a computer person as well.

- As suggested before, the superintendent is caught between those of us who like so-called "championship" conditions and those who prefer more forgiving conditions. I doubt that the resulting cross fire of criticism is always a valid indicator of how people really feel. No one wants impossible or unreasonable course conditions, but neither would most golfers want to play on a course without difficulties. If the secret of the game's appeal is that you cannot conquer it (or yourself), it follows that if course conditions are too undemanding, part of the fun is lost. How else can you explain the lure of Pine Valley or Oakmont? Preserve golf's essential challenge and the game will prosper.

- The superintendent can exert a critical influence on the game just by his philosophy of golf course maintenance

and by his adherence to it. If he is sincerely interested in maintaining a proper playing surface for the game itself, his club members will gradually accept the conditions, and in the process they will become better players. What a happy coincidence that golf course conditions making for a more challenging game can also make for better turf, and vice versa!

- I fear that many courses have ironically become victims of technical advances such as with irrigation systems, in that these "improvements" too often have led to severe problems in turfgrass management. Likewise the over-use of chemicals, such as fertilizers and herbicides, softens grass growth and weakens its performance in stress periods. As a result of over-stimulation of turfgrass in the spring, it becomes necessary to apply water more frequently during the summer. Once the soil is saturated, susceptibility to disease increases, as does the incidence of crabgrass. So golf course playing standards can suffer from a vicious cycle; it begins with the misuse of turf management techniques that can cause more problems than are normally caused by Nature. This pattern of mismanagement afflicts all grasses, cool-season and warm-season alike.

- So as we all look ahead, let us hope that our golf course maintenance programs will be directed more towards quality playing conditions than simply towards aesthetics. This will call for a greater understanding by golf club members and public course players, along with course superintendents.

I salute the superintendent — and so does the USGA, which has long served the superintendent's role and his cause. Let us count some of the ways:

- (1) The TAS directly supports the professional knowledge and the professional image of the golf course superintendent.

- (2) The superintendent's scientific ability and professionalism have been elevated to a higher plane also by the Green Section's support over the past 60 years of turfgrass research.

- (3) The GCSAA Championship Trophy, which is presented each year to the winner of the Golf Course Superintendents' Tournament as a gift from the USGA, is a replica of the U.S. Open Championship Trophy, and this is a form of recognition symbolizing the importance of the golf course superintendent in the USGA's scheme of things and, indeed, his importance to the game of golf.

But the USGA could and should do more — and will, I assure you — to encourage club members, club officials, and golf officials in general to recognize the essential role played by a competent superintendent who maintains a fine course and protects the proper playing standards of the game. Meanwhile I would appreciate — and the USGA would, too — suggestions from the GCSAA or from any individual golf course superintendent, as to how else we can help you to do an even better job, or to make it easier for you, or to shine upon you a light that I know you deserve. We all serve golf in our own ways, but we must work together for the good of the game that we all love. ■