

# Taking It to the Next Level

## *Golf course management and golfer expectations*

Every golfer wants to play on quality turf. And certainly most golf course operators and owners want to have quality turf.

And golf course superintendents work hard to achieve that. So why do these desires fail to get realized?

Sometimes they get derailed because golfers are apt to focus on what they are unhappy about rather than what can reasonably be attained. Then course owners or clubs are forced to chase complaints instead of following an achievable plan of action.

A.W. Tillinghast, the architect who designed Bethpage Black course and Winged Foot Country Club, among others, said, "It is my belief that too many American courses are retarded in proper development and improvement by unintelligent – although doubtless well-intended – criticism and advice from the locker rooms. Without a doubt, there exist more amateur course architects and turf authorities among the members of some of our clubs than there are following these crafts professionally."

The GCSAA golf course superintendent is the person who has the most intimate knowledge of the course and who knows best how to go about achieving course maintenance goals, but unrealistic expectations and outside pressures sometimes prevent them from applying that knowledge.

Chris Hartwiger is a USGA agronomist who consults with golf courses and has seen more than a few of these situations. He and other agronomists spend much of their time talking to golf course superintendents, green committees and course owners during Turfgrass Advisory Service and they often hear golfers with unrealistic expectations.

"Good golfing conditions do not happen by accident," Hartwiger said. "They happen when a team is put together that has the resources and infrastructure necessary to meet the desired objectives."



He offered several examples of unrealized expectations:

**Producing a quality cut:**

Agronomists often hear that the cut was not good on one or more parts of the course. Often, it's a failure to allocate adequate resources – the course either doesn't have any reel-grinding equipment or it hasn't allowed the golf course mechanic to get the necessary training for existing equipment.

**Rough that's not "too rough"** A course owner says, "We have a good staff and new leased equipment, so why is the rough so inconsistent?" In many areas, especially the Southeast, shade and incomplete irrigation coverage doom rough to inconsistency.

Superintendents know that asking sun-loving grasses to thrive in the shade and compete with tree roots for water is an exercise in futility, but golfers rarely let the superintendent remove the trees necessary for good turf.

**Consistent bunkers:** Golfers universally want perfect bunkers, not too firm or too soft. Like Goldilocks they want them "just right." Unfortunately, bunkers will never be that consistent over the course of a season.

The solution involves better communication and the development of a network that includes golfers, the golf shop, the general manager, the green committee and the turfgrass management team.

**Better putting greens:** The best putting greens have many of the following factors in common:

- A skilled GCSAA member superintendent and experienced staff
- Good construction and enough size for amount of play
- Use of an improved variety
- Commitment to a sound aeration and topdressing program
- Little shade and good air movement

through either open sites or fans

- Excellent water quality
- Sensible mowing program
- Summer venting

Without them, the likelihood of better greens declines, too.

The role of a green committee or course owner, working in concert with the golf course superintendent, to develop and implement a coordinated plan is obvious, but where does the golfer fit into the puzzle?

A good first step is a change in mindset. If your course is regularly deluged with complaints, it's hard to create a realistic management plan. If instead, golfers are genuinely interested in what happens on the course, and ask questions when they don't understand what is happening on the course, the management team can begin the dialogue that produces achievable goals.

"The trick is to get everyone on the same page," Hartwiger said, "If complaints and criticisms are a recurring theme, focus on building the team and resources necessary to deliver the results desired."

Every course has some budget limitations, so if it's not possible to have all the employees, the machines, the budget, and the infrastructure to satisfy every hope or dream, help is available. In addition to the fact that your golf course superintendent is the person who knows the most about the course and what can be achieved, he or she has a network of more than 20,000 other turf professionals available in the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, and the extensive professional and educational resources offered by the association.

What golfers say they want may not be realistic at every course, but the good news is that every golf course can set achievable expectations and encourage golfers to enjoy the course when they play.

*Credit: GCSAA Communications Dept.*