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How to Sell Your Story

Maintenance Field Day at Martin Downs CC Draws 150 Members, Local Press

BY JOEL D. JACKSON, CGCS

One of the biggest problems superintendents face is that golfers don't really know what they do. Bridging that disconnection has been one of main goals of the GCSAA in its recent marketing blitz to show golfers the value of having a professional superintendent on staff.

John Cunningham, superintendent of the 36-hole Martin Downs CC in Stuart took the GCSAA message to heart and has done something very successful to take that message to his members. Cunningham just held his 2nd Annual Turf Maintenance Field Day and the attendance shot up from 85 last year to more than 150 this year.

Of course nothing of value is ever achieved without hard work and preparation, and for three weeks prior to the field day there's a lot of nervous anticipation by the staff that is not accustomed to being in the spotlight. But once the curtain goes up, all settle down to talk about their jobs to an audience of interested listeners and the experience becomes a positive reinforcer for



Martin Downs Superintendent John Cunningham (standing on chair) welcomes more than 150 club members to the 2nd Annual Turf Maintenance Field Day. Photo by Joel Jackson.

staff and members.

Cunningham is passionate about communicating with his members and instilling pride in his staff. He approached his board of directors last year about holding a field day and they approved. He hasn't looked back since,

and the field day has taken on the importance of a major golf event at the club.

When Cunningham took over six years ago, he began a program of improvements to make the maintenance facility a less drab and cluttered environment to work in. Once that was accomplished he thought, "We complain that golfers don't know who we are or what we do, why not bring them down to maintenance and show them?"

He got the idea for the field day approach from attending the South Florida Turf Expo in Ft. Lauderdale. He said, "What if we set up six or seven stations. Broke the members up into small groups and had them move from station to station on a timed schedule. We could have tables set up in the building and serve lunch when we are done."

And so the Martin Down Turf Main-

The members make a connection to the staff. They are no longer just faces passing by on the golf course.

They understand these people are trained professionals and have pride in what they do... Once they learn about what really goes on behind the scenes, they are a lot more positive about the club in general and complaints go way down

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Assistant Superintendent Eric Kunkel (far right) explains to members how and why aerification and top dressing equipment is used on the course. Photo by Joel Jackson.

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tenance Field Day was born.

The day of the event the members play in a morning shotgun tournament and then drive down to the maintenance facility where the tournament results will be scored. They participate in the program that lasts less than an hour and then sit down to lunch in the maintenance building.

Cunningham explained, "We have

seven stations this year. Each presentation will last approximately seven minutes including questions and answers which is where we can really display our expertise. Each presenter writes his own spiel and we rehearse the whole program three times and have a dress rehearsal the morning of the field day. We critique the content and time the presentations to make sure they fit the schedule.

"You know a mechanic's strong suit isn't usually public speaking, but once he gets started explaining the precision of what he does and answers a few questions like, 'How many reels do you grind on just this one machine?' And he says, '150.' The members begin to realize there's more to maintenance than meets the eye and his pride builds.

"The whole crew is involved. There will be seven tour guides — one to take each group around to each station when time is called. We have a table crew to set up for lunch and we have six or



In the operations room Assistant Superintendent Jesus Romero described how the daily work is assigned in morning staff meetings to organize men and equipment for efficient course preparation. Photo by Joel Jackson.

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seven members of the staff preparing lunch. Last year we had a barbecue this year we are having a Mexican fiesta theme.

"We did go to the expense of renting banquet tables at a cost of \$350, with board approval, to improve over last years presentation. We also have hired entertainment this year from a local club to add to the fiesta ambience."

Cunningham says the paybacks and benefits of such an undertaking are worth the effort, "The members make a connection to the staff. They are no longer just faces passing by on the golf course. They understand these people are trained professionals and have pride in what they do. They also learn that maintenance is a lot more complex than they realized and that it is a team effort. Once they learn about what really goes on behind the scenes, they are a lot more positive about the club in general and complaints go way down.

"Just as important is what the staff gains from the experience. We push them out of their comfort zone a little bit. They are nervous. Most don't sleep the night before. Every wife has heard the presentation umpteen times, but they do just fine. The pride and improved morale from pulling it off creates such a positive working atmosphere that it is a win-win success for all concerned."

Cunningham is already planning the topics for next year's field day and the members are showing off their newly acquired insider knowledge about golf course maintenance facts. GCSAA's Kelly Loganbill came down from Lawrence, Kan. to see what Cunningham was doing since he had ordered 500 of those golf maintenance inserts that have appeared in golf magazines. The association will be looking at how to present his field day formula as a tool for everyone to use.

The local paper also had a reporter present and there was a great positive half-page article in the Stuart News about the event. So, there is a way to tell your story and no reason for your members to not know about what you do. It's up to you. Go for it. It works.



The superintendent's office was one of seven stations visited by the members. Here John Cunningham (center) describes his various roles and responsibilities as the Martin Downs C.C. golf course superintendent. Photo by Joel Jackson

Positive Feedback

Editor's Note: Martin Downs Superintendent John Cunningham sent the following letters he received from some of his members after the Feb. 7 Field Day. Do you think these people will be advocates for the golf course maintenance department when issues arise?

Dear John,

You and your staff are to be commended for the truly exceptional Turf Field Day exhibition.

This is something every golfer and club member should attend. It certainly demonstrated why golf course maintenance requires money, equipment and dedicated employees.

We never get to see what goes on behind the scene by such capable people, and also we never get to know these same people as we pass them on the golf course.

The various stages of the demonstration were quite unique and the presentations really informative. The guys did a super job.

Needless to say, the food and entertainment were a nice touch and greatly appreciated by the membership.

We are all looking forward to the next one."

Eleanor and Dick Santee

Dear John,

I just want to thank you for a very interesting and informative afternoon at the Turf Field Day. All the gentlemen did an excellent job in their presentations. Thank you for making this huge effort in educating the membership. You and your staff do an excellent job.

Kathy de Wendt

What a special treat your field day was. It gave me a new respect for all you and your staff do. The presentations were so professional. I'm glad to be a part of the Martin Downs Country Club family.

Gayle Bue

Be a Curve Ball Hitter

The key to surviving an economic slowdown will be the extent to which you emphasize playability in your management program ... and educate your golfers on its importance.

BY CHRIS HARTWIGER
USGA Agronomist
Southeast Region

The 1990s were a decade of tremendous prosperity for golf and the economy in general. Thousands of new courses were built and the rate of growth in maintenance budgets far outpaced the rate of inflation.

Unfortunately, signs are pointing to a serious economic slowdown and perhaps even a recession. Some superintendents are going to have fewer budget dollars with no change in expectations for the golf course. This article will offer a strategy for dealing with an economic downturn that will enhance a superintendent's value to their course.

As USGA agronomists during the golf boom of the 1990's period, we learned a few lessons that will prove to be invaluable in dealing with an economic slowdown.

1) No matter how large your maintenance budget is, the condition of the course is never going to be good enough for everyone.

2) Job security is not correlated with the size of the budget. An unlimited budget does not guarantee job security.

Superintendents who subscribe to the school of thought that all will be right with the world if the maintenance budget is 10 or 20 percent higher are due for a reality check. This theory does not work. Just ask the superintendents at the top of the ladder. Instead, now is the time to break out of the cycle of chasing expectations and shift the emphasis on playability.

Why Playability

Much of the extra money that has flowed into course maintenance budgets over the last decade has been allocated to improving the *presentation* of the golf course and not the *playability* of the course.

Roughs are not rough any more. Maintenance has spread from fence line to fence line and brushing off the cart paths every day is more important than brushing the greens. Immaculate presentation and excellent playability can be accomplished by the courses with the biggest budgets.

When mid- to low-budget clubs try to compete with this mentality, they promote mediocrity in many categories at the expense of excellence in a few. The game of golf is designed to be played up the middle of the course, yet we see clubs failing to commit the resources necessary to have excellent green, tees, and fairways.

Shifting the focus on the playability of the course takes attention away from the labor-intensive, expensive pursuit of things such as the search for the perfect bunker sand, overseeding, course landscaping, string trimming creek banks, and on and on. Focus is shifted onto the primary playing surfaces: greens, tees, and fairways.

There is no reason why even a low-budget club can not commit the resources necessary to have excellent putting greens. After all, with more than 60% of

all shots during a round involving the putting greens, doesn't it make sense to make the putting greens the highest priority on the course?

You would think so, but in our travels it is shocking how many courses do not have the equipment package and maintenance program in place to maximize the performance of the putting greens.

Playability Education

It is easy to spot the flowering dogwoods on the 12th hole or the shaved pond banks along the 7th fairway. However, it takes an effort to communicate the importance of regular putting green topdressing or the need to have extra help maintaining the mowing reels.

Start a playability education program and assume course officials know nothing about what it takes to provide excellent playing conditions. Teach them what it takes to create excellence on the tees, fairways, and greens.

The USGA Green Section Turfgrass Advisory Service is an excellent tool to assist in playability education. The Southeast Region Green Section staff has developed a three-hour seminar on improving playability as well as a fun report card designed to illustrate ways to improve playability.

Ten clubs have already requested visits with playability being the main topic on the agenda. We plan to study playability issues at these courses and conduct evening presentations with course officials specifically tailored to the course we are visiting. Call us now (800-296-9398) to schedule a visit.

Be Proactive, Not Reactive

No one knows more than the superintendent about the costs associated with the management and preparation of the golf course. Most golfers and course officials have no knowledge about maintenance.

Create manhour and cost studies that you can use to educate course officials. If faced with a budget reduction, these studies are an invaluable tool to show where expenses can be trimmed without seriously impacting playability.

Remember that even though budgets



Much of the extra money that has flowed into course maintenance budgets over the last decade has been allocated to improving the presentation of the golf course and not the playability of the course.

can be decreased with the stroke of the pen, it takes work to alter golfer expectations. With a manhour study, course officials can be the ones to advise which tasks should be reduced or eliminated to meet the new budget. Show them how playability of tees, greens, and fairways

can be maintained or improved at a reduced budget level.

Have a Plan in Place

If you owned the golf course and had to reduce the budget by 10 - 20 percent, where would you cut costs? Develop this plan now and have it ready in case the budget is cut.

At many private clubs, course officials are volunteers and they derive a sense of satisfaction from representing their club. Imagine how valuable you will be if you implement a program on a reduced budget that actually improves the quality of the tees, fairways, and greens.

It can be done, but you must teach them to focus on playability issues and encourage them to decrease expenses in areas that have little or nothing to do with the playability of the course. You can make these course officials look like heroes during tough times and this will only benefit you in the long run.

Results

The playability of the golf course is a mindset for golfers just like the presentation of the course is a mindset. Maybe it is time to stop the endless pursuit of perfection and focus on how the course plays instead of how it looks. We have seen too many cases of million-dollar budgets with members grumbling in the 19th hole that "it still isn't good enough." Stop playing a game you cannot win and start changing the expectations of the players. It can be done. We have seen it done and we can teach you how to do it.

Life throws everybody a curveball from time to time, but isn't it easier to hit that curveball out of the park if you know it is coming? Developing a plan that maximizes the playability of the course while cutting costs will increase your worth to the club dramatically. Great curve ball hitters are hard to find. Go ahead and get to work.

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