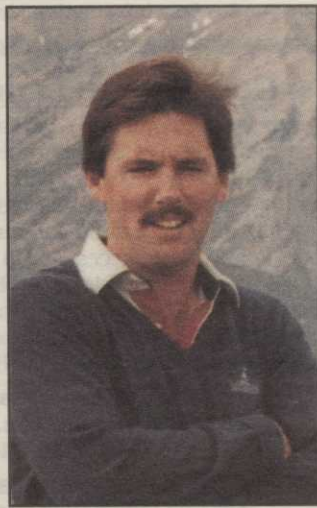




Erosion like that above can happen without their new flags, say Pat McMillan, below left, and Gary Darling, below right.



McMillan, Darling put heads together and, voilà, Heads Up

BY MARK LESLIE

Golf course irrigation contractors, builders and superintendents can sleep soundly during construction projects — now that a new flag assembly is on the market.

The continual problem of destroyed sprinkler heads on a project is "a nightmare to the irrigation contractor and superintendent," said Pat McMillan of Chandler, N.C., an on-site supervisor and finish shaper with Robert Trent Jones Sr. After struggling with this nightmare for years, McMillan and Gary Darling of Sapulpa, Okla., a Jones architect's representative, decided to do something about it.

The result: Heads Up Flagging, a simple 5-by 8-inch orange plastic flag on a 36-inch metal pole that sticks into a rubber mount. Using a powerful new tape from 3M Company, the mount is stuck on the top of the head, so that the flag is not touched by water from the sprinkler.

Tested in intense heat, extreme cold and high winds, the flag assembly has proven it will save money and major headaches on golf courses, parks and athletic fields.

"For years we have griped and moaned about people putting wooden stakes beside the sprinklers," said Dave Davis of Golf Course Irrigation and Design Consultants in California. "The sprinkler would rotate past the stake and it would block out an area of irrigation as well as erode around the stake. But nobody ever thought about putting a sticker on the head and a flag on top of that."

Referring to the standard procedure, McMillan said, "If you stick a 24-inch flag in the ground six inches you have only 18 inches showing. When you're sitting up on a big bulldozer coming over a knoll or bunker, visibility is very poor and you have a lot of dust in front of you, and you can easily run over a head.

"A lot of times guys don't say anything, and when you go to pressurize the system you have leaks all over the place. It's a nightmare

to the irrigation contractor and superintendent."

Darling said use of wooden sticks around sterilized greens is a major problem. "If you have a wood flag, the water hits it and washes into the green and causes contamination."

He also said that on slopes, the old wooden stakes can cause erosion.

McMillan added that on construction sites it is often one man's job every morning and night to walk the course to make sure all the stakes are up. "It's a lot of labor wasted — not to mention how many heads are being run over," he said.

The cost of broken sprinkler heads alone is estimated at several thousand dollars per course. Then there are quick couplers and valve boxes that, if unmarked, can be hard to locate. Underground pipes may also be broken.

Davis, who is testing the flags on several courses, said: "You had a good 5-percent loss on a golf course before using these flags. If you had 1,000 heads it would be easy to lose 50 heads to breakage."

That means \$5,000 to buy new heads, plus another \$5,000 in manhours for repair.

And, Darling added: "If you had a stake blow off on a green and you had to redo the surface of the green, you're talking about \$3,000, \$4,000, \$5,000 in damage.

"Per head it will cost into the hundreds, maybe into the thousands, for repairs."

An average of 2,000 flags per course are needed in the Western United States. In the East, 800 to 1,400 might suffice. At a cost of \$1.29 per flag and holder, that's a cost of \$1,000 to \$2,500.

"When you're spending \$5 million, \$6 million ... for a golf course, \$1,400 is very little for marking irrigation heads," said McMillan.

"The irrigation system — at \$500,000 to \$1 million — is the most expensive thing you're putting into a golf course. It is the life support of the whole course," said Darling. "This is (equal to a) miscellaneous cost."

McMillan added "neatness" to Heads Up flags' list of positives.

He told of a course he visited where a superintendent had stuck lengths of one-inch PVC pipe into the ground to mark heads.

When prospective homebuyers visited, "Here you had a \$10-million golf course and they looked down the fairways and saw all this white pipe sticking out of the ground... The flags can only make things better for irrigation contractors and designers," he said.

They are also more convenient for the builder. Said McMillan: "An irrigation contractor can just sit them on a seat in the truck versus the old wooden stakes where you have a whole pickup full in the back and you're constantly scrounging through them. To put one up, you have to take a roll of marking tape, wrap it around the stake, tie a couple of knots in it... It's just not convenient."

The flags are basically used during a golf course's grow-in period — usually one year.

McMillan and Darling are delighted with the response from people who are testing them.

"Four golf courses in Europe are using them and the response is incredible, especially in Ireland where they've done things the old, old way for so long," McMillan said.

Davis is so happy with the flags that his company is specifying their use on new jobs.

"I've been putting them out on several golf courses to test them in different environments," Davis said. "I've got some in the Las Vegas area and other parts of the desert ... in the hottest part of the season — 120 degrees — and we haven't had any come off."

"We're also testing for wind in the high desert," he said, adding that he has yet to lose one of the 20 flags in an area that has 15- to 20-mph prevailing winds.

Darling reported similar results at his Oklahoma home, which he calls "the windiest place in the world."

Darling and McMillan also gave the unit a "freeze test." They stuck the flag holder to the

ON THE GREEN

bottom of a coffee can filled with water and froze it. Every day for 30 days they put the can and holder under hot water, then returned them to the freezer. The rubber mount remained fixed in place.

"I put it through the heat test, too," said McMillan, who put it on the lid of his barbecue grill. "It actually adheres better with heat. It's incredible."

He said the tape attaches to wood, rubber and or any irrigation head on the market.

The question now is, can Heads Up Flagging keep up with the demand once the word gets out to the industry.

Darling said his Tulsa, Okla., manufacturer is capable of making 2,000 a day. "But we don't even have our (advertising) pamphlets done yet."

If you have had an innovative solution to a golf course problem, let us know. Call the editor at 207-846-0600.

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