

Cummings: Mastering communications smooths the way

By VERN PUTNEY

"The greatest need for a golf course superintendent today is to learn how to communicate." Use of the written word to inform, educate or explain can avoid many problems, said John C. Cummings, superintendent of golf course and grounds at Berry Hills Country Club in Charleston, W.Va.

Cummings uses a unique question-answer approach to keep membership abreast of course developments. Whenever there is an annual meeting to discuss and vote on capital improvements, Cummings prepares a written question/answer format which is mailed out in the annual report.

He tries to put down any question, no matter how seemingly trivial, that he figures a member might ask. This way, no one is put on the spot at the meeting. Their questions have been answered. This process sold a conversion of Berry Hills' fairways to Bermudagrass in 1988. Cummings used this packet to "sell" the need to reconstruct the 40-year-old bunkers on the course and to sod green and bunkers banks to bluegrass. (Construction began in March.)

It is his experience that, if informed ahead of time, membership will support your program. They don't like surprises.

Cummings was first attracted to golf at

age 14. The native of West Virginia worked five summers at the Marietta, Ohio, Country Club pro shop under Bernie Wentis, and two summers on the grounds crew under Charley Lincicome, now at Bucknell University Golf Course in Lewis, Pa.

All the books on management couldn't compare to knowledge gleaned in the field, declares Cummings. "Wentis and Lincicome nurtured and encouraged, and much of my program today is a product of their teachings."

Here's Cummings' question outline and responses:

Q. Does your club or facility demand posting for pesticide applications?

A. No, but I voluntarily post notices at the first tee and the pro shop on days we spray. The signs stay up for 24 hours. We are prepared for mandatory posting in the future.

Q. Are you in "Hazard Communication Compliance" in your maintenance facility?

A. Yes, we have had video training films for our personnel who handle pesticides or other hazardous materials. We post a list of all hazardous materials used at the workplace.

Q. Is your aerification (cultural practices) based upon proper agronomic timing or golfing event convenience?

A. Yes and no. In 1990, I was forced to

aerify and top dress based upon the golf committee's event schedule. At the time allowed for me to aerify, we received heavy rain in the afternoon. I had topdressed heavily following coring. I had seven greens with topdressing material on them which could not be dragged or brushed

in. I lost three greens because the turf was smothered by heavy, wet top dressing.

Since that incident, I sit in on golf committee meetings when they schedule events. They work around my plans. If conditions are too bad, I can use my own judgment as to when to aerify, considering the nature of the event such as a one-day best ball versus a three-day member-guest.

Keeping all parties updated is the professional way. Any phone calls will be met with the correct response. A member doesn't want to bring our three guests and be surprised. Members frequently contact me to ask when the greens will be back to normal. This way, if need be, they can play elsewhere.

Q. If it is based on proper agronomic timing, how have you convinced your superior to accept this?

A. They have learned through the problem encountered in 1990. We aerify between April 15 and May 15, depending on soil conditions and soil temperature and when or if we are applying pre-emergent herbicides and/or TGR's. We then aerify the day after Labor Day, again weather permitting and hinging around the TGR application and any overseeding plans. We need to do it early enough for full recovery before cold weather hits.

Q. Do you have communication with the pro shop staff?

A. Yes. Usually once or twice a week to find out about upcoming events — size, timing, shotgun starts, tee times, amount of play the previous day, etc.

We also meet once a week with other department heads and our general manager to hear the general activities of the entire club.

Q. Schedule of events for the year?

A. Yes, I sit in on committee meetings. I hear their plans; they hear mine.

Q. Daily contact and communications?

A. Not every day in person. We do, however, fill out and post a "Course Status Card" at the pro shop that informs them and the players of the cart policy for the day, what we are mowing, if we are spraying chemicals, and pin placement sheet.

Q. How are you notified for non-scheduled events (last minute)? A. We receive a "party" or event sheet for outside outings ahead of time. We try for no last-minute events.

Q. Are you limited on irrigation times? If not, how do you communicate this to the membership or public?

A. We are not limited to irrigation times by the utility company or anything like that. However, if I water in the morning, I schedule the controllers so that they are ahead of the first group of golfers, off at 8 a.m. I try to do my heavy watering on Mondays, when the club is closed, and at

SUPER FOCUS



John Cummings at Berry Hills Country Club.

night, between 10 p.m. and 4:30 a.m.

If I need to water in a pesticide or fertilizer during play, I avoid heavy play days, and also inform the pro shop to let the players know of irrigation. This need is rare. A crew member or I will stay at the controllers when we syringe greens, for example, so as not to get anyone wet.

Q. Who has final decision on course closings?

A. Usually it is agreement among the golf pro, green chairman and myself. I inform them of the reasons for closing. We consider the day's special events. At times a superintendent must look the other way for the good of the club revenue-wise. For example, we would hate to turn away a \$10,000 outing.

Q. Who has final decision on cart limitations?

A. Most generally I do. We have a complete cart path system from #1 through #18. We never close the course to cart traffic. We will close the course when turf conditions are too wet.

In the spring, coming out of dormancy, we keep the carts in the rough on paths. In the summer, we prefer that carts travel in the fairways rather than the rough, which is mainly cool-season turf. The Bermuda can withstand the traffic in the summer, but damage can occur if traffic is allowed at dormancy break. Very seldom do we use a "Rough Only" sign. This leads to a worn area just parallel to the fairway. Golfers won't think to scatter, instead falling into a "follow the leader" pattern.

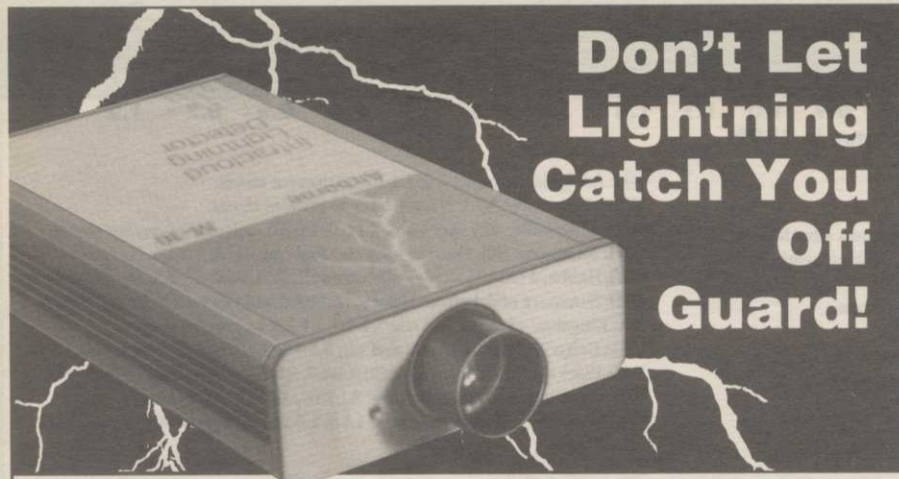
Cummings, who gained CGCSA status in 1984, prepared for the Berry Hills post he's held since 1984 with superintendent positions at Clarksburg (W.Va.) Country Club, and Chartier's Country Club in Pittsburgh. He also was assistant superintendent at Sandy Brae Golf Course in Amma, W.Va.

A member of GCSAA since 1977, offices include past director of the Greater Pittsburgh GCSA, W. Va. GCSA president 1990-91; vice president and secretary-treasurer and past chairman of these committees while serving on the W. Va. GCSA board since 1981 — bylaws, education, fund-raising, membership, pesticide workshop and golf.

Cummings' lone regret at his "workaholic" ethic is lack of quality family time. Wife Cindy and sons Alan, 8, and Philip, 5, have suffered somewhat.

The 1978 Ohio State University graduate, with a bachelor's in natural resources, specializing in parks and recreation administration with emphasis in turf management, is remedying home time shortage via a capable assistant.

The best part of that setup, said Cummings, was having Sundays off last summer, and attending church as a family.



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