Ex-super architects' lament: 'Please maintain integrity of my design'

By MARK LESLIE

Sometimes mixing the two jobs of superintendent and architect can be a bad idea, especially in regard to design integrity.

Architects who were once superintendents have an idea what supers should not do.

"It is rare that our bunkers are the same six or 12 months down the road [after a course opens]," said Keith Foster, an ex-superintendent who now operates a design business out of offices in St. Louis, Mo., and Phoenix, Ariz.

He recalled how he had destroyed those two holes in his superintendent days. "There was a long par-4. I'm a good player, and I felt the hole needed a bunker directly in front of the green. I made that my mission because I didn't think the hole was tough enough. I ruined the hole. Years later, when I knew what I was doing, I went back to the club and convinced them to fill the bunker back in."

Tree programs are another example of something that sounds good, but can be a detriment. Since many clubs and members appreciate trees, Foster said, they give their superintendents money for tree programs. "Many times, the trees are okay. But what happens when the trees aren't properly placed?" he asked. "I think they should be more cautious about maintaining the integrity of the golf course."

Care of greens is a major problem, superintendents-turned-architects said. To avoid complaints by membership and players about scalping along the edges of greens, crews tend to overcompensate in mowing and cut the green smaller, according to Jan Beljan of Tom Fazio Golf Course Designers, Inc. "An eighth inch daily, day after day, and at year's end the green is six inches smaller," she said. For this reason, many owners are now deciding to have wire placed around the perimeter of the green during construction, "so you will always know how far out the green should extend."

Michael Hurdzan of Columbus, Ohio, alluded to this "subconsious effort that causes greens to shrink. Now that these greens are smaller, clubs have placed new irrigation on the edge of the greens and we can't take them back out beyond the heads to where they should be."

Hurdzan added that where people have improperly built the edge of a green — where it interfaces with surrounding soils — the most common symptom is dryness on the next two to three feet. "When the superintendent can't get grass to grow on a short cut, he will often raise the cut to compensate for the bad interface. So you have

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Tips from toiling in both positions

Having toiled both on the equipment and at the draftsman's table, what tips do the superintendents-turned-designers have to pass on?

- Trees: "Keep trees back from the surfaces of greens," said Snyder. "And if you're in an area where you have winter frost, do not plant on the east side of greens and tees, so that the sun hits it."
- Bunkers: "Watch that the slope is not too steep," Snyder said. "Make them big enough so that you can handle them with a machine. Also, allow the golfer a way to walk out of the trap.

"I like to have my traps and mounds fit in as a unit with the green. The shape of the green should match the outline of the sand trap and mounding. Then you have enough space between the edge of the green and sand trap so you can turn a triplex around."

- Greens: "There should be at least several areas on a green where you can put a pin," Snyder said. "I'm not against steep slopes on a green except when you're having difficulty in a change of slope."

On using USGA-spec greens in the desert, Snyer said: "I'm against spending all that money for something you don't need here... We've found that the more sand we use the better off we are."

- Grasses: "If anything," Hurdzan said, "avoid planting the wrong grass in the wrong micro-climate. Don't plant Bermudagrass where it won't grow, or bentgrass where it won't grow."
- Drainage: Primary concerns for superintendents and architects are irrigation and drainage.

"Normally, we drain water off greens in at least two directions," Snyder said, "But dump as little off the front as possible because that's where the fairway mower comes up and where most golfers walk onto the green."

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course design business. As an example of the lack of priority some architects give course maintenance, he pointed to a project that was designed without a maintenance building.

"They had to take out two prime house lots for that building, after the fact," he said.

How has turfgrass education helped this clutch of architects?

"I think it's quite important," Snyder said. "The experience I had as a kid working on a golf course and doing all the nasty jobs around a place — cleaning the sand traps on the course and the grease traps in the clubhouse — all helped prepare me for this."

Some of the lessons:

• Snyder's Law, according to Jack, is "there are slopes beyond which you should not design.

"Look at the Flymo work that's being done on steep slopes," Snyder added. "It's not reasonable, or practical, and it has caused a lot of problems at lots of courses that are just not maintainable — or if they are, you do it by hand, and what does that cost you?"

• "A lot of designers may have worked on a course or caddied," said Beljan, "but I spent years growing up riding all the maintenance equipment. And when you're out there yourself, dawn to dark, and know what the equipment can and can not do, you design accordingly."

Many advances in equipment over the last 20 years have made a difference in both turfgrass maintenance and design, she said, including new grasses for greens and those steeper slopes Snyder spoke of: Flymos and weed-eaters for hard-to-get-to places; and irrigation systems with heads around greens that help avoid over-watering.

• Foster's training has led him to "always look, not at what I shouldn't do but what I should do: positive drainage, surface drainage, air circulation around greens — all the things that allow a superintendent to do his job. What an architect can do is design something that is impossible to maintain, like place a green in a valley surrounded by trees. That was done for many years."

• "To me," said Hurdzan. "my background has been the greatest help in being able to deal with superintendents at a peer level, to break from the norm in the kinds of grasses and fertilizers we use and the kinds of greens we build, and to deal with environmentalists."

He added that architects without a background in turfgrass management are at a disadvantage "when dealing with an environmental hearing or group and having to justify why golf courses are good neighbors to the environment. Those of us who have that background are able to speak forcefully about it because we have used those materials, and understand all the ramifications and interactions of turfgrass management and, more importantly, how to avoid problems and implement Integrated Plant Management."

Yet, Hurdzan tempers help-the-super talk with the admonishment that golf designers are in the entertainment business. "I look at us as being in the entertainment business and we're trying to sell value to the golfer," he said. "We want the golfer to come to our golf course, give us 4-1/2 to 5 hours of his time and $30 to $50 of his money and walk away saying, 'God, that was worth it.' So, what I think personally [about design], and what I think for a golf course to be profitable and for a golfer to feel like he has gotten the value out of a project, may clash.

"If you're trying to make golfers happy — I don't care how difficult a feature is for the superintendent — it should be in there. I'm not a big fan of flowers, as an example. But if that makes people choose one course over another, put them in there. They can help tee complexes. You may have to hire a horticulturist, but that could be the difference between success and failure in some places."

Yet, like his colleagues, Hurdzan maintains a healthy respect for the needs and desires of superintendents.

"I don't think many superintendents try to cross over and do what I do," he said. "I find supers recognize the professional relationship we have. They know more about growing greens to the level of perfection golfers want, and they recognize I know how to build a golf course to how the owner wants it. That's a neat equilateral triangle between the three of us. I defer to the superintendent in technical matters. And he defers in matters I should know about."

Maintain integrity

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a conscious decision to make the greens smaller," he said.

"One other thing is where we have a bluegrass collar and bentgrass green, a green chairman will decide he wants a bentgrass collar. So they start mowing in on the green for a bentgrass collar. That also makes the green too small."

"Superintendents, for better or worse, have a major impact on golf course design," Foster said.

All agree the good impact can far outweigh the bad, especially if the superintendent is brought aboard a project early.