

## Top of mind

AT BLUE ASH GOLF COURSE NEAR CINCINNATI, CULTURAL PRACTICES CHANGED TO PROVIDE GOLFERS WITH A MORE PLEASANT EXPERIENCE

by  
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Throughout the country, competition among golf courses, especially public ones, is pretty stiff. The influx of courses opened during the late 1990s contributed to this. If a golfer is unhappy with the course he plays regularly, he can choose to play another nearby just like that. Golfers have the upper hand, and if superintendents don't help meet their reasonable requests or keep them top of mind, they might see fewer rounds, and in turn less revenue, at their course. Superintendents need to help keep golfers happy to prevent them from leaving their course.

Dan Walter, golf course superintendent of the Blue Ash (Ohio) Golf Course, says that throughout the past five years, times have changed with what superintendents can do to increase play or maintain it.

"It used to be when I ran into a fellow superintendent, it was, 'Hello, how is everything at the course,' and the reply used to be agronomic related," Walter says. "Now the answer is, 'Rounds are down,' or something to that effect. Almost every conversation I have starts off with the business side of the industry, not the agronomic side. What a difference five years make."

Blue Ash Golf Course, which opened in 1979 and is owned and operated by the city of Blue Ash, generates about 38,000 rounds a year.

"We used to average 44,000 rounds, and 1998 was the last time it was that high," Walter says. "There has been a decline of 800 to 1,500 rounds a year. Now we budget for 38,000."

Despite the decline of rounds, rates have


been a steady \$40 a round throughout the week over the years.

"We haven't raised fees in five years," Walter says. "The fees are right in line with the other high-end public courses. Other courses offer discounts, but we want to stay consistent, although we do have junior and senior specials."

Every course built in Blue Ash's market during the past 10 years has been an upscale public course, stiffening competition, according to Walter. That competition has influenced a change of attitudes and cultural practices throughout the years because course management wants to retain repeat golfers.

"We make sure golfers are treated first and that we're more customer friendly," he says.

Seventy percent of Blue Ash's business is repeat play. The city is relatively small and has a



To speed up play and increase rounds, Blue Ash removed some trees and flatten the excessive undulation of some greens.

Photo: Chris Cone

population of 12,000. But there are an additional 70,000 who work in the city because of the many executive offices and large corporations headquartered there. Walter says many business executives golf at Blue Ash because it's only two miles away from their corporate headquarters.

### Out of the way

To help please the repeat golfers, Walter and his crew avoid doing cultural practices (i.e. spraying greens, tees and fairways) during the day, which can disrupt play. Instead, they do them on Monday and Tuesday mornings.

"It sounds simple, but from April 15 to October 15, we're spraying pesticides on the course," he says. "Given that we spray greens every two weeks, and the fairways and tees every three weeks with a nutritional spray in between, the sprayer is on the course every week. The repeat business on Mondays and Tuesdays doesn't want to associate their play day with a spray day. That's the reason we spray early and don't allow golfers to be impacted."

Topdressing is another disruptive practice that needs to be weaved into the schedule and must get done during the busiest part of the season.

"In the past, we used to not hesitate to topdress among play, but now we make it a priority to avoid play," Walter says. "So if the Monday we had scheduled isn't sunny and warm to allow for drying, we must wait till the next Monday when we open at 9 a.m. instead of impacting golfers on the other weekdays when we open at 7 a.m."

The course, which used to open at 7:30 a.m. on Mondays, now opens at 9 a.m. so the maintenance crew can get a jump on their work, making them less likely to interfere with golfers.

Scheduling aerification is different from scheduling topdressing. It's scheduled early and late in the year to allow for golf outings to be fit in when requested.

"In the past, we would dictate when the first and last outing would be for the year; now, if golfers want an outing in October, we will hold off," Walter says. "Agronomically, the earlier the better – typically late August or early September, but with the golf market hurting, we must accommodate golfers as much as possible."

"We start aerifying at 4 p.m. on Sunday after the last tee time, and then we finish on Monday," he adds. "We aerify twice a year, which allows the crew to work without interruption. We will let golfers know when we aerify. We let golfers choose – half the people



Blue Ash superintendent Dan Walter avoids scheduling spraying during the times most golfers are playing to help increase customer satisfaction.

will play, and others won't and will wait a week. Golfers appreciate us letting them know up front. We used to aerify Monday and Tuesday, but it was disruptive for two days, and we lost about \$12,000 in revenue."

Blue Ash used to aerify 20 acres of fairways with one machine, and it took two weeks. "We typically did two or three a week, but now we hire a company that has three machines to do all the fairways, and it takes them one day to clean up," Walter says. "It costs us \$2,500 to bring in the company. The extra revenue brought in from the golfers is more than enough to cover the cost. We save on the machinery and pay an operator to use it. However, it's good to have your own machinery for greens because you need more control and there is less acreage."

There have been a few complaints about mowing at Blue Ash, according to Walter, so he scheduled more people to work in the morning to get most of mowing done by 11 a.m.

"We purchased another mower, so instead of one guy taking all day, we have two guys that are able to stay ahead of the golfers," he says. "It's more efficient, and the golfers appreciate it."

### A better experience

Extensive landscaping (i.e. annuals and perennials) is another important aspect of the course that Walter feels is important to help

retain golfers.

"I feel the golfers today (usually women) enjoy coming out and seeing the different flowers and landscaping, to compare to their homes," he says. "They will ask the horticulture staff questions and get tips on their home landscaping. I feel it gives them a pleasant experience and surrounds them with familiar sites that they're used to seeing at home."

Golf course maintenance equates to the pace of play, which is an issue for Blue Ash because of its narrow fairways, Walter says. The staff has been trying to space out play to make it more enjoyable.

"We took out 600 trees in four years to try and help golfers make it easier to play without taking away the integrity of the design," he says. "We limbed 200 trees. That made a huge difference because it impacted the golfer."

Additionally, four greens were rebuilt because they were too undulated and contributed to slow play, Walter says.

Walter also emphasizes that every dollar and every golfer counts at Blue Ash.

"We used to have the attitude of not caring about losing golfers, but we've lost golfers because of the economy, and now our attitude has changed." GCN

*For more information about maintenance practices at Blue Ash Golf Course, call Dan Walter at 513-686-1290.*