

Navigating political waters

No matter the structure of a club, diplomacy is the key for dealing with controversial decisions *By David McPherson*



The agronomic practices that seem to be the most beneficial to grasses and soils are the most contentious with members, says Donald Singlehurst, golf course superintendent at Royal Colwood Golf Club. Photo: Royal Colwood Golf Club

Good governance is the common denominator at the most successful clubs, says John Gravett, g.m. at the Granite Club. Photo: Granite Club



As keepers of the green and guardians of privileged playgrounds, golf course superintendents at private clubs have to navigate political waters daily. From potentially controversial turf maintenance practices such as aerification, tree removal and pesticide use to large course renovation projects, superintendents need a degree in diplomacy as much as a degree in agronomy.

Several superintendents at clubs throughout North America make it clear there are common ways keep this gamesmanship to a minimum: have an open mind and maintain good communication with membership, use consultants to validate your decisions and have a long-range, approved master plan.

"The impact politics plays at a golf club, especially a private club, can make or break a club in terms of maintenance and membership satisfaction," says Donald Singlehurst, golf course superintendent at Royal Colwood Golf Club in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. "As a superintendent at a semiprivate club, I'm aware there will always be some form of governance model made up of club members, and these members will have a direct impact on the direction the club will take.

"As Spock once said in 'Star Trek,' 'The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few,'" Singlehurst adds. "This also holds true in a private club. I've always believed we defend par and set up the golf course for all to enjoy. Ironically, the agronomic practices that seem to be the most beneficial to the grasses and soils are the most contentious with members. The demand for ideal conditions all the time puts added stress on those who have to make the difficult decisions to schedule the work, and on those who actually do the work."

THE RIGHT STRUCTURE

One key to ensuring politics play a minimal role in course maintenance is good governance. There need to be clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the superintendent, the general manager and the chairs of various member committees. Good governance is essential to ensure superintendents and members get along and are always working toward the same goal: making the golf course a better place to play. Just as in the corporate world, without good governance at a club, divisiveness, abuse of power and infighting arise.

While there's a different dynamic at every club when it comes to the relationship between the superintendent and the members, good governance is the common denominator at the most successful ones, says John Gravett, general manager at the high-end, private Granite Club in Stouffville, Ontario, Canada.

"My personal preference is the governance model in which the superintendent and the pro report to the general manager, who then reports to the board," Gravett says. "That's been the trend at successful clubs these days. This model protects the superintendent more from political influence because it's dealt with by the general manager at the board level.

"At clubs that don't have that structure, you might have the superintendent reporting to the green and property chair, the director of golf or the pro reporting to the club captain, and someone else reporting to the general manager," he adds. "That's when you get into the worst political games."

Whatever the structure, when it comes to working with committees, retired superintendent Gord Witteveen, who's a recipient of the GCSAA Distin-



Gravett

guished Service Award, advises superintendents can't win 'em all.

"Give in on things that don't matter much so you can have your way with the important stuff," Witteveen says. "With committee governance, you'll inevitably antagonize one or two members every year. That adds up and is the chief cause of superintendents being eased out before they're ready to retire."

At Des Moines Golf and Country Club in Iowa, Rick Tegtmeier, the director of grounds, says the committee structure at the 1,500-member, 36-hole private club is a key to its success. Instead of having a golf committee and a green committee, the club has a golf, green and grounds committee.

"This works well," Tegtmeier says. "Both groups want what's best for the golfer, and by



Tegtmeier

having the groups meet together, we work to meet that common goal. The director of golf and I help facilitate these meetings, along with our green chairman, who serves as the committee chair for one year and then moves up the ranks to president. This is a very good system because by the time he's our president, he has a good working knowledge of what we do in the golf course maintenance department.

"At our committee, I give all members the USGA Green Committee Guide," he adds. "I urge all members of the group to read it and try to abide by it. One of the things stressed in this book is how important it is to not have personal agendas. The committee is in place to do what's correct for the good of the entire membership."

Tegtmeier and his staff also attend board meetings to present brief reports each month and answer any questions that might arise about their department.

"It's important to have a leader who helps you and guides you, but also lets you do your own thing in your department," he says.

STRONG LEADERSHIP

One of the best ways to avoid political problems is to have strong leadership at the presidential level, says Paul Scenna, golf course superintendent at Beacon Hall Golf Club in Aurora, Ontario, Canada.

"A dictatorship in a private club works best because sometimes people are just dancing around the issues and are afraid to offend their friends," Scenna says.

While a dictatorship is seen by some as the ideal management model to avoid controversy when it comes to the superintendent's decision-making and recommendations, the larger the group one works with – in terms of the membership and the number of committees involved – directly relates to how much time

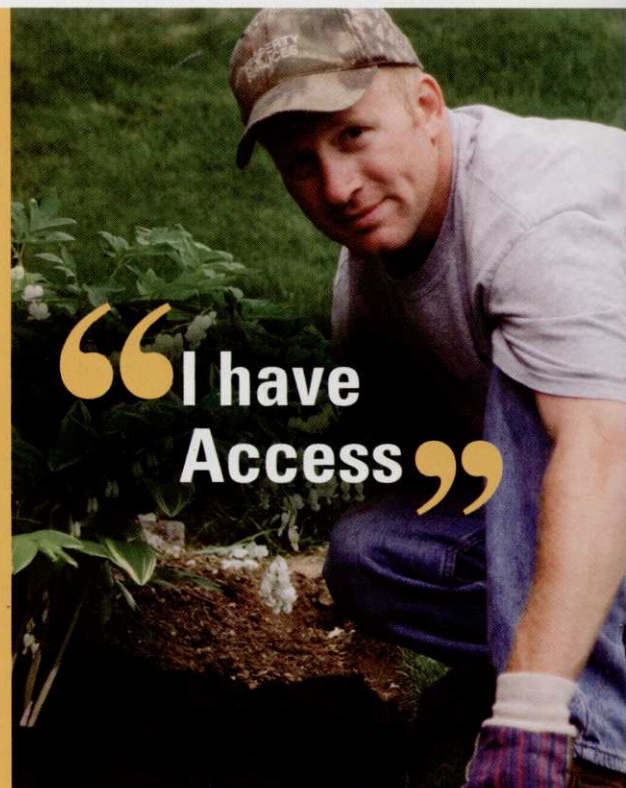
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Instead of having a golf committee and a green committee, the Des Moines Golf and Country Club has one committee for golf, green and grounds. Photo: Des Moines Golf and Country Club

the political process takes. David Kuypers, golf course superintendent at The Cutten Club in Guelph, Ontario, Canada, was lucky to spend a year at Winged Foot Golf Club in New York right before it was awarded the 2006 U.S. Open.

“They had a very small group of decision-makers – only four guys – whereas here at The Cutten Club, we have to go through a grounds and golf course committee for approval, then the finance committee, then the board of directors, then the membership as a whole,” Kuypers says. “It’s democracy in action.”

PLAN AHEAD

In addition to strong leadership, clubs need a master plan. This long-term vision sets the direction of the club and prioritizes maintenance and capital improvement issues, to prevent future disagreements.

Kuypers was hired by The Cutten Club in 2005, when ownership was about to make considerable renovations to the course. This also was the same time when club members took over ownership from the local university. One of the new management team’s first pieces of business was to draft a master plan.

“The strategic plan laid out everything from 2005 to 2010, and every year it’s updated,” Kuypers says. “That was the vision of the finance chair at the time. As a member-run facility, where each year three directors are removed and three new ones come in, you don’t want to be at the whim of who’s in charge that particular year. A five-year plan avoids that problem and gives continuity to the club’s vision.”

Gravett couldn’t agree with Kuypers more.

“You should sit down with the architect, green committee and board every two to three years and say, ‘Here’s the master plan for the golf course. It has everything on it,’” Gravett says. “So, if you have a plan to move a cart path or add a bunker, it’s on that plan. What that does is it sets the priorities without the influence of the green chair or board because the architect is involved and the committee is involved. Any deviation from that plan has to go back to the board and committee.”

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OUTSIDE OPINIONS

From a political standpoint, the master plan also protects superintendents by validating their maintenance decisions and providing a strategic focus. Another key is using consultants to validate superintendents' decisions.

"For example, the club at which I previously worked wanted to remove six trees that were more than 30 years old," Gravett says. "There was a fair amount of controversy, not only at the green committee level, but also with the membership, so we brought in a USGA consultant and someone who studies trees and sunlight angles and those types of things, and we got to the point where we didn't have to remove all the trees. Through selective pruning practices, we were able to remove certain branches so a certain amount of sun



Brewster



got into the green.

"It was a win-win because the superintendent wasn't seen as someone who just wanted to cut trees down," he adds. "Instead, we went out of our way to do our homework and brought

Political problems at private clubs can arise when superintendents believe they own the course. Photo: Granite Club

consultants in to help out with these recommendations."

KEEP AN OPEN MIND

Political problems at private clubs also arise when superintendents believe they own the course, says Jim Nicol, CGCS, at Hazeltine National Golf Club in Chaska, Minn., which has hosted several major championship events throughout the years.

"Superintendents who take ownership of golf courses by saying 'This is my course' are the ones who get in trouble, because it's not their course," says Nicol, who has been a superintendent since 1978.



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Bill Fach, golf course superintendent at Black Bear Ridge, in Belleville, Ontario, Canada, agrees with Nicol.

"I know we think it's ours after five to 10 years, but it's theirs," Fach says about club members. "They pay our wages."

In Fach's experience, avoiding conflicts and politics all comes down to having an open mind and looking for alternative solutions, which makes the superintendent and members happy. When it comes to agronomic and other turf issues, Fach recommends superintendents question themselves. For example, how can superintendents reconcile the need for aerification with members' desires?

"I could punch these holes in November when the course is shut down, even though I like to do it in July," Fach says.

Bob Brewster, golf course superintendent at Mississauga Golf & Country Club in Ontario, Canada, has been working at private clubs for more than 30 years. Brewster takes a similar approach. He has a designated time on Mondays when the course is closed for maintenance, allowing his team to topdress greens, and he doesn't use coring tines when aerating greens. Rather, he uses solid tines so there's no mess.

"We go in with 1/4-inch tines, aerate the greens, roll them and topdress them, and you wouldn't even know it'd been done three days later because you can't even see a hole," Brewster says.

"I've always tried to be golfer-friendly," he adds. "I've been using solid tines for 30 years. I'm a golfer, and I don't like my play interrupted. It's all about communication. You can never communicate enough. Golfers know more about course conditioning today than generations ago, so it's more difficult if you don't communicate properly."

Whether superintendents work in a democratic environment or under a dictatorship, diplomacy contributes to their success. **GCI**

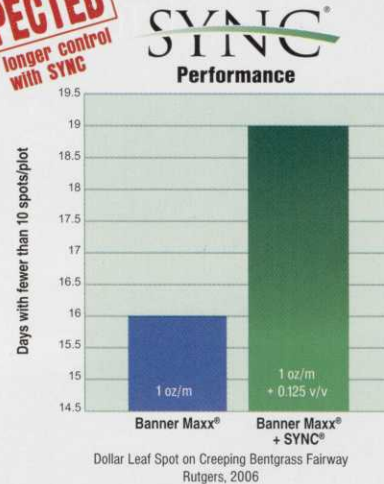
Bringing in a consultant to support a superintendent's decision can help limit controversy. Photo: Des Moines Golf and Country Club



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