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PLAYING FOR RESPECT

Golf isn't a sport that's easy to learn or perfect. But golf is our job, and many times we forget it's also a sport to be enjoyed.

Generally, golfers don't like to hear what we have to say when it comes to "the why" behind our maintenance practices. The words "aerification" and "topdressing" almost always are met with scowls and frowns. I can see it from their point of view. If I walked into a doctor's office and had a doctor explain the intricacies of brain surgery to me, I'd have a certain look on my face, too.

I have, however, noticed a difference in golfer attitude when another skilled golfer describes maintenance practices compared to just a "turf guy." Golfers tend to trust other golfers – especially good golfers. I've had the privilege of working with assistants who also are very good golfers. I have to admit, I'm not that bad – I have a 7.9 USGA handicap and try to play often – even if it's not as much as I would like.

I've witnessed golfers react to hearing maintenance explanations from assistants who are excellent players compared to them. It just seems more palatable coming from them. The golfers seem to lose the blank stare and better understand the topic because they're hearing it from someone they respect as a golfer. Superintendents who are good at golf tend to garner more respect from those low handicappers – usually the golfers who tend to complain the most. Our respect

should be based on education, experience and past accomplishments, but sometimes it's not. It's not right or fair, but more times than not, it's the truth.

This doesn't mean all superintendents must be good at golf. It's not a requirement for success; it's just something to consider.

There are benefits to being seen practicing, playing and enjoying golf. Golfers who see you playing a round or practicing on the driving range might say to themselves, "Well, if he plays, he must know the greens are slower than normal or the bunkers are hard. Maybe there's a reason for this." It helps golfers accept the conditions based on their mindset that you might actually know what you're talking about because you have a golf club in your hand. This isn't right, but I've seen it many times.

So, how do you change golfers' perceptions if you don't like the game, you're too busy or your skills aren't up to par? Not liking the game usually isn't an excuse – almost all of us enjoy the game, that's what attracted us to this profession.

Some say, "I don't play golf because I see too many things that need to be done and can't concentrate." That's baloney. If this truly worries you, use this time as an opportunity to see the course. Take a small notepad and clip it to the golf cart steering wheel or put it in your pocket. How many of us walk our courses regularly? Take notes as you play. If you hit the ball like me, you'll see parts of the course you'd never see from your cart. It gives

you a chance to evaluate the course the from a golfer's view. I always called a round the "on-course evaluation of playing conditions." I don't get to do that as much I would like, but it's worthwhile.

To address the not-so-good golfer excuse, you'll have to practice. If you're worried about being seen at your home course, hit a couple buckets of balls at a range. You're going to have to work to get better.

Next, talk to your counterparts in the golf shop. I've been lucky to have great relationships with the assistant golf professionals I've worked with, and there's a reason they're in such a position – they're good teachers. Ask them for a few pointers. Have them follow you out to the range for a five-minute evaluation. A former golf pro used to yell at me to quit lifting my head as he drove by the driving range tee. Putt a couple times on the pro shop carpet and ask them what they think.

A great side effect of these interactions is strengthening the relationship between the maintenance and pro shop staffs, which benefits the entire organization.

Networking is another benefit of playing golf. Play in your chapter and state events whenever you can. You don't have to sign up in the championship flight. Just get out there and play. These events almost always are organized for those who want to compete and those who just want to play. I've even started signing up for the scramble portion so I could meet others or relax and have a good time with people I knew.

As an assistant, many of my friends were other assistants and superintendents. What a better way to build friendships and meet more people than playing each other's courses. We would rotate between courses every month and play. It's fun, relaxing and you also might learn something you can take back to your course.

You don't have to be a good golfer to be a good superintendent, but it won't hurt to try. This is one of those situations that will only benefit you in the long run. Besides, we should all be able to enjoy the place we give so much of our time, sweat and blood. We should enjoy the fruits of our labor, so get out there and play golf. **GCI**

