

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

BY JIM CONNOLLY

Implementing section maintenance can increase operational efficiency, improve playing conditions and reduce costs

The current economic downturn is pressuring golf course superintendents to scrutinize all maintenance operations to improve efficiency. Because labor represents the largest part of a maintenance budget, it's often targeted for reductions.

"Staff reductions range from 10 to 30 percent, with even more cuts possible later this year," says Larry Gilhuly, director of the Northwest region for the USGA Green Section. "Superintendents may need to look at a complete change in management philosophy, and that's not easily done."

Gilhuly has visited hundreds of golf courses throughout the Pacific Northwest and Hawaii, providing advice and guidance through the USGA Green Section's Turf Advisory Service. Hawaii seems especially hard hit by the reduction in play at resort courses that depend on tourists from the mainland and Japan. Facilities on the islands are using an alternative type of maintenance called section maintenance successfully, Gilhuly reports. He believes section maintenance is an excellent option to improve efficiency, create better playing conditions and, in some cases, reduce maintenance costs. Converting from a conventional maintenance operation to section maintenance is a practice Gilhuly has been promoting for years since he first wrote about it in the USGA Green Section Record in 1991.

Maintenance methods among superintendents vary widely, and it's almost impossible to say there's a universal system everyone should use. Superintendents who use all or part of the section maintenance concept are often surprised more superintendents don't implement the practice.

The core idea of section maintenance focuses on individual responsibility, accountability, efficiency and a more astute attention to detail. A significant difference between conventional maintenance and section maintenance is how tasks are assigned and carried out. Conventional main-

tenance assigns a task to an individual that must be completed throughout an entire golf course. Section maintenance assigns an employee multiple tasks to be completed in a limited area or section. Many superintendents use varying combinations of both methods, but there are fewer that use section maintenance as their primary form of maintenance.

BORN OUT OF FRUSTRATION

Located just outside the city limits of Asheville, N.C., the Biltmore Forest Country Club is rated one of the top courses in the state. One thing that makes Biltmore Forest unique is the money it doesn't spend maintaining the course. Even though the club has the means to spend more, Bill Samuels, CGCS, holds the purse strings. He believes section maintenance is the most effective, cost-efficient method to maintain a golf course to achieve the high-quality results worthy of a high-end private club.

Samuels doesn't remember how, or exactly why, he started using section maintenance. But he does know it was born out of frustration with the lack of accountability in maintenance and evolved throughout time.

"I started experimenting with different ways to improve maintenance efficiency in 1993 and found my staff morale improved and maintenance costs could be decreased by about 30 percent using section maintenance," he says. "I'm surprised more superintendents aren't using this method."

While experimenting with ways to improve efficiency, Samuels found it took too many people to complete a job.

"I would send three people out to do a job only to find it wasn't done properly," he says. "I couldn't tell who was performing at a low level."

Biltmore Forest's staff consists of 12 full-time and two part-time workers. The full-time staff is divided into five categories:

- Section team – seven people

- Mechanic – one person
- Assistant superintendent – one person
- Rough and fairway mowing – two people
- All-purpose rover – one person.

Each section team member is given three holes (includes practice areas) and a personal equipment inventory that consists of:

- A work vehicle for hauling and transportation;
- A Jacobsen 22-inch walk-behind greens-mower;
- A Jacobsen 22-inch walk-behind tee, collar and approach mower;
- An Allen hover mower with a Honda four-stroke engine;
- A Stihl leaf blower;
- A Shindaiwa power string trimmer;
- A Honda push rotary mower for trimming around greens and tees; and
- Various hand tools for raking bunkers and other light maintenance.

Rough and fairway mowing is a daily operation using a Toro 4500, 5400 and 5510. On days when one of the section team members is off or sick, the rover and other team members pick up the slack. The staff meets early every morning to review the day's work schedule and prepare for the occasional special event. Table 1 at the right shows the tasks and assignments for a typical week. The staff members are familiar with the routine that needs to be completed before the golfers arrive and have become proficient at staying out of their way. It takes time, experience and training, but Samuels says the members are pleased with the form of maintenance and interruptions haven't been an issue.

BETTER DETAIL WORK

Another superintendent that espouses the benefits of section maintenance is Steve Kealy, CGCS, at the private, 18-hole Glendale Country Club in Bellevue, Wash. Kealy has been using his tailored maintenance program for about 10 years. For him, the advantages of section maintenance include pride in ownership, attention to detail, healthy competition and improved employee accountability.

"I found details – such as cleaning bathrooms, edging ball washer stands, trimming and cleaning out the bottom of garbage cans – were missed regularly, and conditions weren't meeting my expectations," he says.

Kealy uses a slightly different work schedule

with his full-time staff of 14 and seasonal staff of 10, but the philosophy is similar to Biltmore Forest's (see Table 2 on page 64). Kealy gives each of the five section members a comparable area in terms of time and workload. Workers balance an equal numbers of greens, bunkers, trimming areas and tasks.

RESULTS AND COST SAVINGS

Developing a section maintenance program requires acquiring tools and equipment. Each crew member needs a stable of equipment, and it may take several years to build the inventory. But once built, the benefits of section maintenance can be seen in many areas of the golf course operation.

At Biltmore Forest, the average age of the

Jacobsen greensmowers is 20 years and is a testament to the individual care each crew member gives to the machines. Biltmore and Glendale have low staff turnover and a high level of experience among crew members. Glendale has a combined 63 years of experience among its five crew members.

Maintenance budgets can be reduced using section maintenance, too.

"I would be spending at least 30 percent more if I used the old method I used to use," says Samuels, who describes his operation as lean and mean with the benefits of an immaculately maintained golf course worthy of praise.

Kealy, rather, focuses more on the results he can achieve rather than a cost savings between the two forms of maintenance.

TABLE 1

Biltmore Forest Country Club golf course section maintenance schedule

At Biltmore Forest, Bill Samuels, CGCS, defines section one as holes 14, 16 and 17. Section two is defined as hole 13, the practice green, nursery green, driving range tees and mowing the front circle on Mondays. Section three includes holes three and 10 and the chipping green. Section four is defined as holes one, nine and 12. Section five includes holes four, five and six. Section six is defined as holes seven, eight and 11, as well as mowing along Stuyvesant Road below the tennis courts and mowing by the pool on Mondays. Section seven is defined as holes two, 15 and 18.

Task	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Wknds.
Mow greens		X	X	X	X	X
Cut clean up		X		X		SAT
Mow tees	X			X		
Mow collars	X			X		
Mow green / tee surrounds	X				X	
Trim bunker faces			X			
Empty trash cans	X	X	X	X	X	X
Hand rake greenside bunkers	X	X	X	X	X	X
Check fairway bunkers	X		X		X	SUN
Hand rake fairway bunkers		X		X		SAT
Check number and condition of bunker rakes	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sand tee divots as needed – green sand	X	X	X	X	X	
Sand fairway divots as needed – white sand	X	X	X	X	X	
Check placement / condition of tee markers	X	X	X	X	X	X
Trim yardage markers-sprinkler heads – valve boxes as needed	X	X	X	X	X	
Edge cart paths and sweep as needed	X	X	X	X	X	
Change ball washer water	#1	#2	#3	#4 and #5	#6 and #7	
Check tee towels – change if dirty	X	X	X	X	X	X

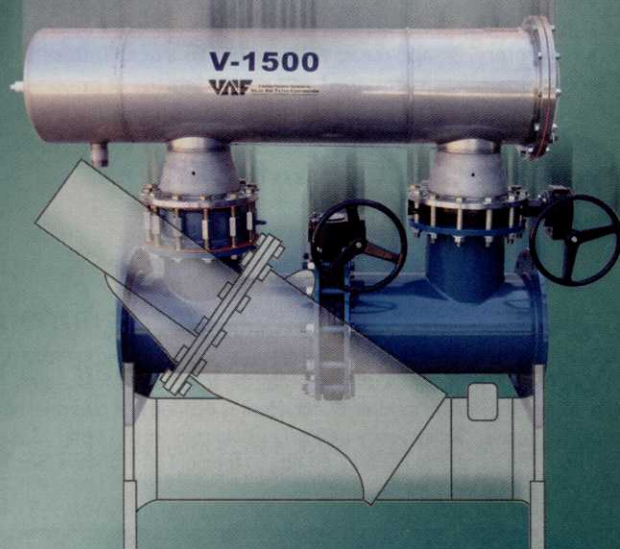


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COURSE MANAGEMENT

TRUST IN OTHERS' PERFORMANCE

The increasing demands on a superintendent to maintain excellent conditions while reducing maintenance costs is a stiff challenge. Maintenance operations require constant evaluation of staff performance and accountability. Delegating responsibility and demanding accountability is just one of the advantages of section maintenance. The flaw of many superintendents and the primary reason for job burnout is adopting the axiom, "If you want something done right, do it yourself."

Developing a performance level you can trust, resulting in high morale and accountability, is one way to reduce a superintendent's stress level and achieve employee satisfaction. Section maintenance deserves a closer look for maintenance programs and may be an excellent way to achieve goals set for the year. **GCI**

Jim Connolly, a former USGA agronomist, is president of JCC, a Spokane, Wash.-based consulting firm.

TABLE 2

Glendale Country Club golf course section maintenance schedule

At Glendale, Steve Kealy, CGCS, defines section one as holes one, five, 15 and 17. Section two is defined as holes two, 12, 13 and 14. Section three includes the putting green on hole 6 and holes 10 and 18. Section four is defined as holes four, seven, eight and 16. Section five includes holes three, nine, 11 and the practice area.

Task	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Wknds.
Mow greens	X	X	X	X	X	
Change holes	X	X	X	X	X	
Flymow around bunkers				X		
Trim bunker faces				X		
Empty trash cans	X	X	X	X	X	
Hand-rake greenside bunkers	X	X	X	X	X	
Hand-rake fairway bunkers	X	X	X	X	X	
Weed around trees	As needed all week days					
Paint hazards					X	
Sand tee divots	X	X	X	X	X	
Sand fairway divots	X	X	X	X	X	
Set up tee markers	X	X	X	X	X	
Trim tee and fairway yardage markers					X	
Edge cart paths	X	X	X	X	X	
Check tee towels - change if dirty	X	X	X	X	X	X