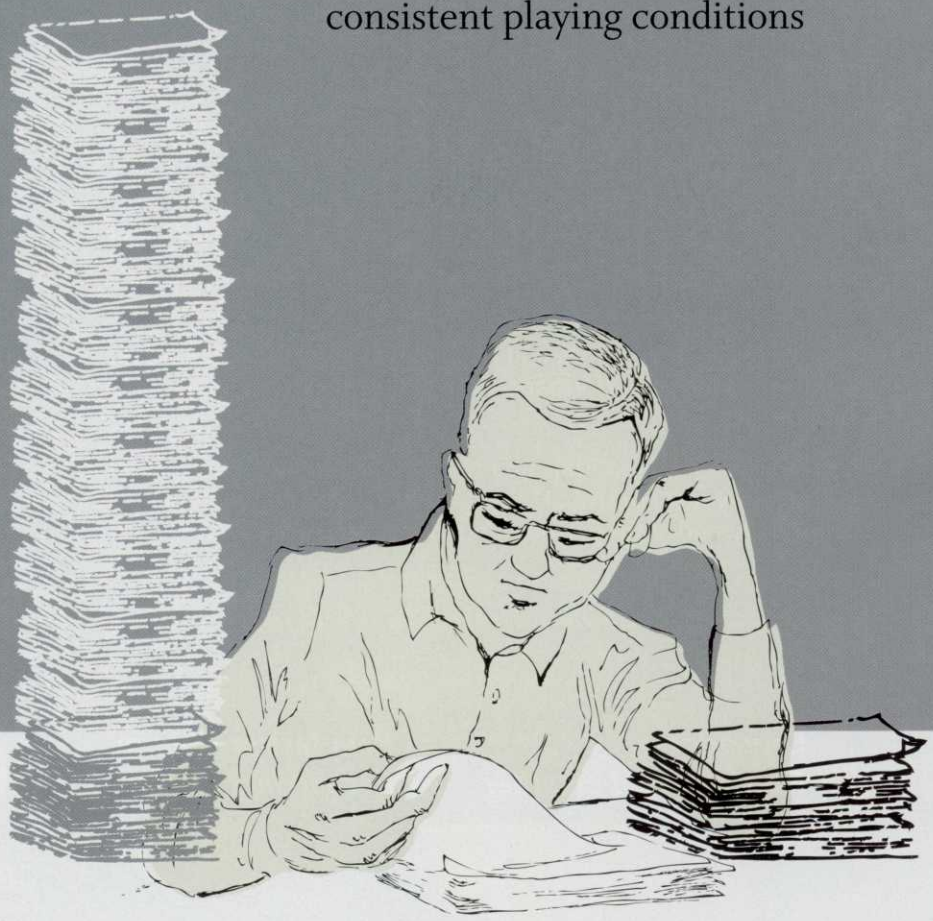
By Tom Leland

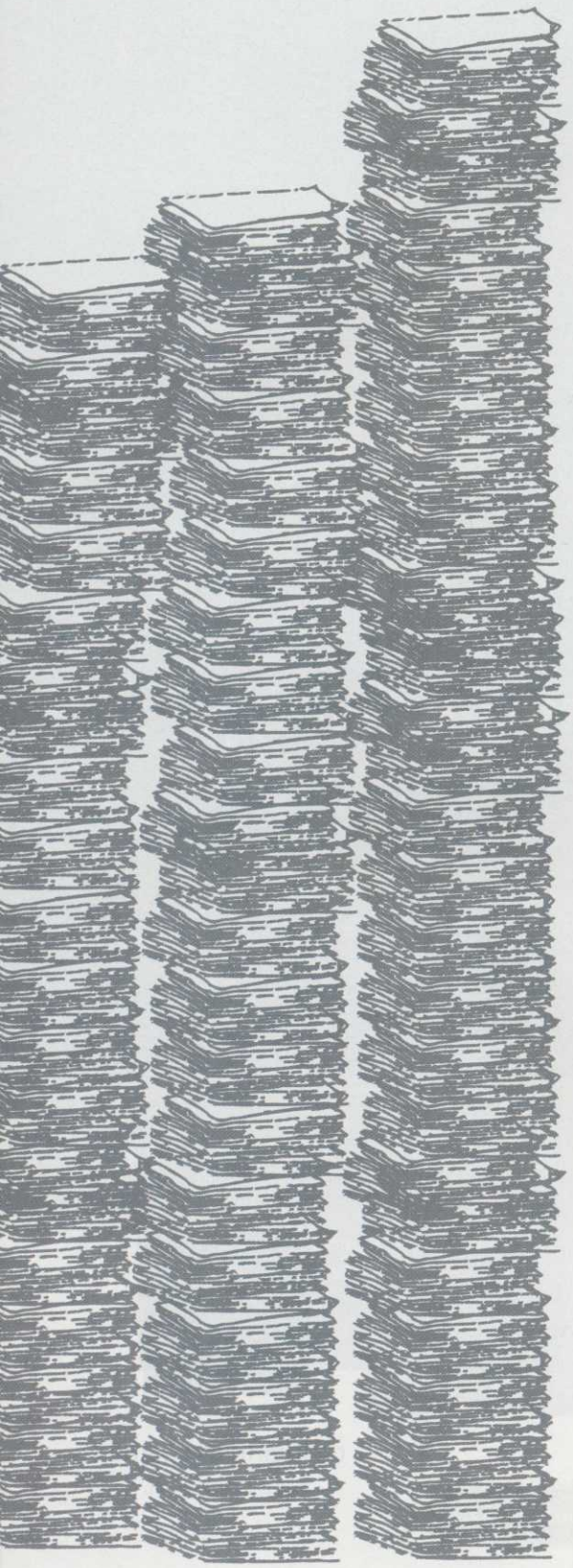
Look, listen and learn

Proper training pays off with improved and consistent playing conditions

The demands placed on a golf course maintenance staff aren't unlike those required of workers at an amusement park. Versatility is crucial in both settings. Ideally, every amusement park worker should know how to operate the Ferris wheel, how to help nauseated people off the roller coaster and the best way to unwedge stuck bumper cars. On a golf course, each employee must know how to mow the green on 14, trim the fairway on 7 and run the string trimmer around the tricky tee perimeter on 11.

But that's where the parallel ends. Working on a golf course, one deals with the complexities of turfgrass and answers to an audience with high standards and expectations. Hiring people who can multitask with machinery and tools, yet be patient with an agenda that's at the mercy of unpredictable golfer behavior and weather, are just some of the staffing and training challenges golf course superintendents face.





VALUABLE KNOWLEDGE

At many courses, management shows new hires a number of instructional videos, sometimes including one that lays out the most basic understanding of golf – there are 18 holes, here's how golf is played, this is what a putting green is, etc. Then there are safety videos, which are more about what not to do on a course.

"Basically, these videos say 'Don't do anything stupid,'" says Randy Allen, senior director for golfing grounds at Grand Dunes Golf Club in Myrtle Beach, S.C. "Like, don't stand in front of a front-end loader, don't climb trees, don't even stand on something to reach something in a tree, etc."

There also are videos that cover broader safety issues, such as lightning storms and heat stroke.

Individual pieces of equipment – utility vehicles, chain saws, rotary rough units, tractors, various mowers, etc. – often come with training videos. At The Club at Mediterra in Naples, Fla., new employees might watch as many as 30 videos – many supplied by the manufacturers.

Besides videos, some courses have hard-copy training materials covering all maintenance practices, safety issues, and core standards for set-up and guest service, as established by the superintendent or, at times, by a parent company that owns the course.

After the preliminary video and/or written training, employees usually are taken out on the course, probably by an assistant superintendent. A common practice is to have new employees watch the experienced workers in action. After initial introductions, the assistant superintendent will leave, and the new hires will shadow the old hands on their rounds the rest of the day.

Proper training at this early juncture will usually pay off with improved and consistent playing conditions, says Kevin Kienast, golf and ground superintendent at Four Seasons Resort Aviara near San Diego.

"After the initial training, follow-up training in the field should be practiced regularly," Kienast says.

OLD HABITS DIE HARD

When hiring experienced golf course workers, inevitably there are adjustments to make.

"Sometimes you have to really hound people until they break bad habits they got into at their old job," says Scott Whorall, director of golf course operations at The Club at Mediterra. "Within a few weeks, you know if they're going to catch on. If not, we'll try to find another role for them at the course."

On the other hand, a person occasionally will bring a technique or way of thinking that improves the process at a new course.

STAFF TRAINING DO'S AND DONT'S

Do

- **Create a well-defined organizational structure**
- **Convey the mission, vision and goals for your course**
- **Foster a climate conducive to open communication**
- **Develop detailed job descriptions for applicants**
- **Empower workers**
- **Make safety a top priority and provide bilingual materials if necessary**
- **Teach fundamentals of the first one or two tasks**

Don't

- **Micromanage your staff**
- **Forget what it's like to be new**
- **Be adverse to learning from new hires**

"If someone has a smarter method, we'll implement it," Whorall says. "We're always looking for a better way."

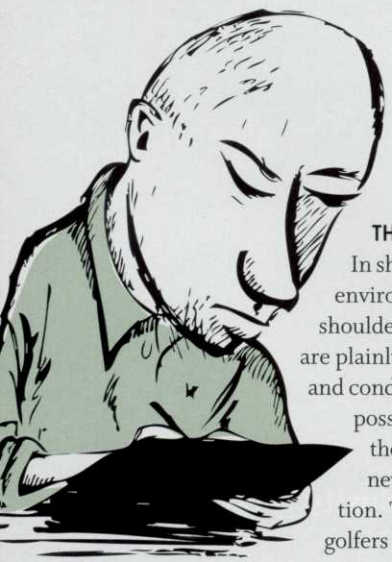
Many superintendents believe it's important to observe people in their first weeks on the job.

"Some guys are just naturally talented at certain things," Whorall says. "We take notice of what people's strengths are. If someone is particularly detail oriented, we'll give them jobs that require someone that's conscientious."

At the end of the day, it's the superintendent's job to see what's needed on the course. Some things are done daily, such as mowing greens, collars, approaches and fairways. Routines vary according to the season. During summer and spring, fairways might be mowed three times a week, down to twice a week during the fall. Routines also depend on how things are growing. For example, if there's been a warm spring, or during a tournament, fairways might be mowed four times in one week.

Throughout time, a superintendent learns what to look for and develops an intrinsic knowledge of the course's present needs and a sixth sense about future needs. But imparting that knowledge to new staff, some of which have never even mowed a lawn at home or driven a car, can be challenging.

While a supervisor knows the general basics of what's happening with, say, the practice of syringing greens, he can't oversee every spot where grass might be wilting. Workers have to learn where the hot spots, hydrophobic places, are. For example, it might be 120 degrees on the canopy of a turn, and the grass will burn out if it isn't misted. One green might be getting plenty of air movement, which evaporates the water on the grass. Another green might be surrounded by trees, which block air. When such conditions cause loss of water, grass gets hotter, causing disease or other problems. It takes a lot of time for a worker to learn how to discern the particular needs of each microenvironment, which has to be inspected three or four times daily in hot weather.



THE IMPORTANCE OF MORALE

In sharp contrast to the tranquil serenity of a golf course environment, there's constant pressure on the collective shoulders of a maintenance staff. Usually their mistakes are plainly visible and often not fixed easily. Staff must mow and conduct course set-up away from the golfers as much as possible, which slows down their work routine. Unless they've been on the job for years, they're often learning new groundskeeping techniques and equipment operation. The inconsistent and unpredictable progression of golfers over the course only exacerbates the struggle to tend to every hole, every day. So it's no surprise golf course superintendents seek ways to maintain their staff's morale.

Superintendents have to give workers basic knowledge of how to complete a given task and make them understand how important it is, but then let them go to it.

"If a superintendent is constantly trying to step in and make every decision, the employee will feel he's just a piece of meat," Allen says. "But if you empower him to do the job, he'll take more pride in doing it, and in turn, he'll do a better job.

"You try to impart wisdom without micromanaging," he adds. "I try to allow people to make their own decisions. You can't tell a guy how to weed eat the grass, you have to give him a weed eater and let him figure it out. This shows them they're important, that you have confidence in them. If you give them a chance, more than likely they'll figure out a better way to do it. A front-line person who's dealing with it every day will figure out a faster way or a neater way or a more economical way of doing it than you will."

At some courses, green committees and club presidents think they're experts in golf course management, but they don't know as much as they think. When they try to tell a maintenance worker how to do his job, it usually ends up with some kind of disaster.

"One way to get the best work out of your staff is to ensure they're aware of the big picture," says Mel Waldron, golf course superintendent at Horton Smith Golf Course in Springfield, Mo. "Let everyone know what the goals and expectations are – for a given day as well as throughout the coming weeks or months – and their work will be better and more consistent."

To help boost morale, The Club at Mediterra holds a cookout or pizza party every month. It also cross-trains workers so they don't become bored doing the same thing every day. Additionally, about every six weeks, it holds employee focus groups in which employees can candidly voice ideas or gripes with no repercussions.

PREVENTING A LANGUAGE HANDICAP

In markets where staff is likely to consist of Hispanic workers, Spanish language versions of all training videos and materials are available. It helps to have at least one supervisor, or even one worker or mechanic, fluent in Spanish and English. There are always instances in which someone has to be called in from a distant fairway to translate a conversation. The Club at Mediterra has a literacy council consisting of golf club members who volunteer to teach course workers English after working hours. These volunteers are acknowledged at the annual golf course maintenance open house. They might even ask one of the Hispanic employees to show off his new language skills by reading something in English.

But even for English-speaking staff members, there's a learning curve when it comes to communication.

"Assistant superintendents are usually kids just a few years out of school, and they have more to learn about communication with their peers than they do about soil nutrients," Allen says. "They get hung up on little stuff and tend to make big things out of small things. We try to get them to understand that a mower that doesn't start isn't a crisis, but a green under 3 inches of water ... that's a crisis." **GCI**