



YOUR MAP TO GROUND ZERO

A lot of people talk at “30,000 feet,” as they say. Let's bring it down to ground level, where the action is. Every year, we clean and tune up our irrigation equipment – knowing that on an old golf course, there's a fifty-fifty chance things could go our way. Whether we like it or not, there's a decent chance for some kind of an irrigation system failure, and often the bigger challenge is finding – not fixing – the problem.

Where will the action be this year? A compression fitting on the 11th tee box installed about eight years ago when a trencher nicked the piping? An electrical splice hastily twisted last summer and buried outside the valve box? Who's going to have to find it and how fast?

I've always felt bad for irrigation crews, regularly dispatched on mapless treasure hunts. No clues, no markers, no direction – just find it and fix it. I guess it's just part of the training. After all, you can throw just about anything at a seasoned irrigation foreman. Eventually, he (or she) can find a 30-year-old old irrigation drain somewhere on the east end of a 100-acre site, or the original 6-inch asbestos main from an old greens nursery buried 3-feet deep. But it takes a lot of time, patience, inspection, reflection and perhaps most of all – shoveling.

GET YOUR AS-BUILTS IN GEAR

Why would anybody not have a “map” to his or her site? I'd expect every golf course superintendent to have an accurate blueprint that quickly locates irrigation system features and even details when they were installed, modified, upgraded and removed, just out of good, old-fashioned CYA and professional paranoia.

Irrigation as-builts are worth their weight in gold, and the more current and accurate, the better. You can usually recognize a golf course that doesn't work off an as-built. You see long trenching scars in the fairways or roughs from exploratory surgeries. Patches of turf around some of the valve boxes look lumpy and out of place.

If you're managing a large site, Global Positioning System (GPS) might be the way to go. GPS refers to a network of satellites that can provide accurate positions anywhere in the world, 24 hours a day. It's become a pretty hot product in the golf industry because you can catalog so much detail about the entire course – including turf and tree species, bunkers, water hazards, landscaped areas and parking lots.

In addition to locating details of irrigation piping and electrical runs, individual system components (to the year, make and model) and repairs, you can document the exact square footage, linear footage and acreage of your site and all of its features. The square-footage information can be used to more accurately calculate pesticide and nutrient requirements.

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GPS as-builts record with astounding precision the location of every single irrigation head, valve, pipe and fitting, electrical and control line, drain and air-relief valve. Need I go on?

We're all stuck with what we inherit, but too many golf course sites remain without any drawings or documentation whatsoever. One of the biggest challenges when arriving at a new site is not having enough documentation of the existing system, so out come the measuring wheels. But these data sets can't tell you what parts of an antiquated irrigation system have been altered over the decades.

If you can't go GPS, at least get started this season with some kind of baseline project map and inventory record. Stop working in the muck wearing a blindfold, feeling around for system repairs and upgrades. Hand-trenching across turf to locate irrigation lines or equipment is about as inspiring as breaking granite into sand.

I always marvel at a crew of three or four guys up to their waists in a hole guarded by a couple of trucksters. “What are you guys lookin' for?” I ask.

“An old quick coupler that's weeping – we haven't seen it in years,” they say.

“How long you been here?” I prod.

“Dove into it first thing this morning,” they admit.

If you're going to send them on a treasure hunt, at least give them some clues. **GCI**