



Blackstone Golf Club is a high-end daily-fee course my firm designed in the northern suburbs of Chicago.

Short-changed scenario

How does a superintendent cope when a course is built on the assumption that 40-50 percent of the water would come via effluent, from adjacent home lots, but only a fraction have been built?

by Bob Lohmann

So here's a question: What does a superintendent do when a golf course irrigation system was designed and built on the assumption that 40-50 percent of the water would come via effluent, from adjacent home lots, but only a fraction of those homes have been built?

We've recently been in touch with the ownership and management teams at Blackstone Golf Club, where we've all put our heads together to find solutions to this problem. Blackstone is a high-end, daily-fee course my firm designed in Chicago's northern suburbs. The golf portion of the venture has done extremely well, even in these tough times. But 95 lots were planned and only 13 have been built. So we've been strategizing this spring, in consultation with Blackstone, to determine alternative water resources and alternative design/grassing strategies to reduce the facility's overall thirst.

Blackstone opened for play in 2005, but the reality is course architects maintain a life-long





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relationship with the courses they design and help build. While course owners and superintendents can and do change, the course designer is and always will be the course designer until such time that a layout is renovated. Even then, unless the routing is completely blown up and replaced with an entirely new design, the original architect remains attached in a way that is both unique and resourceful.

Superintendents inherit golf courses from the folks they've replaced, and they serve existing owners as stewards of the property. But in another important sense, superintendents inherit the course from the architect. Accordingly, when something isn't working, or something doesn't make sense, that architect should be put to work. Find him. Pick his brain. Get him out to your property so he might explain what the hell he was thinking when he put that bunker there, or preserved that line of trees, or contoured that green in such a way to prevent cupping on 25 percent of the putting surface.

We have always made a point of staying close to past clients, and we've found these relationships to be far more constructive than adversarial. We've developed a checklist of things to discuss with past clients, so we might better realize original design goals along with new goals based on modern influences. These ongoing relationships invariably result in improved efficiencies, playability and maintainability. We've also found that current superintendents, with our input, are better able to allocate money from less- or non-essential areas to essential ones. That's been the case at Blackstone, and here's that checklist:

Analyze the impact of current equipment and maintenance technologies on the original design. What still works, what doesn't? Rare is the design that truly anticipates agronomic innovation, for example.

Review those parts of the original design plan that were not built – due to budget or previous owner bias, etc. You wouldn't believe what gets sacrificed just to save a tree...

Review design elements, i.e. green slopes relative to current green speeds, available pin

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placements; variety in teeing distances, on a hole by hole basis more so than overall; width of landing areas, i.e. where are people really landing the ball, what's really in play?

Review pace of play, i.e. where are the pinch points? What's slowing golfers down?

Review maintenance issues that have presented over time, i.e. excessive sand maintenance, drainage problems, material failures (greens mix, bunker sand), limited irrigation coverage, poor cart circulation, etc.

Review efficiency of maintenance practices, i.e. effective use of cultural practices (top-dressing, aerating, etc.), hand-raking versus machine-raking, bunker face management (hand

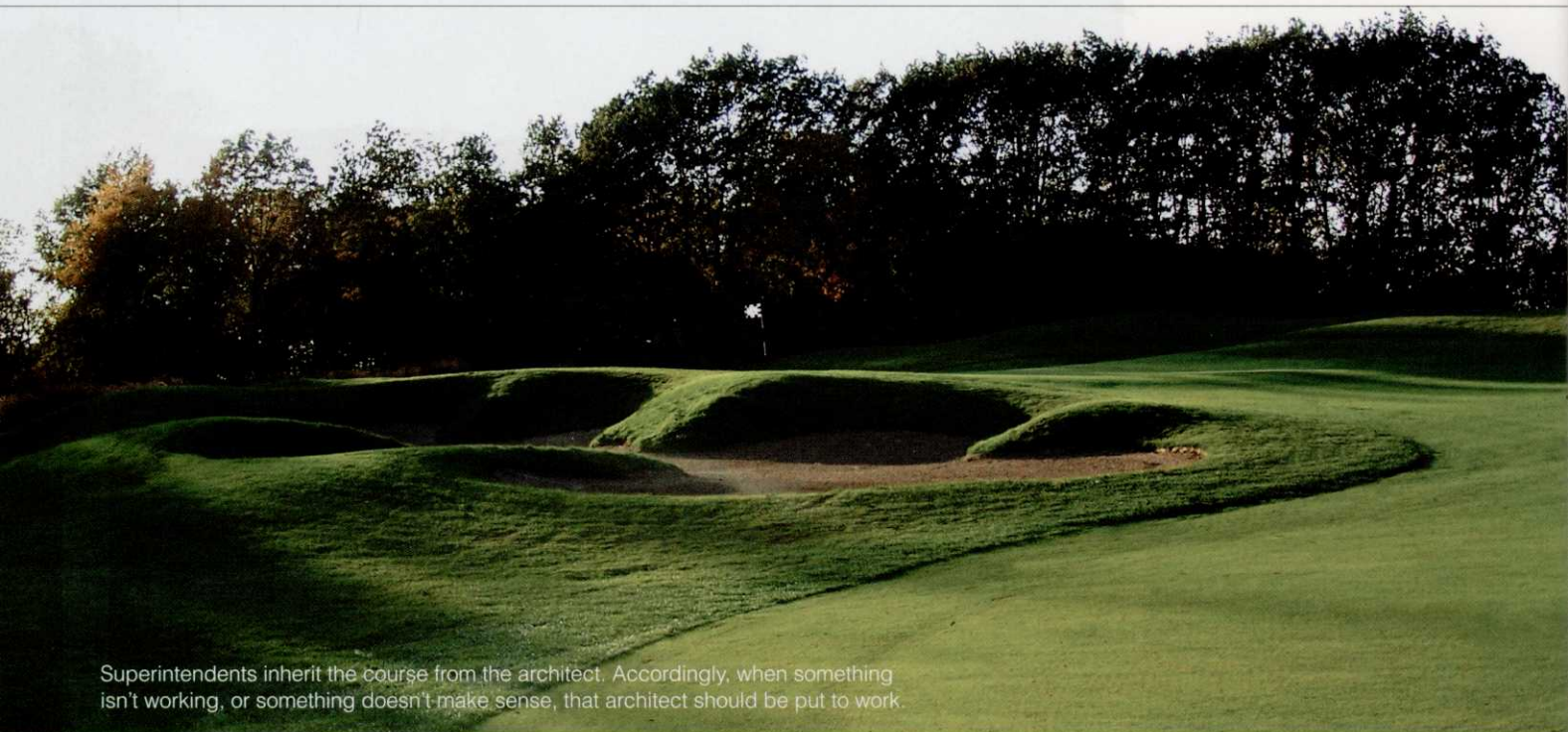
vs. machine), tree management, *Poa annua* management, water management, etc.

Assess environmental and economic impacts, i.e. unused land for housing, stormwater management, water quality and water sources.

Assess age and durability of specific features, mainly greens, tees and bunkers, with an eye toward eventual replacement, because they do wear out.

Be proactive regarding future regulations and restrictions, i.e. energy use, water use, etc.

This is stuff that supers and in-touch owners assess every day, but rarely with the original architect. We're currently working through this process with Blackstone and, as per usual, it's



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proving incredibly instructive. Finding new sources of water is a big ask, admittedly. But we're aiming to identify several acres that can be reasonably converted to non-irrigated areas. This "turf-reduction" we're recommending involves the replacement of manicured turf with fescue plantings, and/or the re-grassing of areas with more drought-tolerant varieties.

We know the grassing plan at Blackstone because it's our grassing plan. We know, better than anyone could, which areas can go non-irrigated, what aspects of the grassing plan were entirely aesthetic, and therefore can be sacrificed or repurposed. Those 82 units of housing aren't going to be built anytime soon, meaning no new water sources, but we reckon the measures we've proposed will reduce the client's water needs by 5 to 10 percent.

Understand that while architects like to stay in touch with past clients, it's the clients who request and drive the process. We keep the door open, but the clients have to walk through it.

"There's been good communication from the start but I do

think I approached you guys," Dan Weck, the owner at Blackstone, told me. "There was that big hump in the putting green. We didn't think it was representative of the greens on the course and it was tough to maintain. I talked to you about that last fall, Bob, but that was a project we did in-house.

"Prior to that we had expanded a tee box on one of the par-3s, but it was the bunkers that really got us thinking. There are certain ones out there, just a couple, that just don't come into play too much, so the cost of maintaining them was tough to swallow."

We went from there. Some bunkers at Blackstone are indeed slated for removal, but not until we ensured those removals would have minimal impact on aesthetics and strategy, probably none at all. We've also proposed to the owners some additional design tweaks:

Expansion of the 5th green, which is the most complained-about putting surface on the course, apparently. (I don't know why... Narrow and angled around a deep hollow – with a lovely Biarritz-like swale at the

midpoint. It's a beauty.) We've proposed filling in the hollow to create a lower tier, allowing the green to be hit in regulation more often, while still providing a stern, fun putting challenge.

Removal of a fairway bunker on the left side of No. 10 and expansion of the fairway, allowing better players to draw the ball around or carry a pond, thereby setting up the best angle into this par-5 green.

Opening up the green-entry on 14 by shrinking or moving a greenside bunker, providing a better opportunity to run it onto the green at this long par-4.

"That change on No. 5," Dan explained, "will really improve the golfer experience on the hole. I think I initially brought up the idea [of expanding the green into the hollow] but an actual design solution? That needs an architect. I don't know the height of that tier, what it should be, how it should transition... I'll leave all those specifics to you guys.

"My goal is to make the course more enjoyable for the golfers. That's the biggest part of it, and that's why the relationship with

the original designer needs to continue beyond opening. The whole operation here is driven by, 'What can make the experience better at a certain price point?' Because we want to improve, we want to be talking to the architect continually, to enhance the experience, but also to improve our maintenance situation from a conditions standpoint and a cost standpoint."

It's not clear when exactly all these design improvements will be implemented at Blackstone, but the new grassing plan and bunker reductions are definitely a priority. We're hoping to mitigate a big problem for the club, and save it money.

As the original architect, it's something that only our firm could have achieved; we visited the course but we could have done it without a visit – such is our knowledge of the property. That sort of familiarity is invaluable, and the original architect is the only one who has it. **GCI**

Bob Lohmann is founder, president, and principal architect of Lohmann Golf Designs and a frequent GCI contributor.