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LESS IS DEFINITELY NOT MORE

Earlier this year, I did the circuit of annual conferences and shows, availing myself of opportunities to hear golf's leaders espouse on the state of our industry. One panelist made a statement that caused me to stop, think, and then get really angry.

The speaker was the editor of a major golf magazine. Asked about the future of maintenance, he said we – by which I assume he means golfers as well as superintendents – have to be willing to accept less than perfectly maintained golf courses.

Consider what that means. He's not suggesting we find smarter ways to marshal resources or protect the environment. What he's telling me, and you, is that we should not do our jobs.

How dare he! Such pronouncements are exactly what's wrong with "environmental sustainability."

Most superintendents I've worked with over the past 30 years are wired to give more, not less, to their courses. So asking the superintendent to do his/her job at less than 100 percent is insulting. It's like asking the general manager, golf professional or owner to provide less service, a poorer selection of merchandise or inferior golf lessons.

And it's the same as telling that editor to produce a publication with poor grammar, incorrect punctuation and blurry images. Would he? I think not, because if he did, we would cancel our subscriptions.

I fully understand, and agree, that we should look for opportunities to reduce maintenance costs, use less pesticide, and conserve water. But to be told that we need to withhold maintenance – usually by saying that our courses should look more like those in Britain – is a broad, sweeping and ill-informed generalization.

For the most part, superintendents

across the pond make less money, have smaller maintenance budgets and hire smaller crews than their U.S. counterparts. Plus, the land and climate over there are more consistent. Firm, fast and brown may work in some regions here, but it's not a one-size-fits-all standard.

Ask yourself an important question:

For the foreseeable future, the two "greens" are going to keep clashing: The green of sustainability versus the green of the almighty dollar.

Are we losing money because golfers are questioning the conditions found on courses? A principle reason golfers choose a course to play is conditioning. And there is no reason we can't reduce pesticide use and water while still offering top-notch playing conditions on the course.

But that won't happen with "less" maintenance. If anything, it probably requires more work from the superintendent and staff. Not only more, but smarter work.

Ask that same editor, whose staff and budgets have been cut, if he's working less, or less intelligently. I doubt it. And ask him why, if he's in favor of our industry and the golfing public accepting less well-maintained courses, why his magazine and the other golf media continue to show photographs and videos of lush, green perfect golf holes.

The golf magazines and other "thought leaders" are instrumental in changing the public's taste. But frankly, if our members and owners expect perfect fairways and healthy rough, that's what we have to give

them if we want to keep our jobs.

All that said, we know that the job of a superintendent can be done with less. (I'm sure most of you are already doing just that, and pretty damn well.) I'm fairly certain most superintendents want the game to grow: more courses, more players, more young blood coming out of turf school and able to get jobs.

Growing the game is in our best interest too.

But I'm hearing an awful lot of let's not grow, let's maintain the status quo. I won't – and we can't – accept that.

We should all commit to reducing golf's environmental footprint, tackling climate change, and inspiring others to do so. But we can't do it alone.

And while we're on the subject... What do people mean when they say "sustainability"? It's the hot term in our business, but are we all saying the same thing?

By definition, sustainable means harvesting or using a resource so it is neither depleted nor permanently damaged. Does sustainable necessarily mean reducing maintenance levels?

To me, "protect" and "preserve" mean staying stuck in the past. "Sustain" doesn't equal forward progress.

As superintendents, we are at the forefront of sustainability whether we like it or not. But more than just getting on the train, we must have a voice on where it's going. And we have to be careful not to go backward.

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Every course is unique, with its own demands and constraints. What we do on each of them will help set the future course of our industry. But here is a statement that I guarantee is universal: "Less" maintenance is not the answer. **GCI**