

BY JOHN TORSIELLO

IRM

Superintendents strive to strike a balance between golfers' preferences and healthy turf conditions that are best for the bottom line



At the OGA Golf Course in Woodburn, Ore., golf course superintendent Ryan Wyckoff communicates with golfers to find out how the course is playing. Photo: OGA Golf Course



At Aberdeen Country Club, golf course superintendent Dan Connolly maintains green speed at 9.5, and he says most golfers seem to be happy with that. Photo: Aberdeen Country Club

“And there’s always a worry that by keeping the grass too tight you’ll stress out the turf and wind up losing parts of the course,” Snow adds.

The U.S. Open, which the USGA operates, is notorious for fast and firm playing conditions. But Snow says even a course set up for an Open must have its conditions carefully analyzed and then managed properly to avoid presenting unfair playing conditions.

“I wasn’t there, but I believe the greens at Winged Foot (site of the 2006 U.S. Open in Mamaroneck, N.Y.) were no more than 10.5 on the Stimpmeter,” he says. “If you went beyond that, some of those greens would be impossible to putt on because of their slope and undulation. Again, I wasn’t there, but I have heard greens running a 14. But that was on relatively flat surfaces with little undulation.”

GOLFERS’ IMPACT

With green speeds, there’s always a trade-off, even at private clubs. Skilled players love being tested by firm and fast putting surfaces, while less accomplished players want slower greens that allow them to be more aggressive on putts.

“There’s a lot of difference between a two handicap and a 22,” Connolly says. “A scratch player wants the greens 11 or higher, and a 77-year-old lady who’s barely getting around

wants them at 7.5.”

Green speed and firmness is always course specific, says Ryan Wyckoff, golf course superintendent at the OGA Golf Course in Woodburn, Ore.

“A superintendent has to take into consideration the caliber of golfer playing his or her course,” he says. “Usually, private clubs have very strong players, and their expectations are firmer and faster conditions through the green. Public courses have lesser caliber golfers who would be better served with slower greens and a little higher-cut fairway grass.”

Wyckoff, who has worked on grounds crews at several U.S. Opens, believes superintendents need to be proactive and seek input from the customer.

“I always try and communicate with golfers to find out how the course is playing and get their feedback,” he says. “And you need to communicate with the guys in the pro shop. A lot of times they’ll get more feedback directly from golfers when they check in or pass through on their way out the door.”

Bivens says there should always be an education process going on between the superintendent, his staff and the members about

the whys of playing conditions.

“We try to educate our members through our newsletter and various committees, telling them why course conditions change from season to season,” he says.

THE AGRONOMIC ASPECT

Mother Nature plays a role in course setup and conditions, too. For example, Bermudagrass fairways on courses in the South will roll faster in spring because a thatch layer has yet to build up. During summer, even though the grass might be being cut the same height as in the spring, the fairways will build up thatch, become thicker and offer less bounce and roll. Thus, the reason for a 150-yard shot in April becoming a 170-yard shot in July.

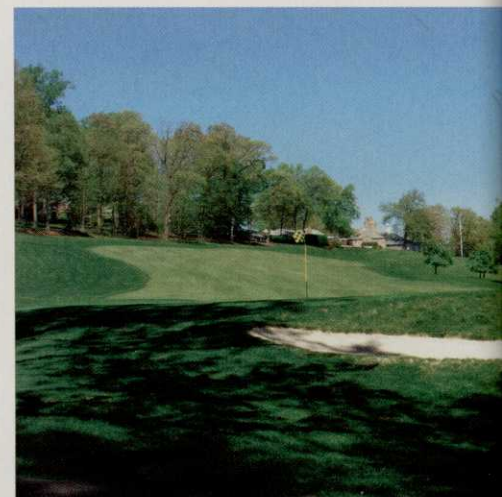
Fast and firm at Berry Hill Country Club in Charleston, W.Va., means golf course superintendent John Cummings and his staff do what they can to maintain conditions so at no time the ball plugs through the greens, Cummings says.

“This is, of course, assuming Mother Nature cooperates,” he says.

Cummings says fast and firm conditions can best be achieved through the amount of water the turf receives.

“We don’t overwater and irrigate only enough to keep the turf from stressing out to

At Huntingdon Valley Country Club, playing conditions are more important than turfgrass color. Photo: Huntingdon Valley Country Club



Dan Connolly says there are concerns about keeping grass low and dry because it opens the door for pathogenic attacks. Photo: Aberdeen Country Club

the point of death or nonrecovery from the heat and wear and tear of the day's play," he says. "As for greens, it means to mow, roll and topdress depending on the growth rate of the turf to keep the greens smooth, consistent, quick but healthy, with good dense canopies. A properly hit shot should allow the ball to release and advance toward the hole."

Green speed also can be controlled by spot watering, rolling and double cutting, says P.J. Ringenberger, golf course superintendent at Green Valley Ranch Golf Club in Denver.

"You can even use a vibratory roller and spot roll right around a hole placement for additional speed," he says.

To create firm fairways, more superintendents are topdressing with sand, which helps break down organic matter and allows greater air and water circulation to keep the turf firmer, Connolly says.

"A good golfer will always like firmer fairway conditions, so the ball doesn't plug and sits up nicely," Shafer says. "You create that by not watering as much and having fairways with proper drainage so water isn't sitting and softening the turf."

"We have found with our comment cards that golfers enjoy firm, dry and fast conditions, and their scores have reflected that," he adds.

BE CAREFUL

But maintaining fast and firm playing conditions can place a strain on a superintendent's budget and manpower.

"Any superintendent with basic skills can do anything he wants with the firmness and speed of fairways and greens," Connolly says. "We can double and triple cut, roll, topdress, treat the greens with growth retardants and groom every day. Private clubs that have big budgets can do this. Usually municipal and privately owned public courses don't have the type of budgets that allow for such maintenance."

But Connolly says there are concerns about



stressing the turf by keeping the grass low and dry. It opens the door for pathogenic attack and can weaken the plant in which it becomes less resistant to stress.

If one wants firm and fast conditions, that person will have to stay on top of things, Ringenberger says. If a course is set up for a tournament and the greens are dry and fast, the turf can take a hit if the weather is really hot. If that's the case, spot watering is needed so the turf doesn't stress out.

Maintaining fast and firm greens also can limit the number of pin placements a green can have.

"If we have the greens rolling 11 or 12 most times of the year, that means we lose in placements, especially on the edges of greens," Bivens says. "But when we drop down to a nine during July and August – when the weather is too hot to keep them running faster – it opens up all sorts of new pin placements on higher levels of the greens and around the edges. This way the members still can have greens that appear to be faster than they really are."

CONDITIONS OVER COLOR

Scott Anderson, superintendent at Huntingdon Valley (Pa.) Country Club, has taken a unique approach to course maintenance. He

considers himself a playing conditions manager more than a turf manager.

"We have placed playing conditions above color," he says. "The soil-based greens seem to allow for a lot of resiliency in achieving firm and fast playing conditions, even on extremely hot days. The turf will turn brown at certain times of the year but the playing conditions are always the focus. The grass has been conditioned over time with a survival of the fittest approach. Our organic and minimalist base program keeps costs down."

The reaction from members has been positive, Anderson says.

Knowing a course inside and out is crucial to maintaining consistent playing conditions, Bivens says.

"You have to know each individual green and understand the little things, like how much sunlight it gets, when the sun hits it and its undulation, and treat it accordingly if you want to be consistent," he says. "It's all about having a balance in playing conditions from hole to hole. That's what members want no matter what the speed is." **GCI**

John Torsiello is a freelance writer based in Torrington, Conn. He can be reached at jorsiello@sbcglobal.net

Course conditions, functions, marketing and staff are keys to a profitable business

BY BOB SELIGMAN

Here's a recipe for making golf course owners happy:

Take a well-conditioned golf course, preferably with a playability level that will make golfers want to return. Add a clubhouse facility that can handle bottom-line stimulators such as outings, weddings and other appropriate functions. Throw in a food-service operation that provides more than the basics like hot dogs and burgers. Mix in the importance of keeping the facility fresh and inviting, along with having the proper amenities to continually attract new members. Top all that with satisfied golfers who are glad they've come to the facility and not somewhere else.

"The most important thing to me is that people enjoy themselves when they come," says Joe Hills, managing member of Blue Mash Golf Course in Laytonsville, Md., and Waverly Woods Golf Club in Marriottsville, Md., two upscale public courses.

Having excellent course conditions goes a long way toward that end. Hills says course conditioning is the No. 1 thing, and it's extremely important to golfers, particularly when attracting new players.

"It's word-of-mouth advertising regarding what kind of shape the course is in," he says. "Customer service is important, but if you had to choose one or the other, I would choose maintenance over anything else."

The most important asset of the private Cape Girardeau (Mo.) Country Club is the golf course, says Don Staples, managing trustee of the club.

"Without that, the rest of the stuff would mean very



Many owners rank the golf course and its condition as the most important aspect of a golf facility's success.

owners' needs

FACILITY OPERATIONS

A clubhouse that can properly accommodate various social functions allows a golf facility to generate additional revenue aside from the golf course. Photo: Winchester Country Club



little," he says.

With any golf course, there should be a conditioning level that people look for, says Jim Scott, golf director at Gull Lake View Golf Club in Augusta, Mich. Gull Lake View owns five 18-hole courses at three different facilities within a 12-mile radius in southwest Michigan. Scott says fairways should be cut at a good height, yet greens don't have to read 12 on the Stimpmeter – eight or nine is enough. Courses also have to have fairly smooth putting surfaces, and the rough can't be so tall people can't find their balls.

"You should be able to play without losing two dozen golf balls because the grass is so long," Scott says.

Course renovations also can please course owners, even when they come in the face of adversity. Cape Girardeau is located right next to the Mississippi River. Flooding put the course under water twice in two years during the mid-1990s. After the second episode, Staples knew the club would be in trouble if it didn't do something dramatic, especially

because the course was closed for three to five months both times. He put together a drive to change and raise the affected holes.

"It ended up to be the best move we ever made," Staples says. "It modernized the golf course and the greens, fairways and tee boxes. It caused a lot of excitement for several years. Two years after we opened up again, it was the largest membership we've ever had."

Cape Girardeau, like many other clubs, has a good superintendent who helps meet its goals for the facility.

"I see the superintendent, Mike Fitzgerald every day at Blue Mash, and I'll be out on the course at least once a week," Hills says. "It's been a constant thing of improving the golf courses. We're always adding new drainage, adding tree work, improving the turf, working on bunkers. We're always going at it every year."

HOSTING VARIOUS EVENTS

Excellent course conditions set the stage for making golf course owners happy, but adding

to the bottom line by hosting outings, weddings and other social functions is another source of business. But in order for the cha-ching to sing, one has to work at it. It's not only having a clubhouse or facility that can properly accommodate various functions, it's making sure the facility is aesthetically pleasing.

Some clubs, such as Cape Girardeau, might completely renovate the clubhouse with new bars, chairs, furniture, carpet and a paint job. Blue Mash's annual initiatives to improve the clubhouse include the recent completion of a new locker room and installing a plasma TV behind the bar.

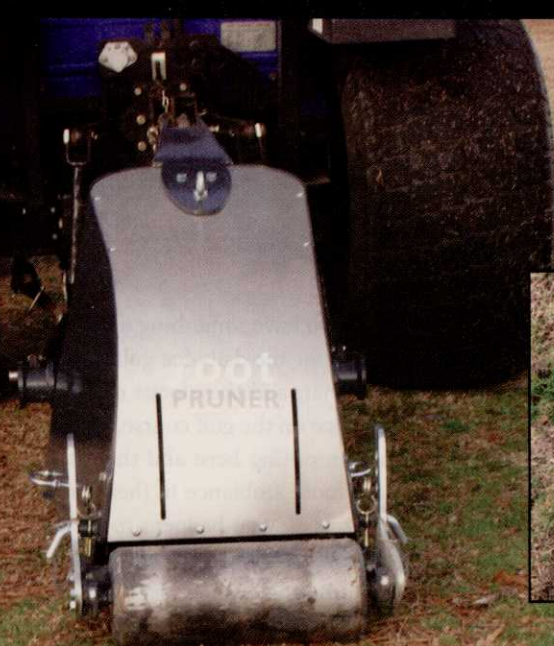
The corporate outing business also is important for Gull Lake View, Scott says.

"We try very hard to promote those outings," he says. "It gets into a bidding war sometimes. We'll put our bid in, and we'll try to sell our golf course on the fact that we can provide them with better entertainment value for the dollar than the golf courses that might underbid us. We're professionals. We have good equipment, a good building, a good staff.

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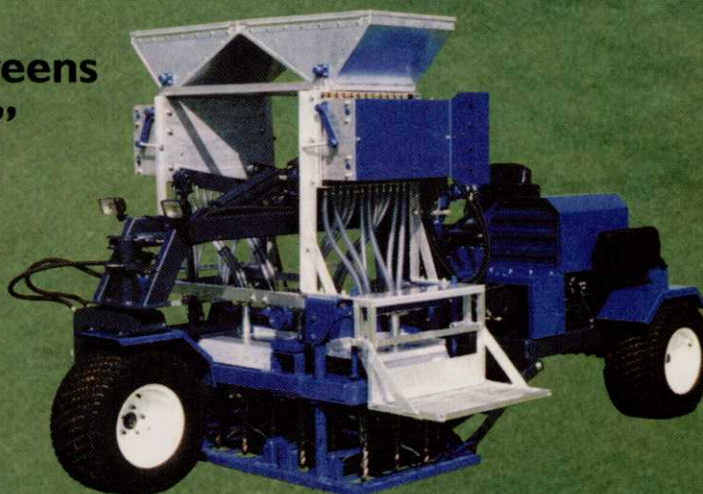
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FACILITY OPERATIONS

With a higher-end food-and-beverage operation, a golf facility has the potential to generate more revenue from outings. Photo: Contraband Bayou Golf Club at L'Auberge

We know how to do it.”

But clubs like Blue Mash might also elect to stay within a smaller operating or capital expenditure budget, which is good and bad, especially when trying to attract more outings to the facility.

“We have relatively modest clubhouses compared to other clubhouses in the area, and our food-and-beverage operations are pretty simple,” Hills says. “That’s just how things have evolved for us. We don’t have the expertise to do more of a higher-end type operation. Unless you’re really good at it and can have someone that can really focus on it, your bottom line gets hurt. With a better food-and-beverage operation, if it’s done right, we can make a lot more money on outings. It requires a certain amount of expertise, which we’re bringing in.

“If you have something nice and clean and decent for the daily-fee golfer, they’re happy with that, and they focus more on their experience on the golf course,” Hills adds. “We lose an outing here and there to clubs that have more ambiance in their clubhouse, but in terms of what happens to the bottom line, what we’re doing is pretty good.”

Promoting business is important for a golf facility, particularly in difficult economic times. As Scott says, every round of golf in today’s market is important to every golf course owner. Particularly in an area like his, which has been affected by the exodus of local manufacturers and the diminishing auto supply and manufacturing business in Michigan. However, Scott says Gull Lake View is holding its own.

“In 2006, we were level with 2005, maybe



a touch above it,” he says. “The economy is starting to show some signs of recovery. I’m still bullish on the golf market.”

Gull Lake View, which promotes itself as a golfing destination and puts together golf packages for out-of-town golfers, works hard marketing itself to major metropolitan areas within a five-hour driving radius, including Detroit, Chicago, Indianapolis and Toledo.

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The marketing includes a Web site, www.gulllakeview.com, and exhibiting at golf shows within driving distance of that area.

"We'll do them individually as a destination, and then we do them with a co-op that we're part of in Battle Creek with other golf courses and lodging facilities so we can market for the traveling golfer," Scott says.

RETAINING MEMBERSHIP

Private clubs are also striving for new members while doing what they can to retain members.

"There's a continuing battle every year to keep membership up," says Staples, who has seen his membership drop slightly to 380 members from 425 members. "The lifeblood of a country club is the dues, and if you don't have the dues, you don't have a country club very long."

Normal attrition will happen and isn't always preventable, but clubs are trying to avoid many resignations, says Bill McMahon, chairman of The McMahon Group, a consulting firm based in St. Louis that tracks the private club industry.

"The best way we find for retaining members in clubs is just making sure you're providing everything you're supposed to do at a high-quality level that's good quality for the cost of membership," he says.

Cape Girardeau is taking a proactive approach to increasing membership. The club encourages its members to become involved in a spring membership drive. They benefit from this involvement because the drive helps keep the dues at a more reasonable level than if they were ignored, Hills says. That resulted in 36 new members last year. A consulting firm, Graves Associates of Manhattan, Kan., has helped the membership become more involved in several of the drives.

"If the members don't get involved, we can't advertise and things like that," Staples says. "Other than direct mail to an individual, we can't run ads in papers because of the structure of our club."

Attracting younger members is a key to strengthening a club's membership. Cape Girardeau is enticing people age 25 to 35 with families by offering them full memberships with a low initiation and lower dues structure. When they reach age 35, they pay full-membership prices.

"Probably the thing we need the most is to attract young people," Staples says. "That's where our nemesis is. Our weakest point is not attracting enough young people. The reason is that our pool facility needs to be torn out and a new junior Olympic pool needs to be put in."

A PROVIDER

Club owners say there are other things they want and need from their golf facilities – a PGA Class A golf professional, for example. So is having a professional and courteous staff that knows the value of customer service. A well-stocked pro shop helps attract golfers, especially when outing organizers are looking for quality goods when they hand out gift certificates to participants. A neat cart area is important, too.

Scott sums up what he expects from the golf facilities he owns.

"What we want out of our golf courses is to provide us with a steady income that we can live on," he says. "We've been able to do that. We've been profitable enough to maintain a lifestyle and raise our families and educate them and bring them along in the world. We've provided our employees with stable and fairly good benefits, and we're providing the community with an entertainment opportunity to play our golf courses for recreation and exercise and all the things they play golf for." GCI

Bob Seligman is a freelancer writer based in Suffren, N.Y. He can be reached at bhseligman@aol.com.

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