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Another downside for me is that I have been denied a few opportunities to participate in design because *Golf Digest's* is policy that my involvement makes those designs ineligible for a *Golf Digest* ranking. At least two such courses have gone on to be ranked by *Golf Digest*, which shows the clients made wise decisions.

What don't most people know about the ranking process?

I'd like to think readers know a lot about our ranking process because we reveal as much as any publication about the process - 1,100 panelists judging on a 1-10 scale on seven criteria, highest score wins, etc. What clubs and architects sometimes forget is it's a magazine article. It's meant to attract readers and generate talk, even debate. I've always called it our "swimsuit issue."

How should clubs treat raters

from golf magazines?

I can only speak for *Golf Digest*. We ask clubs to treat *Golf Digest* panelists as they would any other paying guests. No special treatment. No high pressure sales tactics. Just let panelists do their job.

No club has ever been so crass as to offer payment in exchange for a ranking. We had a few instances where clubs offered inducements, like travel and accommodations, to a panelist. That's against our rules, and the club was removed from survey consideration for a while, and the panelist who accepted the offer was dismissed.

What single factor might affect a *Golf Digest* ratings the most?

Shot Values, since its score is doubled in our formula. However, Shot Values are either

strong or weak. Without a major redesign, it's hard to enhance shot values.

"Conditioning" is the one area every club can control. Our new definition focuses on firm and fast fairways and firm-yet-receptive greens over color. You can roll back the irrigation, install more drainage, and improve your conditioning score.

Do rankings increase memberships, dues or fees?

I've never paid much attention to memberships or fees. In the 1990's, every public course that won our "Best New Public" jacked up its green fee. That's part of the reason we instituted a "Best New Affordable" category, with a ceiling of \$50 greens fees (later \$75). That didn't keep winners from raising prices. Hey, that's business.

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Why do some courses shun ratings?

The more exclusive a club, the less its membership wants to share its course with outsiders, particularly when several magazines want access. I can understand why some clubs don't want to be considered. We abide by their guest restrictions and still get evaluations for those clubs, but it takes much longer.

What list is the most important to be on?

That depends upon a course's goal. If it's a local daily-fee hoping to attract more business, a 5-star rating in "Places to Play" is ideal. A national membership club trying to convince a multi-millionaire to join his 15th club may seek listing on America's 100 Greatest. Obviously, we consider America's 100 Greatest to be the

ultimate achievement, but there's nothing wrong with being ranked one of the "Best in State" or a "Best New Course."

Why is the Golf Digest list the best?

I'm biased, but I like to think Golf Digest's list is the most respected because we offer the most transparency. We publish category-by-category scores of all winning courses, and we base our results solely on those scores. We don't cook the books.

Golf Digest's rankings have existed since 1966 so it's the oldest, by far, among golf publications, which makes it the most recognizable to most golfers.

With almost 16,000 US courses, is a Top 100 enough? Have you considered either 200, or in current

parlance, identifying the top 1 percent?"

Our franchise is 100 Greatest, and has been since 1969 (reduced from 200 Toughest). We feel comfortable with keeping it at Top 100. It's tough, because about 250 courses can legitimately contend for our 100 Greatest, but I think readers appreciate the consistency of maintaining a 100 Greatest ranking. Another publication ranks 200, but I like to say they just don't want to make the tough decisions.

Has anyone ever gone to extremes to influence the Golf Digest rankings?

In the 1990's Oakland Hills dropped from the Top 10. When asked why, I reported that their "Aesthetics" score had dropped. A few months later, Alice Dye told me that Oakland Hills had

installed a waterfall behind their 16th green "to improve their numbers with Golf Digest." I called the superintendent, who said they installed the waterfall primarily to drain the clubhouse air conditioning, but thought it might make a neat feature. It was 800 yards from the clubhouse, and a totally artificial rock garden. It didn't improve their "aesthetics" numbers and they later removed it.

A superintendent was reportedly fired when his course dropped in our ranking due primarily to a drop in the conditioning score – but that is rare. **GCI**

Jeff Brauer is a licensed golf course architect and president of GolfScapes, based in Arlington, Texas. He is the author of GCI's "Design Concepts" column.

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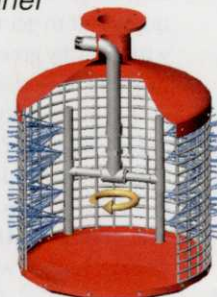
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OH CAPTAIN, MY CAPTAIN

Preparing a course for an international rivalry is a career-expanding task, one welcomed with open arms by Curtis Tyrrell, GCS, director of golf course operations at Medinah Country Club outside Chicago. His previous tournament experience was as on-course superintendent at the Cochise Course of the Golf Club at Desert Mountain in Scottsdale, Ariz., for The Tradition, a Champions Tour event.

Tyrrell's specialty is golf course construction: He actually came from Lake of Isles (Conn.) to rebuild Medinah's other two courses, No. 1 and No. 2. Used to the deadlines common in course construction, he had a knack for managing projects with lots of moving parts. While working on No. 1 and No. 2, he had an opportunity to look "under the hood" at No. 3, the venue for the Ryder Cup, which was originally laid out by Tom Bendelow in the late 1920s. And he found many agronomic issues in need of attention.

Around the time Tyrrell came on, Medinah brought in architect Rees Jones to renovate the Ryder Cup course. Jones' directive was to re-establish the integrity of the No. 3 – to toughen it up. The members wanted Jones to redesign the relatively flat greens, make the bunkers more penal, lengthen the course with new teeing grounds, and add bunkers that would come into play from the new tees and in second-shot landing zones on par 5s.

Tyrrell attended the Ryder Cup at Valhalla in 2008, where he first met Kerry Haigh, the PGA of America's managing director of championships and business development, and the man most responsible for course set-up for the organization. They discussed the upcoming Jones renovation, as well as Haigh's goals for the course and the Cup matches.

With a little more on the line than

the average golf nut, Tyrrell awaited the naming of the captain in January 2010. A self-professed "big fan" of Davis Love the golfer, Tyrrell is now also an admirer of Love the captain. "I was a bit star-struck when I first met him at the captain's announcement," Tyrrell admitted. "But I've come to admire his outgoing nature, courteous style, and respect for the golf course superintendent. Davis really made me feel an important and vital member of the 2012 Ryder Cup team."

The two had a private chat to get to know each other better. "We talked

The Ryder Cup is unlike any other professional tournament, a fact that influences how Tyrrell and his staff have to set-up and tend the course.

about our families, golf and the set-up goals for the golf course."

Love's main focus has been the primary rough, asking for it to be shorter to provide additional shot options. He also wanted to review fairway contours, rough contours, and ways to create intermediate rough, especially around bunkers and green contours. Right now, they are planning on the intermediate being cut at 1.25 inches and the primary rough at 2.5 inches, pending final decisions just before the matches begin.

With agreement on the roughs, over-seeding began. The mix included Kentucky bluegrass, creeping red and Chewing's fescue, and gray leaf spot-resistant perennial ryegrass to enhance ball lie. Fairways also have been widened slightly.

The plan for the bunkers is to make them as firm as possible, even tougher than Jones had them. Some bunkers now wrap around greens, toughening some possible hole locations.

Jones left his biggest mark on

the 15th hole, a par four that was shortened by about 100 yards, making it potentially driveable. (It can play as short as 280 yards, but the original tee—367 from the regular men's tees, 392 from the back—has been preserved for the club's use.) But Jones also added a two-acre lake that dangerously borders the right side of the fairway and green.

The result is a strong risk-reward challenge both for club members and Ryder Cup players. And since match-play competitions such as the Ryder Cup rarely reach the 18th green, this

change didn't only improve the course but also showed strategic foresight.

While the 15th hole was under construction, 11 of No. 3's original greens, plus its main putting green, were rebuilt. Having all 18 greens conform to USGA standards gives the grounds crew more control over moisture levels and, Tyrrell says, consistency. "I'm excited that every green is the same now. The members will be able to enjoy a uniform stand of turf offering a consistent appearance and playability."

The PGA of America won't determine green speeds until after Labor Day, Haigh and Love agreeing it was important to get through the summer with healthy greens. Decisions will be made once the summer heat has passed and the Ryder Cup is in sight.

Love also didn't want to settle on green speeds and other issues until his team was set. No. 3 received a great deal of play in May, June, and July; in August, rounds were cut back to pro-

(continued on page 56)

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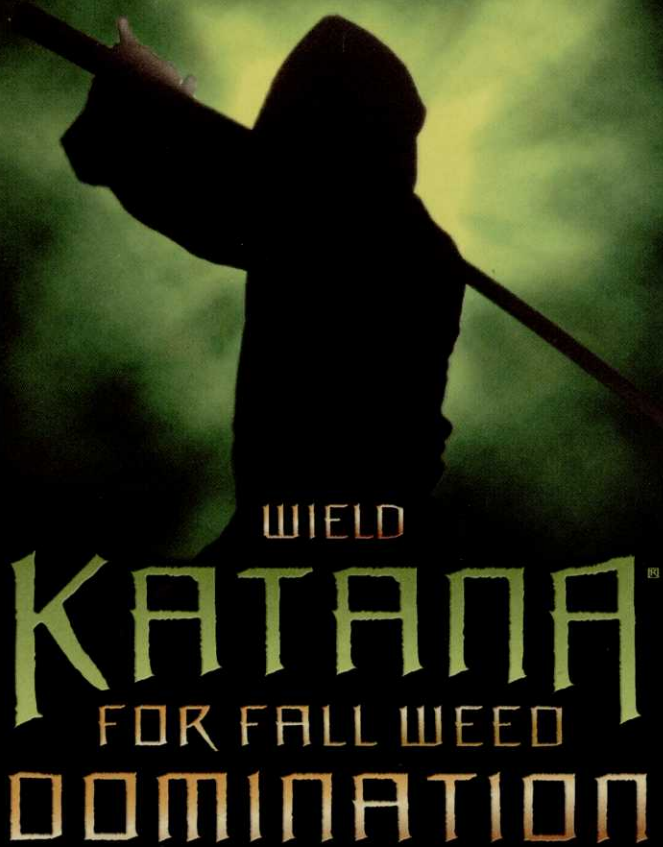
THE PLAN

An agronomic plan is the first step toward a more accurate budget and achieving your ultimate vision for turf quality.

by Bruce R. Williams, CGCS

Early on I remember hearing the old adage that “a failure to plan is a plan that will surely fail”. Such is the case with creating an agronomic plan for any golf facility. Without a plan that is written, approved and communicated it is likely that an operation is being run without a roadmap to meet the goals of the business.

Agronomic plans can be simple or complex but should include a number of basic items. All of the items in a plan require resources in terms of manpower, equipment, materials and products. The agronomic plan is the first step to developing an accurate budget to maintain the golf course at the desired quality level.



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“All too often I have found that maintenance standards are much higher than the programs and expenses needed to achieve those goals.”

MAINTENANCE STANDARDS. The genesis of any agronomic plan should be the creation of a written set of maintenance standards. These standards are set by the owners, members, or management. An agronomic plan is the bridge to provide those standards and develop a budget and calendar to accomplish those goals. It should be a collaborative effort between the golf course superintendent and those that he reports to.

All too often I have found that maintenance standards are much higher than the programs and expenses needed to achieve those goals. There's the rub. A lot more resources are required to be 100 percent weed free or disease free than allowing for a tolerance threshold of 90 percent. Each facility has its own personality, and development of agreed upon maintenance standards will go a long way to make the right fit for your type of course and the local competition.

RESOURCES. There are a number of resources that go into an agronomic plan. Typically the largest maintenance costs fall under the categories of labor and plant protectants. Fertilizer and topdressing sand are also in the same category, and each course has its own plan on accomplishing the goals set forth in the maintenance standards.

When decisions are made as to the type of mowers, collection of clippings, and frequency of topdressing, they will all have an impact on the labor expense. All of this needs to be calculated into the agronomic plan.

Equipment is another factor in the agronomic plan. What equipment do you have and what equipment do you need to get the job done?

There are a variety of labor saving pieces of equipment out there today that can save your facility money in the long run. Good superintendents can make the case for cost savings by calculating the return on investment for any and all equipment purchases.

Over the recent difficult economic times I have seen an overall reduction in equipment purchases and often see the inventory in the junk pile growing while the operable equipment diminishes. This too will have an impact on what can be included in the agronomic plan and also what practices must be outsourced at a greater cost due to a shortage of equipment.

MATERIALS AND SUPPLIES. Few golf courses operate without any expense in the areas of insecticides, fungicides, herbicides, growth regulators, fertilizers, wetting agents and topdressing sand.

So it is not an issue of whether these products are required but more of an issue of what products help you achieve your goals through your agronomic plan. Generally speaking there are a lot of products to choose from. There are also a variety of prices on products. The best advice is to use high quality products and not just the least expensive items. Do the appropriate research to verify that the products control the pests or provide the fertility for the desired period of time. One of the earliest lessons I had in school taught us to calculate the cost of a fungicide per day of control versus cost per 1,000 sq. ft. The same is true for fertilizers and other products used to create healthy turfgrass plants.

As mentioned under equipment it



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is necessary to keep a long-term capital improvement program for all golf courses. Sadly I have seen a huge cutback on capital items and as the old TV commercial would say “you can pay me now or pay me later”. Most things on the golf course have a specific time frame for their use. At some point they may require upgrade or replacement. This can extend from equipment all the way to bunkers, greens,

irrigation systems, maintenance buildings. When one knows that you are on the last couple of years before bunker rebuilding or an irrigation system replacement then it will surely affect your expenses.

Expenses go up as items age – just like your car – but certain expenses can be deferred at the end of their useful life and before replacement.

THE AGRONOMIC PLAN. Before you know where you are going... you need to know where you are at. Initial testing is the best way to analyze where Point A is as you develop the roadmap to Point B (maintenance standards and goals of the facility). The following list is a good start toward having the adequate information to make sound decisions:

- Water quality
- Soil chemistry
- Soil physical properties
- History and trends of the above tests

What are the desired grasses for your facility? Most courses that were built prior to 1970 had much fewer options for grass types and also particular cultivars of each grass. It is hard to compete with the courses down the street if you are not taking advantage of newer turf varieties that can be cut lower and have quicker green speeds, etc.

Every course should set the proper range for mowing heights of each grass type and also different playing areas and time of the year. For those courses requiring fairway mowing four days per week the cost is higher than those that opt for two days per week. With the use of growth regulators we have seen a reduction in mowing frequency and this also lessens labor costs, fuel consumption and wear & tear on equipment.

By monitoring growth regulation via clipping yield and growing degree days it takes a lot of guesswork out of fertilizer and pesticide applications. Time and materials equate to cost so proper pre-planning is like putting money in the bank.

Greens only comprise about 3 acres on an average 18-hole golf course that would sit on 100-150 acres that are maintained. So 2-3 percent of the acreage is involved in 75 percent of the shots in a round of golf. In theory each hole has the shot into the green and two putts to reach par. With an average par of 4 that means 3 out of 4 shots involve the greens. It is reasonable to assume that the inputs on this small acreage are much greater than any other part of the golf course.

Agronomic plans for greens should include most or all of the following inputs and cultural practices:

- Insecticides
- Fungicides
- Herbicides
- Growth regulators
- Wetting agents
- Fertilizers
- Rolling
- Grooming

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