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## Wailed My Way In... Worked My Way Out... as Chairman

By HENRY McKEEN, JR.

THREE YEARS ago I was one of that legion of carefree divot-digging golf neophytes who roundly cursed when the course seemed not just right but who took perfection for granted without a word of praise. In those happy past gone days redtop would have meant, no doubt, slang for a red head, brown patch gravy on the shirt front, and pythium, I'm sure, would have suggested a visit to the family doctor. But those carefree days are gone forever—and thereby hangs a tale.

Our course for 6 or 8 seasons back was yearly getting worse and worse. Fairways became thinner and thinner, and greens rougher and weedier. Our club financially was a typical "small-town" club, never quite enough income, and nary an attempt at budgeting. First come first served, let each chairman grab what he could while the going was good. Abundance for a few months, then bread and water until finances perked up again.

Our greenkeeper has grown up with the course. His knowledge was rudimentary, his ego colossal, his temper and vocabu-

lary worth going miles to see and hear. He was supposed from long association to know each little blade of grass. He had the green-committee buffaloed to the 'Nth degree—and actually did more damage to the course each year than the total spent on it.

Mr. McKeen is former green-chairman of a Pennsylvania club who now is taking a vacation in France. From that safe and distant point he looks back at the course maintenance task at a representative country club in one of the smaller cities. He pulls no punches in saying his little piece.

McKeen has this load he wants to get off his bosom, he hopes for the good of the cause.

Like most other small clubs, from time immemorial our successive green-chairman had been complaisant, old and agreeable "yes men." Usually they were appointed because they had little to do but hang around the course in playing season and, I suspect, because they were constitutionally unable to say "no," even to the request that they act as green-chairman. One I remember, somewhat different, in that at least he did little harm, accomplished this result by appearing at the club only once during the year—at a late fall dance!

The green-committee consisted of two or three others, informed no doubt by mail

of the honor of their appointment, and who I'm sure promptly forgot about it until called to their attention by seeing their names in print in the annual report.

### Greenkeeper Is Dictator

You who have this kind of green-committee—and you are legion—will gather that what I am trying to get across is that the greenkeeper was the WORKS! And what an imagination ours had when it came to excuses. And how he could thimble-rig that poor green-chairman.

Let me wander for a moment on the subject of the greenkeeper. Taken as a whole the dozens and hundreds I've known and talked over problems with, from Massachusetts to California and from La Baule to Cannes in France, have been honest and agreeable fellows. Most were interested in their work and very hard workers. Too few, however, except in the big and wealthy clubs, have the time or opportunity to reach out into the broad theory of scientific agronomy. And few have the means, the time or the desire to experiment. Lacking time, and without the knowledge how to plan for greater efficiency, during the playing season their days are a hectic rush to keep their course in playing shape, usually on a rule of thumb basis. Heaven knows their job is a hard and thankless one. Blame if things are not quite right, little credit if things go well.

But to get back to my tale. Our course was getting worse each year. Some of us bolder souls began asking embarrassing questions of the green-chairman. He collected the usual dish of applesauce from the greenkeeper. But this crowd of malcontents just didn't like applesauce as a steady diet, and were so insistent that the poor green-chairman in despair resigned. And then my troubles began. No longer a carefree neophyte but now a hard-boiled watchdog, one eye on the ball, the other on this rough to be trimmed, one glance at the line of putt, two to a suspicious looking patch, or a new growth of crabgrass. For as one of the prime movers in the revolt, how could I well refuse to fill the now vacant green-chairmanship?

### Sure—Easy to Keep Course

Now if ever there is an easy job it is to make and keep a golf course in perfect condition. All one needs is a little ground, a bit of raking, a sprinkle of seed, and an occasional watering. Ask any one of the

dozen chronic kickers who infest every golf club, like fleas infest a dog. Each of them can not only tell you just what is wrong, but exactly how to correct it. Every one's diagnosis and remedy is different, but what matters that?

My native Scotch caution made me to make haste slowly. The chairmanship was wished on me in the fall, with the playing season nearly over, and the course practically a wreck. I acquired a library on turf culture, and all the literature I could get from the Green Section and various state agricultural colleges and departments. I wrote scores of letters of inquiry to seedsmen, seed growers, fertilizer manufacturers and others having to do with grass growing. I propounded hundreds of theoretical and practical questions. I profited greatly by reading many issues of GOLFDOM. I attended lectures and courses tramped over experimental plots, and exposed my ignorance to many experts. I bought and learned to use those interesting implements for the determination of pH values and phosphoric content. As for our course itself that fall and winter I did nothing except to get accurate information as to size and structure of greens, with details as to what seemed particularly to ail the grass on each one, and to secure from the greenkeeper (as close as he could remember, for no written records were kept) some information as to quantity and type of fertilization.

### Work and Study

All my spare time and more that fall and winter was spent in work and study. I was amazed at the intricacy of the science, and each day became more and more interested.

Some wise man has described the art of fine turf culture as "the science of growing grass against all laws of nature." The modern putting green is the acme of artificial growth. It must be smooth as a brussels carpet, requiring silky grass and thousands of plants to the square foot. It must be of a pleasing color and at its best during mid-summer playing season, when all other of nature's growth is dormant. It must be clipped close, as short as 3/16 of an inch on a "fast" green. The natural return of humus and plant food to the soil by dropped clippings rotting and being absorbed, is precluded by all cuttings being removed. The digestive facilities of the plants themselves through abundance of leaf chlorophyll is much les-

sened by the necessity of close cutting, while roots are so interwoven by required thick plant growth that without artificial feeding all would die.

### Tell Need of Patience

By early spring I was a slave to my new and fascinating hobby, and felt equipped to analyze and face the situation intelligently. I first made it clear to my board that it was going to cost money and take time to correct 10 years of abuse. I told them that I was certain it could be done, but that *carte blanche* must be given for at least 3 years. A letter was sent to each member stating facts and warning that nature could be helped but not much hurried. Saying further that perhaps some things about the course might even be worse before getting better, and asking for their patience and co-operation for 2 or even 3 years if necessary. This was perhaps a bit over pessimistic, but it seemed wiser to surprise perhaps by improvement sooner, rather than promise something impossible of fulfillment.

When spring arrived I was prepared to check and verify my theoretical findings. Without going into great detail suffice to say that all greens were badly drained, much too high in alkalinity to prevent excess weed and coarse grass growth, and improperly fertilized and topdressed. Ten years of this had so ruined soil conditions of about half of the greens that it seemed better and cheaper to plow them up and build them right rather than try to rehabilitate them. When I broke this news to my board and they agreed that the work should proceed, I felt that come what may I must justify myself with eventual results. Less than 2 years later we now have 8 new and perfect bent greens, 2 more ready to sod from our turf nursery, and the other 8 as fine as one could wish for, largely bent from stolon plantings in incisions on old greens. All from proper diagnosis and intelligent planning.

In addition we have a beautiful practice green, a repair nursery of 8000 sq. ft., a bent nursery for sod of over 25,000 sq. ft., an experimental plot, and a soil nursery for topdressing of nearly 5 acres.

And we take care of the course and all these new and necessary adjuncts with less men and at less cost than before. And how is this miracle accomplished, you ask? By a comprehensive and intelligent study of the economics of golf course maintenance. Under the old regime the greenkeeper hired what men he thought he

needed, better an extra one or two than too few. He bought such materials as he thought necessary when and in such quantities as the moment required, at top prices for small quantities from time to time.

### Machinery Saves

By the purchase of labor saving machinery an average of 2 men were eliminated. By the advance planning of material requirements over 25 per cent was saved in costs. By judicious experiments it was found that a fertilizer with exactly needed proportions could be acquired at a saving of nearly \$40 per ton as compared to an inferior brand we had been using. Work was planned for every hour in advance, always at least a week ahead; and so on down the line.

I forgot to say that the old greenkeeper lasted only a very short time under the new system. He is now putting fertilizer on hot dogs at a roadstand rather than on the greens, a job I am sure he will succeed in better. As his successor, was chosen a hard worker with little actual knowledge or experience, *but who wanted to learn*. And give me that type any time as compared to him who thinks he knows, and has no desire to keep up-to-date and to learn something every day. A green-chairman and a greenkeeper who both want to learn and who co-operate at all times could make a perfect course in the desert of Sahara.

The green-chairman who has the time and inclination to make a real study and hobby of his job, is probably a rarity. There is, and probably always will be an enormous waste and inefficiency in the usual golf course management. The proper solution for those clubs who cannot afford high priced experts for their greenkeepers is some type of co-operative expert advice. A dozen clubs within a given locality could band together and secure the services of an expert. He would analyze, plan for and supervise the policy and the purchases of them all. He would work with and for the greenkeeper and the green-committee. His charges would be prorated among subscribing clubs, and would amount to little for each one. My guess is that he would save each club his fee a dozen times each year. And besides the money saving, he would earn the gratitude of golfers for better playing conditions, and of greenkeepers and green-chairmen for making their lot easier and their work pleasanter.