

Times Better, But Maintenance Economies Continue

By JOHN MONTEITH, JR.*

THE SUBJECT of economy is one which has been discussed from various angles for the past few years. It will continue to be a common subject for discussion by club officials for some time to come. Golf clubs have in the past built up a reputation for wastefulness and extravagance that will take some time to live down. If the present curtailment of funds brings about a decided change in the management of golf courses it undoubtedly will ultimately work out as a distinct asset to golf. In this so-called war on depression the battlefields have been cluttered with erstwhile good business men acting as riderless horses, racing aimlessly around without any guidance of reason. Many of these panicky steeds have been kicking up the dust on golf courses as members of green-committees or boards of directors, causing confusion rather than aiding the cause of better maintenance.

Golfers everywhere seem to hold the opinion that, regardless of business revival, golf clubs will not soon return to the extravagant methods used in the recent past. The belief seems to be general that clubs will be operated at far lower cost than was considered necessary only a few years ago. I believe we can expect better golf in many instances, and better maintenance methods on all courses.

Not many years ago anyone who suggested economies in golf course maintenance at some clubs was quickly branded as an impractical theorist wholly lacking in good business sense. In the past few years, however, the public's conception of the expression "good business sense" has undergone decided changes, especially as applied to such organizations as golf clubs.

How Far to Cut Salaries

When the depression hit, one of the first moves in reducing course maintenance budgets on some golf courses was to reduce salaries, a method requiring the least mental effort on the part of those responsible for the preparation of the budget.

Since the largest items of golf course budgets come under labor and supervision it was natural that these items should be carefully considered. Unfortunately in too many cases there seemed to be little consideration other than the making of blanket slashes in the pay scale. Some golf courses have been paying the laborer only a dollar for a day of eight or nine hours. Such pay scales are certainly not in accord with American living standards. It is probable that many golfers never realized what low wages were being paid to the men who were providing them with the means for the enjoyment of the game.

In extreme emergencies, such as the one which has just been experienced, no one would seriously question the advisability of reducing salaries and pay rolls in a reasonable manner. There is a big difference, however, between reasonable pay reductions and the slashes in wages that have actually been made on some golf courses. Whole staffs of faithful and capable employes have in some cases been thoughtlessly discharged from golf courses in the name of economy. They have been replaced by cheaper but wholly inexperienced help, which in the long run may cost the clubs far more than will ever be realized by the short-sighted individuals who have been responsible for the changes.

Tyro Committeemen Are Costly

Probably the greatest handicap to efficient management of golf courses in this country has been the system of running courses with inexperienced committees. The fundamental principle of the committee form of management is probably sound, but misinterpretations and abuses of this system have been frequent enough to account for tremendous annual losses in the maintenance of golf courses. In the case of green-committees alone one could find countless cases of waste and extravagance that would undoubtedly amaze the golfers if they could be accurately tabulated. Members of green-committees are

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seldom picked because they have any particular knowledge of golf course maintenance. One member, appointed chairman, often takes full responsibility without ever consulting with the other members of the committee. He may have proved to be a highly successful executive even to the extent of becoming president of his company, which may manufacture toothpicks. Because he has been successful in his particular line of business and has been selected as chairman of the green-committee he may immediately fancy himself an authority on all subjects of greenkeeping and course management.

The club, however, already has in its employ a greenkeeper who has spent considerable time in learning something about greenkeeping methods; yet all his education and experience in the subject are quickly set aside in favor of the superior opinions of the gentleman of the toothpicks. In a very brief space of time the chairman becomes an expert on all subjects pertaining to golf turf maintenance and no authority in the world can be compared to him. Fortunately most of our golf courses are not at the mercy of chairmen of green-committees of the type just mentioned, and therefore there is really some hope for reasonable economies through a proper co-operation between green-committees and greenkeepers.

Is It a GC or a CC?

It would seem that one of the first problems to be solved in making any reductions in operation costs is that of the relative importance of the golf course compared with other sources of expense to the club. If the golf course is only an incidental feature, it is natural that the budget of the course proper should be severely curtailed. Nevertheless, there are clubs which are operated primarily for golf where the officials in making up budgets make the first assignment of funds to the clubhouse and everything that is left over is allotted to the maintenance of the course. If the membership falls off chiefly because of poor golf the greenkeeper is usually blamed. Admitting the desirability of fine clubhouse facilities, we naturally ask the question, "Do golfers join and remain in golf clubs primarily because of the clubhouse facilities or because of the enjoyment of golf?" This might be a good question to have printed at the head of all budget sheets to remind committees of this important consideration whenever

they prepare new budgets. Many golf clubs in the past made the mistake of competing with country clubs in building elaborate clubhouses and have ever since been continuing in the mistake by trying to keep them in full operation at the expense of the golf course.

Let us assume that a fair share of the budget has been allotted for the operation of the course and that the greenkeeper and the green-committee are working in harmony in an honest endeavor to make certain essential reductions in maintenance costs with a minimum reduction in the enjoyment of the game by the club members and a minimum reduction in the wage scale of the faithful employes of the club. One would think that the first attack would be against waste and extravagance, but it is surprising to find how many clubs have made no effort in this direction or have been remarkably unsuccessful at it in the past few years.

Under waste we can classify all those expenditures which give nothing in return, or that part of expenses representing the excess over that needed to obtain similar results at a lower cost. Any material or treatment that is used but which fails to give any response is a total waste. The larger share of waste on golf courses, however, is accounted for as partial waste due to using excesses or to using too costly materials or methods. Thus, in many cases, one finds water being applied in excess, and the cost of all the water above the amount that can be used by turf represents waste. Also, if a greenkeeper spends \$100 for a chemical or fertilizer, when he could have obtained the same results at an expenditure of \$50 for another material, he has wasted \$50. Any number of such examples of total or partial waste on golf courses could be readily cited.

Holding Down Extravagances

Under extravagances we can group expenditures for materials or labor which give a full measure in results; but the results are not essential to the full enjoyment of the course by the members. Many items falling into this category are debatable, for something which is necessary to one club may be luxury to another. A few items which may be considered under luxuries are frequent cutting of rough, large putting greens, numerous large sand traps, frequent raking of sand traps, and fertilizing or watering of areas seldom used in playing the course.

It would be wise to reduce the size of most of the putting greens in this country if we are to have more economical course maintenance. Frequently one hears club members boasting about the large size of the putting greens on their course. In the interest of the game and economy the boasting should be about the excellence of the putting surfaces rather than their size. We frequently hear the statement that putting greens are no better today than they were many years ago, and to prove this assertion we are reminded that most good golfers probably take as many putts today as they did in the matches years ago when greens were not so carefully groomed. This statement is probably true, but no one has yet given any statistics to show the relation of the size of the green to the number of putts used in important matches.

One sometimes hears players complaining about putting surfaces and blaming greenkeeping methods because they have been forced to take three putts on a number of greens. They probably have overlooked the fact that if they had been playing on putting greens of a more reasonable size they would have taken more strokes to get on the green and then only two putts.

There is a serious question among good golfers as to whether overemphasis on long approach putting justifies the additional cost. A solution that has been offered for this problem on many golf courses is to let the grass grow longer in a wide strip on the outside of the putting green, concentrating attention on a central area of from 2,000 to 2,400 square feet where the turf is maintained in excellent putting green condition. Several thousand square feet of the original putting green turf which is allowed to grow longer is kept in good approach condition, but due to the fact that it is mowed less frequently, watered and fertilized less, and does not require as frequent topdressing, it represents a decided saving over what would have been necessary to maintain it in even fair shape for a putting green. A golfer playing to such a green has offered to him practically the same target as previously; but instead of reaching the putting surface with a wood and long iron and taking three putts, he reaches the longer approach turf of the old putting green area and is given the opportunity to play a short chip or run-up shot to the pin and gets down easily with two putts

once he is on the smaller putting green. This latter method adds variety to the play, which many golfers believe is highly desirable, and at the same time reduces maintenance costs.

Save by Reducing Fairways

Likewise fairway areas kept in good condition often can be reduced, and in many cases this will result in actual improvement of play. On many courses where funds are too restricted to properly maintain entire fairways it would be much more desirable to concentrate on the smaller areas which are most used rather than to try to keep the entire fairways in mediocre condition. This applies to such matters as fertilizing, watering, controlling weeds, or similar attention. In fertilizing fairways the custom seems to have developed of applying the fertilizer evenly on the entire fairway area. This should result in a uniformly good turf across the entire width of the fairway. Sometimes even in the last two years the fertilizing program has been extended to include a few yards of the rough to make it more hazardous.

Let us assume on a hole receiving the above treatment that the best line of play is directly down the center of the fairway and that four players from the tee obtain drives of equal length and the four balls are all lying in grass representing the average in their respective positions. No. 1 ball is in the center of the fairway with a nice lie on good turf. No. 2 ball is just at the edge of the fairway. It represents a poorer drive from the standpoint of direction than does No. 1 but it has exactly the same lie as No. 1 for the turf is equally good from the center to the edge of the fairway. Ball No. 3 is lying only a few inches from No. 2 but just off the fairway. It is lying in grass which has been fertilized and cut longer than the fairway, therefore it is in a heavy mat of grass requiring perhaps a niblick to take it out. No. 4 is the poorest of the foursome, lying in the rough 30 or 40 feet from the fairway. There the grass is thin and starved. During the days since the rough was last cut this grass has grown very little compared with the grass at the edge of the fairway, in which lies No. 3 ball. No. 4 ball has a lie which permits the use of a No. 3 or No. 2 iron or possibly a spoon. Such a situation places the most severe penalty on the player of ball No. 3. The difference between the lies of

Nos. 2 and 3 are entirely out of proportion to the difference in the accuracy of the shots.

Would it not have been far better to have found these four balls in the following situations? No. 1 receiving the reward of perfectly kept fairway turf with a perfect lie for a brassie shot; No. 2 in turf cut at fairway length but somewhat starved and thin, giving a lie which represented a mild penalty and offering a hazardous lie for wooden clubs and more probably requiring the use of an iron; No. 3 in thin starved turf cut somewhat higher than the fairway and offering a lie which was evidently not safe for a wooden club but which could be readily handled with a No. 3 or 4 iron—in other words, a lie which was only a trifle poorer than that of No. 2; bail No. 4, on the other hand, which represented a poor drive, would be found in deep heavy grass which would provide a distinct penalty.

Watering Savings Possible

By fertilizing and other care of the turf in some such way as to provide conditions in keeping with the purpose of the course it no doubt would be possible to greatly improve many of our golf courses and at the same time reduce maintenance costs. In sections where fairways must be watered continuously, as in California, the cost of this operation represents an important item in the budget. In some instances the item for water has had to be reduced but an attempt has been made to continue to keep turf watered practically the entire distance between tee and green. The result has been that all of the turf is poor.

On the other hand, some courses have confined the watering to smaller areas. This latter method has made it possible to maintain the turf in the approaches and the principal landing areas in good condition, with the result that the well-played shots have been rewarded with good lies.

Large improperly placed sand traps, which add greatly to the cost of maintenance, are still preserved on many golf courses even though they bother only the dub player. Long before the present depression started such traps were labeled as unnecessary, unsportsmanlike, and costly. Nevertheless, they are still in evidence. On many courses it would be wise economy to spend a little extra money in eliminating such monstrosities.

Along with the unnecessary traps should

go many of the steep banks around tees and greens and other relics of poor planning which have made it necessary to use excessive amounts of hand labor for maintenance and which have added nothing to the enjoyment of the game. A few hundred dollars spent in eliminating such features from the course will not only add to the enjoyment of the game but may prove to save thousands of dollars in maintenance costs over a period of years.

Folly in Too Close Cutting

The question of the height of cut of fairways should be considered from the standpoint of savings in the cost of maintenance. It has been amply demonstrated that the fairways of many of our golf courses have been kept cut entirely too closely. It has been shown that close cutting of fairways usually encourages weeds and multiplies the greenkeeper's problems in maintaining good turf. The recent developments in machinery have made it possible to cut fairways extremely close. On a closely-clipped fairway a ball will roll farther than on one on which the mowers have been set higher. When the wear and tear of machinery, cost of reseeding, weed control and other factors are considered, the cost of keeping fairways shaved closely is much greater than where they are kept longer.

Much attention in the past few years has been given to the subject of increased distance made possible by variations in the ball. Although not generally recognized, it is probable that more distance has been added to the average drive on many golf courses by improvements in mowing equipment than by improvements in the ball. All additions to the length of drives have added to the cost of maintenance of golf courses.

In the purchase of materials and equipment, golf courses as a class have established a reputation for poor judgment as well as poor credit. If expenditures had been made more wisely many of our golf clubs would not be in the deplorable financial condition they are in today. Greenkeepers often share the blame for this condition with various club officials. In some cases the greenkeeper has been practically forced to buy inferior products at exorbitant prices from a certain firm because of fear of offending a club member who is connected with that firm. Greenkeepers will recall many instances where there has been direct or indirect pressure brought to bear on purchases of equip-

ment or materials by club members. Unfortunately the greenkeeper is usually helpless against such influences and he is forced to be more economical in other ways to counteract this waste.

On the other hand, where the greenkeeper has been given entire freedom in making purchases, his spending has not always been wisely done. Many greenkeepers are too easily influenced by super-salesmanship. Representatives of large commercial organizations with reputable products sold at a narrow margin of profit have in despair told me that from experience they had decided it was useless to try to obtain golf course business without making direct personal contact with the clubs. Such a condition simply means that clubs must pay more than they should for what they use.

Those clubs which are paying a greenkeeper a salary representing something more than a foreman's pay have the right to expect that he will purchase materials and equipment on the basis of merit rather than on the basis of personalities or persuasion. On the other hand, the clubs that pay the greenkeeper little better than laborers' pay have only themselves to blame if they later discover that the lack of good purchasing judgment has cost them dearly. The large number of worthless or inferior products that find a ready market on courses is ample evidence that golf clubs could make huge savings by using better judgment in the purchase of materials and equipment.

Why Experiment?

Another source of waste on many golf courses is excessive experimentation conducted by the greenkeeper or the chairman of the green-committee. While experimentation is desirable if one wishes to make progress, it does not follow that all types are worth while. Experimental work is usually expensive and is not something to be taken as a hobby by committee members or greenkeepers at the expense of the club. Many of the items of expense for running a golf course which are listed as ordinary expenses are in reality wasteful expenditures for experiments to prove a theory held by the greenkeeper or a member of the green-committee.

It is difficult for the average citizen to understand that there is a big difference in viewpoint between the proving of a theory and real scientific experimentation. The difference was well illustrated when one of our country's leading sci-

entists was called upon to testify in a legal battle involving some technical questions. After hearing the technical facts in the case the lawyer remarked:

"Professor, it seems to me you have not proved the case."

The answer was, "It is the business of a lawyer to prove the case; it is the business of a scientist to learn the truth."

Unfortunately the experimentation on golf courses is too often dominated by the desire to prove a point rather than to learn the truth. It has been amply demonstrated that scientific experimental work can be done most economically by those who have the training and equipment to conduct it properly. Since most golf clubs are not run on a competitive basis there seems little to be gained by each club developing secret information by experimental work. A large nursery for trying out different kinds of grasses, or an expenditure of a thousand dollars or more for a trial of a certain new material are common examples of experimental extravagance when conducted by individual golf clubs without any systematic checking of results.

The fundamental purposes of a green-committee is to secure best playing conditions and to keep down excessive costs. Critics of the green-committee system assert that as a whole the system has been more harmful than useful, but such a condition need not be continued. It has been amply demonstrated that the system will work properly when handled by the right kind of men.

A chairman to act effectively should be himself available to club members for criticism and if a fair proportion of them object to certain features in the maintenance program he should present the criticisms to the greenkeeper, who in turn should see that the necessary changes are accomplished.

If the green-committee, functioning in some such manner, should find the greenkeeper is prejudiced, extravagant, and generally inefficient, it should then be the duty of the committee to see that he is replaced by another man with better understanding of greenkeeping problems.

As clubs endeavor to change to more economical methods of operation the greenkeepers as a whole should feel obligated to co-operate to the extent of trying to eliminate as far as possible from their profession some of the wasteful and extravagant methods that have been all too common in the past.