

How a Sound Labor Relations Plan Grew at A Golf Club

By LEO J. FESER

Looking back over a trail 30 years long is not half as interesting as looking forward on one of unlimited horizon. Few greenkeepers who looked ahead on that trail thru the land of golf in 1921 expected to see what we have now seen. The surprises were many and varied, some exceedingly pleasant, some depressing to the extreme. The trail certainly had its ups and downs. Gazing back we see the high spots but remember the low ones. Looking ahead, we see only the high spots, but know that the low ones are there. Experience is of value only as we look ahead and seek to apply the benefits of past experience to the problems of the future.

As the clouds of World War I were fading away, few of us looking up that trail expected to find that people and personalities would prove to be as interesting as "greens, tees, grass, trees, soils, seeds and golfer's needs". Yet I dare say that the influence of personalities, the individual golfer, the club officials, the salesmen, the technical men, and in no small way the workmen who did our bidding, was of immeasurable greater importance to our progress than all other factors combined.

The workmen who did our bidding and those who will do it in the future are of utmost importance in construction consideration of the trail ahead. Labor relation is not a problem peculiar to some member who happens to employ a lot of people in his plant. It is not something that might be settled for all time by friendly discussion with the people involved. Labor relations constitute a difficult problem demanding constant and endless consideration of those who are responsible for meeting the golfer's requirements on the golf course.

If we lived in the never-never land where altruism supreme ruled our thoughts and action, we should make certain assumptions as a sound basis on which a successful plan for labor relations could be constructed. Those assumptions are quite simple; the first would be that every laborer and every labor organization is primarily interested in giving the employer a full measure of service for every dollar paid to labor. The second would be that the employers are primarily interested in the security and welfare of

their employees, from the day they are employed until death do them part.

Golf Has Been Lucky

Par on the links of labor relations depends entirely upon how much weight can safely be placed on these assumptions. Obviously, neither assumption has carried too much weight in this land of reality, but looking back over the years, it seems that golf as a business comes closer to being that never-never land than any other industry. Perhaps the shrewd labor exploiter becomes more of an advocate of employee security when he joins a golf club. Perhaps the laborer who sleeps at his bench becomes a tireless marathon paragon behind a power mower. More likely it is because somewhere in the golf set-up, somebody is constantly striving both assumption to a high degree of practicality.

One of my privileges during the past 30 years has been being that somebody. Having retired as a golf course superintendent, there is nothing to gain by boasting about past accomplishments; I merely hope that by outlining past policy and efforts, and by recording some of the results obtained, the trail ahead may be made a bit more pleasant for those who are going to travel on it. As a golf course superintendent, many of my most pleasant and interesting moments were spent in discussion of the problem with my club officials and with the men who actually did the work on the golf course. While at times it appeared that a solution of a specific problem was impossible, thanks to the practical attitude of all concerned, "labor trouble" with us was something we read about in the papers.

All of these experiences took place in Minnesota. No apology is intended, but the following quotations from the 1941 Yearbook of Agriculture indicates the seasonal characteristic of golf course maintenance in this state: "Wide variations in the length of the growing season are to be expected . . . 90 to . . . 160 days. Snow-fall from 20 inches . . . to 70 inches. Vegetation is dormant during 7 months of the year."

Not the best climate for year-round employment of golf labor, but one that offered a top challenge to the workability of the assumption that employers are pri-

marily interested in the security and welfare of their employees. How to make the terms "security" and "welfare" mean something was a nice question back in 1921, just as it is today. Our approach was an effort to set up year-round employment for at least six maintenance men and make the investment pay off to the satisfaction of hard-headed business men who controlled the purse strings of the club.

In 1921 the late '20s boom, the following depression and the New Deal were all in the future. We didn't anticipate a government-sponsored social security plan. We didn't know that within a few years all business men would be struggling desperately to remain solvent, and that unemployment of millions of wage earners was to become an accepted burden on our economy. We had a country club that we wanted to operate in a way that would give the members the most pleasure for their dollars. To accomplish that, labor was necessary. If the hard-heads could be convinced that year-round employment of labor would give the members more pleasure for their dollars, they would open the purse enough to make that possible. It was that simple.

It was generally agreed that if we could develop a skilled labor force that could do all the usual technical maintenance jobs during the growing season and retain that force year after year, the efficiency resulting in actual maintenance would be much greater than that obtained by a crew composed of yearly new-comers. It was agreed that by re-

taining the same men over the years, a certain esprit de corps would be developed, stimulating a pride in workmanship. But how could six men be kept profitably busy thru a long snow-and frost-bound winter?

Program Developed

It would be presumptive to state that we sat down and worked out a program, and then just followed the plan. Rather we felt our way along, developing the program from year to year, to meet the requirements of changing conditions. But in a general way a plan of four major parts was followed.

The first was to maintain all the physical property of the club with our own workmen with a minimum amount of outside help. The second was to set up a long list of major improvement projects that could be carried out during the slack months. The third was to gradually acquire equipment that would make possible the extension of winter work, and the fourth was to promote winter activities at the club that would require labor.

Maintenance of our physical plant involved the training of men to do the many jobs usually accomplished by especially skilled labor. We sent men to trade schools to learn the fundamentals of carpentry, plumbing, furniture repair, painting, plastering, masonry and welding. When necessary, outside contractors were employed who would agree to use our men under the supervision of their foremen, and in this way they developed various skills by actually doing. We post-

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THE CIRCUS COMES TO THE MASTERS'



Paul Hahn, the young trick shot expert who's been headlining with his exhibitions, puts on a performance before the large gallery at the Masters' tournament. Hahn's sideshow got high approval from the crowd at Augusta.

Supts. Prepare Cost Survey for Chicago District

Midwest Assn. of Golf Course Supts., after considerable inquiry and discussion among supts., green chairmen and Chicago District Golf Assn. officials, has prepared what authorities declare is the most practical survey of golf course maintenance costs and methods ever devised. Copies of the booklet containing the survey queries have been sent to green chairmen of all CDGA clubs.

Purposes of the survey were to get data that could be practically compared, and to share experiences in cost accounting and methods. Superintendents and chairmen in preliminary discussions of the survey frankly admitted some data (especially areas involved) required for sound management of budgets was not known, hence the survey's spur to collecting basic information on one's own course was a valuable service to the CDGA clubs.

Divisions of the survey include general information, club activities determining extent and character of maintenance work, superintendent's arrangement with the club, labor, greens, tees, fairways, traps, rough, trees and shrubs, equipment, water system, budget and expenses, nursery.

Although comprehensive in details of costs and methods and controlling factors the survey is remarkably simple. It is an exceptionally valuable contribution to the development of business management of golf courses.

Sources of the material will be held confidential.

Raymond Gerber is chairman of the Midwest Information committee which compiled the survey form and is conducting the survey. He is supt., Glen Oak CC. Robert Williams of Beverly and Donald Strand of Westmoreland are on the committee with Gerber.

As the survey form constitutes the most complete operating and cost outline that has been worked out for golf courses,

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superintendents and chairman outside the Chicago district who have learned of it have expressed keen desire to secure copies. A few are available for supts. and chairmen and may be secured from Raymond Gerber, 865 Hillside ave., Glen Ellyn, Ill., at \$1 a copy, which undoubtedly is less than the cost per copy of

SOUND LABOR RELATIONS

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time and money spent on this job.

poned any inside maintenance work that could be delayed until the slack period when the weather was very bad. (We refused to do any work in the homes of members, even tho there was some pressure brought to bear on this point. By this refusal the respect and goodwill of the local contractors and tradesmen were retained.)

The list of major improvement projects consisted of such items as building and widening roads and parking areas, cutting down hills and making fills in swamps or undesirable low areas, constructing the base for tennis courts, building walls, hauling rock, trimming and planting trees. One project involved the excavation of a basement under a building and pouring a concrete slab, supported by proper framework. In this instance a consulting en-

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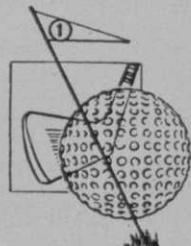
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gineer was employed to assist in our planning.

While it is still necessary to rent some equipment required in winter operations, items such as blasting equipment, tractor loaders, power saw, snow removal machinery, truck and other items have gradually been acquired. Winter activities such as skeet and trap shooting, skiing and ice skating all require considerable maintenance labor which help to keep the men profitably employed.

Pension Plan Adopted

During a quarter century of development and use of the year-round employment theory, the assumptions of reciprocal employer-employee interest became so much a part of our every-day operation that it not only became the norm, it stimulated the desire of all concerned to weld it into permanent form. A young, progressive club president conceived the idea of an employee pension, based on years of service and financed by voluntary contributions from the members. The contributions are billed quarterly on the members' monthly statement, and the system is operating as smoothly as a putting green in June.

Employee appreciation is best demonstrated by an analysis of club operating

costs. Our per hole cost of golf maintenance is substantially lower than that of comparable clubs. Likewise, the costs of maintenance of buildings, pool, tennis courts and other property is low in comparison to private facilities of comparable nature. In addition to these advantages, the membership has received the benefits of a constant low-cost improvement plan that has expanded the facilities of the club to make it presently the most diversified-activity club in the Upper Midwest. Looking ahead on the golf trail in 1952, it is not difficult to see that labor relations are going to be of prime importance. It seems rather obvious that maintenance men will be recognized as a skilled trade group. Golf maintenance is an art as well as a science.

Club officials and superintendents will continue to wrestle with the all-important problem of costs and accomplishments, and labor will continue to be the most important factor in bringing about the necessary balance. No rules or assumptions will solve the problem, but a constant effort to bring the assumptions set forth in this article to a high degree of reality will pay big dividends. We have been getting dividends for a quarter-century. They are still coming in.

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