

Course Maintenance Cost Study Is Neglected

By CHARLES W. PARKER

A nation-wide study of course maintenance costs is again being proposed and before the shouting for and against this controversial subject, either kills the proposal or generates an inadequately planned survey we must consider a few elementary questions.

Who definitely wants such a study? Just how comprehensive must it be to be of permanent value? If, and when, such a study is completed and conclusions are drawn and the presentation made in a form that will permit of practical application who will be interested enough to make the application? What worthwhile end results will there be?

Over the years GOLFDOM has published numerous articles on this subject. Some have been in favor. Some have been opposed. Unquestionably GOLFDOM has a file of "pro" and "con" on maintenance cost accounting that will bring to light some very interesting source material.

To infer that no appreciation of the problems of maintenance costs has existed other than by GOLFDOM or that no other attempts have been made to generate interest among golf course superintendents is definitely wrong. In addition to GOLFDOM'S efforts the subject has been presented at schools for greenkeepers, conferences and conventions. Here the approach has been that of "selling" the golf course superintendents on course costs accounting through the medium of the experience of others. Attempts have been made to demonstrate that the individual experiences of some superintendents shows that cost records and the analysis of the information contained has been of inestimable value and that all golf course superintendents are delinquent in not having a chapter on maintenance costs in their book of knowledge.

Course maintenance cost accounting as a minor subject in the concentrated program of a short course for greenkeepers or a paper read at a conference or a convention serves only as an introduction and cannot arouse much more than passing interest.

It is not hard to understand why the seeds sown have largely fallen on barren ground. If some superintendents have become convinced and inspired sufficiently to assume the added burden of cost-keeping the end results have too often been

disillusioning. With the initial aim set too high they have been expecting to exert immediate influence on policy rather than being content to develop a background of several years of information and to demonstrate to themselves that cost records are helpful and valuable.

When figures go to the top level the first question asked is where do the figures come from and what can the figures be compared with? A set of immature figures or a report that has no yardstick for comparison will have little value at the policy level.

What Value Are Figures?

Up to now about all that comes out of a collection of maintenance cost figures from the sources available to clubs are "so what" figures. More or less has been spent as compared internally with some previous period. The cost per hole was so much or a "mean" had been worked out to be so much. The ratio of maintenance cost to membership dues may be used for external comparison but, again, "so what." What actually has been going on in the attempts of the past has resulted only in the exhibition of various pictures all of them out of focus.

Just where are we at this point? Had the work of the past generated sufficient interest the efforts would have been continuing and it would not be necessary to admit that planned and effective follow-up has been conspicuous by its absence. Nevertheless each new effort has created some interest, negative tho most of it has been, so let us go to the record and examine what this interest has been.

Golf course superintendents have been accused of being adverse to comprehensive study of maintenance costs when the need for such study has been proposed chiefly to make external comparisons possible. "How can we compare an apple and a pineapple?" superintendents ask.

Many golf course superintendents keep very close tabs on their maintenance costs. They are not interested in broadcasting their figures for they know that unless comparisons can be made with allowances for the uncontrollables and "wild factors", one course to the other, the end results are inconclusive. Such comparisons may be somewhat valuable but a true picture cannot be produced by comparing the dollars-and-cents figures

alone. These figures must be tempered by a knowledge of the variables. It has been the disregard of these variables and the acceptance of cold figures only that has developed a definite antagonism to external comparisons.

Some experienced superintendents doubt that detailed maintenance costs have much practical value. They are of the belief that among chairmen and other officials there is no real interest in such costs; that knowing such costs will produce nothing but trouble and that the only official interest in costs is that any cost is too great.

A quick look at the actual practices of three top superintendents seemingly confirms this opinion that detailed costs aren't essential. Each man is covering his job to the complete satisfaction of his club. How these men treat costs varies from doing absolutely nothing about detailed records, to keeping just enough records to keep within the budget, to the third man who keeps detailed cost records, intelligently arrived at and from which he submits an annual report that strongly influences the policy of the green committee.

Interest Is Intermittent

Committees and officials who should be interested in maintenance costs and ought to want improvement in the presentation of such figures are inclined to show their interest by "talk" rather than "do." What interest they have is sporadic. It appears generally only when club finances are causing concern and lasts only for the length of the crisis. The tenure of office of a club official is limited and upon return to the status of member he ceases to contribute further constructive services to his club.

Too often the club official, while expressing the need for better figures from which to determine and carry out policies, feels that some one else is delinquent in not furnishing such figures. Just who, or why this is so is rarely determined. If any action is taken it is to have the general accounting methods overhauled. Unfortunately all that comes out of this action is to have the same old figures presented in a little different way.

Herb Graffis' article "Golf Clubs in a Fog on Operating Costs" in February *GOLFDOM* makes clear what some associations have been attempting to do. Two strong district associations have been trying for a number of years to compile maintenance cost figures that mean something and from which external comparisons may be made. What have the results been so far? The associations are handicapped because of lack of co-operation from the member clubs. So we have the strange picture of a number of individual clubs formed into an association to pro-

mote and improve golf, handcuffing the association through the inability or unwillingness on the part of the member clubs to furnish vital information.

The USGA Green Section, born as a turf research medium, may have the responsibility of leading research into course operating costs.

Regardless of the figures broadcast about the increase in golf play there has been no great increase in golf course construction and the possibility of some clubs being priced out of business is real. It may be all well and good to quote figures showing the big increase in play on publicly operated golf courses and to report that these facilities are being expanded rapidly. An investigation will show that golfers will tolerate crowded and chaotic playing conditions to a certain point, beyond that point they will become casual golfers or will stop playing altogether. This situation is putting emphasis on study of golf maintenance costs.

A majority of the golf course superintendents together with club officials and the policy makers of the golf associations must be convinced that a workable method of comparing golf course maintenance costs can be developed and that the results will be real and continuing value. The superintendents must demonstrate that they are whole-heartedly behind the study of a difficult problem. From the official side it must be made clear that the prime interest is to bring out into the open what the factors are that are making the costs burdensome and why this is so and what the remedies may be. From that point it will then be a policy problem of an individual club to make application of the information that will be available.

The end results of this study will not be a source of satisfaction to everyone. Neither the superintendents nor club officials are going to be happy when some of the "whys" come to light. Some superintendents will have to make rapid changes in their thinking and some club officials will find that their policies have been those of expediency; penny-wise and pound-foolish.

Working Base for the Study

For this proposed study a sound working base must be established. This can only come from the completely co-operative effort of the golf course superintendents, golf officials and golf associations. All levels of interest must be included and the effort must be continuing until the last "i" is dotted and the last "t" crossed.

Much of this work will have to come from the superintendents for it is at this level that most of the source material has

to come and when the final results are arrived at it will be from the superintendent level that the continuing implementation will be made.

However, the club official and golf association level must not be discounted for from here will come the information on what is needed to be known, at this level, and in what form so that golf maintenance costs may be tied in with other operating costs to give a true over-all picture. The "why" of golf maintenance costs has been presented inadequately so that when the problems of club finances are being studied and policies determined the golf course is usually the goat.

The building up of a fund to guarantee the successful completion of this study may appear to be the major difficulty. It is not intended to infer that this is not a real problem but when the solicitation campaign is backed by solid proof that this study is wanted and needed and that a sound program for procedure has been drawn up, resistance to co-operating through grants-in-aid will be definitely reduced.

Because it is at the superintendent level that much of the eventual benefit will be realized, here too, must come not only organizational support but also money backing. The Golf Course Superintendents Assn. must lead the way in both and must expect to put up a worthwhile amount of money. The many sectional associations of golf course superintendents will have to fall in line behind the major association.

The Green Section can well afford to make a grant-in-aid. The business side of golf is very much the concern of the Green Section and while the diversion of some money from turf research to cost research may not be immediately appealing, the long view will show that from this study must come more members for the USGA and consequently an increased budget for the Green Section.

The various district golf associations ought to see that to co-operate through grants-in-aid will be the best method for them to support the study and that they can help further by securing donations from their member clubs. The financial burden can be lightened by grants-in-aid from the manufacturers and dealers in the maintenance equipment and materials field and also by the manufacturers and distributors of playing equipment.

GOLFDOM has offered the impetus for a study of course maintenance costs and it is now up to all the levels of interest to pick up the offer and develop the project. Where this start will come from remains to be seen but certainly the Golf Course Superintendents Assn. will be serving its members and clubs in seriously examining the opportunity now spread before it.

Intelligent Comparison of Course Costs Tough Job

By JOHN L. COUNSELL

Supt., Salem (Mass.) Country Club

No element in golf management has received as much studious attention as the comparison of golf course maintenance costs has received from the men responsible for course operation.

Almost every superintendent of a golf course sees so many more things he'd like to be able to do to his course, if the money were available, that he is constantly looking for possible improvements in his management of the budget dollar. The days have long passed when superintendents hesitated to compare costs. For years we have been trying to learn how to do the work better and at less cost, or fight the problem of rapidly mounting costs.

And this search has brought to members of the Greenkeepers' Club of New England realization that to make an intelligent comparison of course costs you have to know practically as much about the other course as you do about your own when you are striving to make a close comparison.

It is my conviction — and it's shared by many of my associates in course maintenance work — that it is possible for a very efficiently operated course to cost \$10,000 to \$15,000 a year more to maintain than another course in the same district where conditions are much different. Club officials, not knowing the different conditions which are primary subjects for comparison, may be inclined to compare the bare costs which are basically the secondary factor in the comparison.

Here are a few of the varying factors in determining course maintenance costs that come to my mind:

1. Area of greens, fairways, tees, traps and rough.
2. Standard of maintenance (and how are you going to compare that?)
3. Number of daily rounds of golf, and length of season.
4. Soil and climatic conditions.
5. Club accounting systems (No two are exactly alike.)
6. Fairway watering — increased mowing and fertilizing costs.
7. Variations of salaries and wages in different areas.
8. Equipment (Is it sufficient and modern?)
9. House and grounds (area and type of planting.)
10. Chemical treatments (for weeds, diseases and pests.)

Unless one can get data that can be uniformly and closely compared on these 10 factors an accurate over-all comparison of maintenance costs is impossible.