

Spotlight on super service

By JIM MANKA

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Everyone employed in the golf industry gives service to the golfer in some particular manner. Who is responsible for the most important service enjoyed by any golf player? In my opinion, it is the golf course superintendent. You could take away the costly clubhouses, or swimming pools, but the golf course will *always* exist, for this is the first reason most members join a club.

The superintendent's ability to extend to members the best possible service reflects upon his talents as a businessman. Sometimes, the principles of sound course management conflict with ideas maintained by a member. That's when a degree in political science can be more valuable than any other qualification to survive country club employment!

Service to the member, from the golf course superintendent's point of view, begins at the club entrance. He can ill afford to leave the litter of last night's beer cans around the front gate. Especially with guests, first impressions may be lasting impressions. Roads and the club parking lot should be clearly marked with proper signs. Hedges used as screens in the parking lot must be kept cut and not allowed to serve as a backstop for windblown debris.

Using annual flowers will add color along walkways to the clubhouse. It is important that flower or shrub beds around the clubhouse or on the grounds be kept neat, free of weeds and litter to

be of the desired aesthetic value.

Out on the course, teeing areas should contain adequate benches for all players, a trash disposal basket, uniform tee markers, yardage and handicap signs, clean tee towels, and operative ball washers. The area around washers should not contain puddles from the overflow of the ball washing fluid. Application of a cold mix or crushed rock adjacent to the ball washers will correct this eyesore.

Good housekeeping practices must be taught to all employees. One sheet of paper may become a hundred pieces after entering a rotary mower.

Drinking fountains, shelter houses, and restrooms must be kept clean and serviceable. Often, cleanser and elbow grease is all that is needed to make a radical improvement.

Of course, the greatest service any superintendent can render his membership is to keep the entire course in play at all times.

However, diseases, insects and weather have never respected man, his wishes or his ability to maintain fine golfing turf.

Sometimes, adverse turfgrass conditions may necessitate closing areas of the course. Badly damaged areas may need complete renovation and be unplayable for long periods. Some loss of turf may be corrected by overseeding and declaring the area "ground under repair." This area must be properly defined and clearly marked. Many times the superintendent will be able to have an injured location sodded. Using the latter method, the greensmaster is able to keep the area in play.

Syringing of bent or *poa annua* greens and fairways (this is a light application

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Demands on the super encompass more than maintenance—he must also be a diplomat as well as an educator.

of water by hand or sprinkler for a brief period of time, say, up to 10 minutes) on a hot afternoon with cold water may be considered a disservice by some players. Yet, if this were not done, by night an overextended grass plant may have collapsed for the last time.

Superintendents realize and more greens chairmen now recognize a little water will save "lost grass" when properly applied at a critical time. Often, the *apparent* disservice of today may well be the service of tomorrow that will keep turf for the balance of the season.

Golfers tend to resent the fact that healthy grass must be cut, fed, watered, sprayed and topdressed when they play the course. Maintenance interferes with play—it's as simple as that. However, it's well to remember that, thirty years ago, the practice of sending a work crew to a different part of the course to avoid player interference was rather easy. Today, the increased popularity of golf makes this practice very difficult.

Certainly the scheduling of maintenance activities to avoid interference to members during periods of heavy play by male golfers and Ladies Day is a *major* concern for all superintendents. In this regard, early starting of course maintenance workers has proven helpful, when you are able to find early risers. An extra man cutting greens on the first few holes on Saturday morning will enable maintenance crews to avoid player contact. Supplemental workers during the twilight hours of evening are able to perform many golf course tasks. Presently, some courses cut fairways at night.

However, at all times—and especially when undertaking a large renovation or

major construction project—it is a good policy to keep the golfers informed of the highlights, purposes and reasons for the work. Making use of the club bulletin boards, newsletters or a general membership notice will decrease many gripes and unwanted questions. Some members become more annoyed at NOT knowing why or when than they do about the cost of the project.

Many players, who enjoy rounds of golf at different courses, are quick to make comparisons with absolutely no knowledge of the other club's operations or even his own club's. It is up to the superintendent to make certain his members don't get steamed up unnecessarily through ignorance of the facts.

Services that a golf course superintendent is able to perform for a golfer can be restricted by one or a combination of these factors: monetary funds; manpower; geo-physical relationships; weather and vandalism.

Though many golf clubs are established as non-profit amenities, they go one step further to operate on our great governmental principle of deficit financing. The HCL (High Cost of Living) is now a reality that affects all our lives. As the costs of goods and services increase, they must be absorbed by the golfer. Once, however, a group has accustomed itself to conditions on a golf course, it becomes increasingly difficult to initiate a change. Members expecting to find at least one rake close to every sand trap or sand traps raked daily, may become very irritable when they find their golf ball in a giant footprint in the sand.

Manpower has been in short supply to golf course maintenance departments since World War II. Higher wages, better hours, free weekends and numerous fringe benefits offered by industry have made it exceedingly difficult to obtain employees. Therefore, many extra jobs or personal services at some golf courses,

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such as raking traps, are totally neglected in the interests of economy.

One example of geo-physical limitations is that members of links adjacent to the ocean can never expect to enjoy the great variety of plant materials found at inland courses. At Inwood, for example, only Norway maples, planes, Russian olives and Japanese black pines have survived the brackish water and the salt water breezes over the years. Also, oceanside courses along the south shore of Long Island are flat by comparison to those on the north shore.

The weather is, of course, another factor which superintendents cannot control. We hope that the five-year drought that has plagued the northeastern United States recently is now history. Many clubs were restricted to the volume of water obtainable by governing municipalities.

Another limiting factor on the superintendent's service to his members is vandalism. Maintaining golf courses becomes more expensive annually because of this menace. No club appears free from this wanton damage.

Only recently, I had two large beds of tulips completely destroyed by vandals. It also would be impossible to forecast the number of tee towels removed by outside agencies at 8,000 golf clubs. It is regrettable that regardless of club location and the preventative steps taken to curb vandalism, it still continues to grow.

The great growth and popularity of the game of golf closely parallels the rise of golf cars usage and the demise of the caddy ranks. In assuming the golf car maintenance responsibilities, the superintendent will enhance his value to his organization and becomes responsible for a valuable member service. Golf cars must be kept clean and in good condition to receive maximum use by the players. Who is more amply qualified to oversee this service than the superintendent, who already has a mechanic on his staff.

Improper operation of a gasoline or electric golf car may result in serious bodily injury to the occupants or damage to the vehicle or course. Use of a golf car sometimes must be denied, if it is detrimental to the course or other players. Therefore, superintendents should affix a copy of all rules pertaining to car operation in a clearly visible place. Also, special rules that are in force on wet or extremely hot days should be clearly posted and visible to all players. It might even be a good idea to clip a copy of these rules to the car itself in the interests of member safety and protection of the course.

Many members have endless questions to ask about their course. It is therefore a good practice for the superintendent to spend Saturday morning around the first tee meeting different members and to take an occasional trip through the lockerroom. Don't forget the former idea on Ladies Day. Members desire information on matters other than their golf games.

Many golfing home owners, for instance, constantly strive to have their lawns as good, if not better than the local golf course. The last of July will find many amateur greensmasters uttering the old Dodger battle cry—just wait until next year!

Some of the more successful lawn enthusiasts will discuss their problems with the golf course superintendent when they play golf. They find free professional advice from a qualified individual familiar with their immediate area.

A few superintendents post lawn tips on bulletin boards or have a copy posted in the club newsletter. Increased use of this practice fosters good relations with members as well as performing a real service to them.

The value of publicity, especially free publicity is welcomed by most clubs. Today, local golf events in some areas receive better coverage than many major golf tournaments. Attending these events, the superintendent contacts other people interested in golf and golf writers who

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are seeking copy material. A greensmaster attending a golf event or visiting another club is indirectly representing the club and himself.

Everyone knows about the course labor problem, but who is interested in employee wages, holidays, retirement benefits, health insurance or the morale of the maintenance crew? Generally speaking, the greensmaster must concern himself with these problems. Suddenly, after union representatives have been elected to negotiate all labor relation problems, the member is quick to ask why and how. Here, the superintendent can serve a valuable role by preserving labor harmony if the labor relations board does not select another representative.

Early in the spring, a golf clinic serves as an excellent member relations opportunity. Here the neatly attired superintendent can explain golf courtesy, care of the course after a poor shot and the player's responsibility in maintaining the course. How many members, for example, know the correct way to enter and leave a sand trap, replace a divot or fix a ball mark? Prepare in advance for a shock and ride around the course Sunday morning.

Observe the divots removed on a par five tee by a driver, footprints the length of a trap and up the steep slope that required a partner's extended hand to reach the turf again. Then await that innocent cry, "not our members—they wouldn't do that." But who else used the course?

The golf industry will serve more players as its growth continues. The superintendent's responsibilities and the member services he performs will no doubt expand. However, it is the efficiency with which he discharges his present duties and his readiness to assume additional tasks that will enhance his value to the club. And remember this—good communications with members will help overcome some of the limiting factors in golf course operations as well as enhance yourself and your profession. ●