

Confessions of a superintendent

Anonymous

Last year tremendous reader interest was generated by a series of "Confessions." This year begins a renewal of this series.

Right after I graduated from the turf management school at Penn State in 1953 I got a job as head superintendent of a nine-hole course in a town with a population of about 30,000 in southern Ohio. I stayed there for two years, then moved up to one of the better clubs in the Cleveland district.

I doubled my salary when I moved. In the 14 years I have been at the Cleveland club I've done well financially—better perhaps than 75 per cent of the superintendents in the district.

But many times, and more often in recent years, I wished I was back at my original club. The reason: there's too much pressure at a big city club—too much demand for excellence.

At the smaller club we had bluegrass fairways, bentgreens, of course, and very few traps. The club since has been expanded to 18 holes, but still retains its original characteristics. It's a good course, not a great one. The members want things nice, but they're not overly fastidious.

I used to maintain the course with two men. I was a working superintendent. Now, with 18 holes, they have a six-man crew. The last time I visited the club, about two years ago, the superintendent told me that he is a kind of part-time worker, but most of his time is devoted to supervision. He has been there seven years. The members, as far as he can see, aren't any harder to work for now than they were when he started. He says they seem to be satisfied that he gives them as much as he can with the money he has to work with. He doesn't

have any pressing labor problems. He looks happy.

I envy him. And, I'll let you in on a secret. I'm not the only superintendent at one of the metropolitan clubs that wouldn't be tempted to trade places with him. I've heard this discussed more than once, believe me.

As I see it, there are two things that make a difference between a big city club and a small town club. The primary one is the labor situation. The second is the demands of the membership.

At my old club, the superintendent has two men year-around besides himself. One has been with him for the seven years he has been at the club; the other for five years. Three of his four part-time employees have worked for him for at least two years. All of the latter are either high school or college students who are available not only through the summer but on weekends during the spring and fall. Every man in the crew is trained to do a variety of maintenance jobs. That is the advantage of having a stable staff. There is time to give each employee thorough training. The superintendent at my former club doesn't know what a labor problem is!

Contrast his situation with mine. I have 15 men working for me at the height of the season. Three of them are full-time employees, but only one has been with me continuously for as long as three years. I have gone out of my way to get more money and added fringe benefits for my full-time men in an effort to keep them. But with the exception of just the one, I have lost them to the

local labor market. Those who have left, usually after one or two years, have said that they like working on a golf course, but there is more money elsewhere. They can go into a factory and do routine, repetitive work and make 50 or 60 cents more an hour than they can at the course doing a variety of jobs that requires a good deal of skill and no little amount of resourcefulness.

A few years back I had the best mechanic I've ever seen. He could do anything. I got him two raises in six months, but with five kids he still had to moonlight to make a living. He stayed at the club for a little less than a year, then finally decided to work full-time for the company for which he was moonlighting. This firm offered him \$50 more a week than I could. I've never found a man who could come close to replacing him.

It's a pretty situation when you can't keep three full-time men as the nucleus of your labor staff. Ideally, it should be five, or one-third of the full summertime crew. For at least the last eight or nine years, I've had to train one or two so-called permanent employees every spring due to our turnover. In most cases the training period has been too short or some phases of it have been neglected because at the same time we've been getting ready to open the course for the season. And, of course, we recruit labor at this time of the year. A superintendent should have no less than three experienced men on hand in the spring to help train the newcomers.

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Problems connected with the part-time or summertime staff are even greater than with the permanent staff. You hope to get three or four men back from the previous year. Five are too many to hope for. Then, you have to look for a half dozen more men to bring your labor force up to strength. The upshot is that if you get a total of five, including old and new, who stay with you through the season, you're lucky. The attrition goes on all summer. In desperation, you may hire two or three doubtful specimens just to have bodies present. They may stay on or disappear. Mature high-school kids and college kids work out pretty well, only they're not available until mid-June and many times they quit early in August to go with their families on vacation. Just when you need them most!

Once again, it is in the heat of the summer when you're fighting to keep your course from being ravaged by nature and your maintenance crew from being decimated, that you wish you were back in that town in southern Ohio, where the staff stays on and the members aren't so damn fussy about the upkeep of their course. Sometimes, in fact, you wish you were even farther back than that—at a nine-hole course where they have sand greens and are lucky if the fairways are mowed once a week. The grass there may be dormant already but it looks a lot greener than yours.

What people who belong to country clubs, metropolitan or otherwise, don't realize is that it takes a long time to train a man to become a competent course worker. You can explain this to many a green chairman or committeeman and get a pretty blank reaction. Many of them will raise an eyebrow or give you a kind of tentative "Is that so?" when you point out that it takes several months to teach a fellow the proper way to change a cup; or half a season for a man to

learn how to run a fairway mower; or at least a month for a new employee to acquire the skill to whip a green and run a mower in a straight line, and another month to teach him how to detect disease. Night watering certainly isn't learned in one night or a dozen. As for chemicals, neither I nor any superintendent is going to allow a man to apply them on his own for at least a year.

As I say, most people don't have any concept of how much training you have to give a person to fit him for working on a course. When he quits on you after having been trained for a month or so, you get that crushed feeling.

The fact that most people around a club look upon a course worker as nothing more than an unskilled laborer, who can be easily replaced, keeps the maintenance wage rate down. As a result, we aren't able to compete with industry for the type of capable and conscientious man we'd like to have. There isn't any doubt that golf clubs are hurt by it. Specifically, let's say the superintendent is hurt by it. With all the other demands on him, the labor problem is sometimes almost more than he can take. At least, it's that way in the big city clubs.

I mentioned earlier that I think the demands of the membership of a metropolitan club are a good deal more trying than at a smaller club. From my observation, we are called upon to keep our courses better conditioned than superintendents at the outlying clubs. Maybe this isn't true in all cases, but in a general way, I think it is. Statistics and economics, if nothing else, support my claim.

On the average we have almost twice as many employees as they do at smaller clubs. Our payrolls are nearly twice as high. This implies we have to do about twice as much work on our courses as they do. However, I'm not losing sight of the fact that part of the payroll differential is due to the higher wage rates in the cities versus those in smaller communities. And, because their labor is more stable than ours and probably better trained, courses at the

smaller clubs may be maintained more efficiently than those at the big city clubs on a per man basis. Still, with our larger staffs, I'm sure we're turning out a good deal more work than they are. We'd better be, or some day some of us big city superintendents are going to be investigated.

I think this reasoning can be extended to the purchase of such things as chemicals and fertilizers. The bills for these items, according to the figures I've seen, consistently run from 30 per cent to 40 per cent higher at metropolitan clubs than at smaller clubs. So, we must be fertilizing more and treating more turf, even if we are enjoying it less, because our members demand it. Our equipment investments, according to statistics, also are about 30 per cent to 40 per cent higher than those of small clubs.

I don't know why big city members demand more excellence than those who play at small town clubs. Perhaps it's because they pay higher dues or it costs them more to belong to their clubs. Maybe it's because they are more sophisticated, more competitive and more affluent. I am inclined to think they get around more and play more surrounding clubs than small town members. Then, when they return to their home clubs, they want something incorporated in their courses that they saw somewhere else. I've heard more than one metropolitan superintendent say that he wished there was a ban on members traveling around to other courses.

All I know is that it looks to be a lot tougher to be a superintendent at a big city course than one in the hinterland. The labor situation gets a little worse for us each year, and for the last seven or eight years the demands of our members have been growing. It seems that the pressure never ends. I envy the brethren at the smaller clubs. It looks like they're living in Camelot. One of these days I might decide to go back and join them. It may cost me a few thousand a year to do it, but I've got a hunch I'll get my money back in improved health and a better disposition. □