

# Reflections on the Superintendent's Image

Perhaps our image is difficult to define, says this figurative superintendent, because we don't know what we want

A composite of interviews by JOE DOAN

Illustrated by Art Sudduth

**F**or the 20 years I've been in the course maintenance business, we've been kicking around this image thing. It has been hashed over at most of the Golf Course Superintendents' Assn. of America conventions I've attended. It has long been a favorite topic at regional conferences and the same probably can be said of the local meetings. It's a subject that a lot of us seemingly don't want to bury. But for all the mileage we've given it, I still don't think it has been made clear what superintendents want or what we're trying to prove.

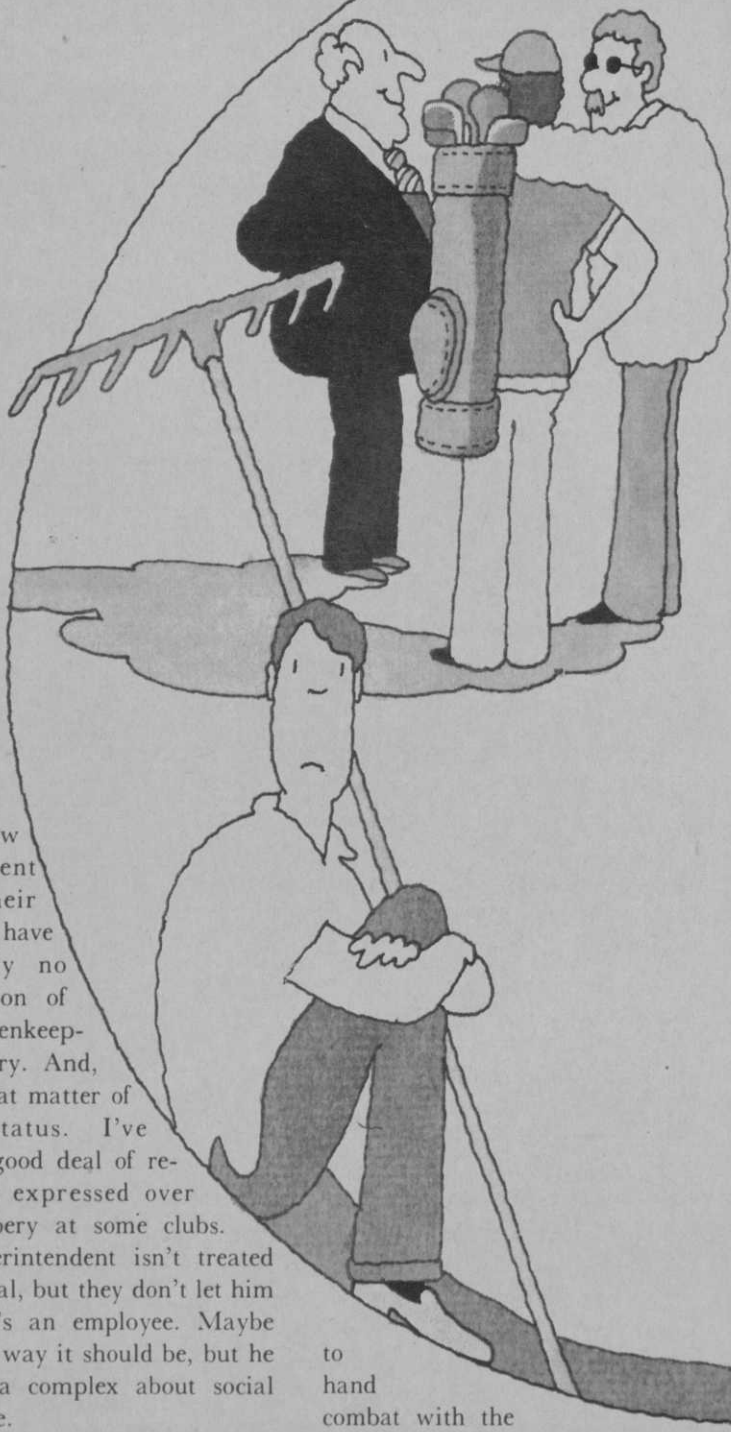
Some superintendents feel that we don't have much of an image because we're weak in public relations. Others say that the educational background needed to be a superintendent works to our detriment so far as image building is concerned. I've heard more than one superintendent dust off that word, "identification," and then state that compared to the pros and club managers, we're so far out in the boondocks nobody is aware that there is such an animal as a golf course superintendent. I've

heard quite a few men lament that their members have absolutely no appreciation of their greenkeeping artistry. And, there's that matter of social status. I've heard a good deal of resentment expressed over the snobbery at some clubs. The superintendent isn't treated as a menial, but they don't let him forget he's an employee. Maybe that's the way it should be, but he develops a complex about social acceptance.

The majority of superintendents don't have these hang-ups. But that doesn't mean they ridicule or look with contempt upon those that do. They realize that some hang-ups are valid or, at least, they exist. They don't pooh-pooh the image idea, either, knowing that every professional or occupational group has an image, whether it courts it or not.

But they don't get into a big sweat over these things. These fellows don't think they are in hand

to hand combat with the pros or club managers for a fair share of recognition at their clubs. They don't downgrade education, but they believe vastly more is learned about course maintenance by working at it than studying it. They don't worry about social status because most of them never give a thought to hobnobbing with members of their clubs. As for image building, they feel they have to do most of it on an individual basis. Oh, it can be a collective undertaking by the GCSAA, but there is only so much the corpo-





rate body can do. Nevertheless the association continues to try to build up the image of its members. One aid, a pamphlet entitled "Golf Course Superintendents' Public Relations," contains information to help the local chapters set up a public relations program. It also issues releases describing the job of the superintendent.



Let's take a look at public relations. In the minds of

most people, getting your name in the newspaper is public relations. Public relations experts say this is only a beginning, but beyond this I don't understand the ramifications.

Assuming that newspaper publicity is public relations, what does it amount to? I had my name on the sports page five or six years ago as a guest expert on winterkill. I was splashed over a full column, complete with my picture. How much image did it build for me? I got three phone calls—one from my green chairman and two from neighboring superintendents.

A little more than a year ago a superintendent friend of mine got some nasty phone calls after being quoted in the newspaper as asking what is going to take the place of DDT. He was quoted in one of those dash and dot columns golf writers write. One of the calls was from the wife of an affluent member. She's a bird lover. The writer didn't include everything the superintendent told him; that there

are several million species of insects that are capable of doing a better job of poisoning mankind than DDT has. Anyway, this fellow is still getting dirty looks from the wife of the influential member.

A funny incident involving public relations and identity happened at a midwestern club about five years ago. A company that manufactures sprinklers put on an extensive advertising and publicity campaign. The president of the company had his picture taken with a pro examining a map of a course irrigation system. To give the pro his due, he tried to explain to the high powered PR man that the superintendent was the logical man to be in the picture. But he wouldn't listen. The picture got pretty wide circulation. It was received with a good deal of snickering, especially among superintendents. Maybe some even boycotted the product.

Some sensitive superintendents will seize on such an incident and say: "See, it proves our point. Everyone thinks the pro is in charge of maintenance at a club. No wonder we have no image."

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That is about 90 per cent wrong. It used to be that way, maybe 15 years ago. Then, even a lot of golf writers thought the pro was in charge of course maintenance. But not any more. They have been educated. As far as I can see, golf writers are our champions. They give us a good play and they do what they can to help us build an image.

As for our relationship with pros and club managers, I think it is generally good. Or, as good as in any other business where the management function is divided among three departments. Personality conflicts are inevitable. But in recent years the three have been working more closely together, sublimating their individual interests for the good of the club.

There is no doubt that the image and prestige of the pro is resented by many superintendents, even bitterly by a small percentage. I've never fully understood the ratio-

nale for this. Tradition makes the pro the glamour figure at the club. He's the front for all of us. He couldn't change this if he wanted to, so why should I resent it? I've got better things to do than worry about my image versus that of the pro.

The pro at our club and I have been working together for 12 years. We're good friends. The closest we've ever come to a falling out is over the closing of the course. A few times he has thought I was hasty in doing it, but after I explained my reason he accepted it. He always lets me know that it costs him money when I put up the "No Golf" sign; I always reply that he'll make it up.

I've always been closer to the pro at our club than the club manager, simply because my job throws me into more frequent contact with the pro. On a couple of occasions I've had to battle down to the last dollar of my budget with the manager. I haven't been overly annoyed by this because the club's

policy calls for the manager's reviewing all expenditures. If my budget had been arbitrarily cut without my getting a chance to justify the figures I submitted, I would have been put out. Some superintendents tell me this happens to them. Nine times out of 10 it's because they don't protest. Instead, they sulk. Too many of these fellows have the impression that the club manager has too strong a position at a club to be opposed. Some of them say the manager oversteps his authority in other ways. Personally, I don't sympathize with them. If the lines of authority at a club aren't clearly defined and it bugs the superintendent, he should get off his duff and do something about it.

Most of the men in our profession are products of the college short courses, although an increasing number have been getting degrees in agricultural sciences and agronomy in recent years. I'm not going to argue the degree business

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## IMAGE

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here. I don't have one, but I don't feel like I'm underprivileged. I spent two years alternating between a turf management school and working on a course. From a practical standpoint, I don't think you can beat this kind of education. Furthermore, like other occupations, I don't think course or turf management necessarily lends itself to four years of college training as do other fields.

Our strong point, as I see it, is that we're pretty much self educated. In the last 20 years, superintendents have done as much as any class of people in educating themselves through conventions, conferences, local meetings and refresher courses. Agronomists and others who are knowledgeable in turf and related subjects deserve more thanks than we've probably given them because of their contributions to our self improvement programs. We've had a knowledge explosion in turf management in the last decade or so, just like they've had in other fields. A superintendent has had to do a lot of studying on his own if he wants to keep abreast of new developments.

As for our social status at the club, we've come a long way from the days when I broke into greenkeeping. Then, it was common for the old greenkeeper to tell his son, who might have been working for him learning the profession, that he had no business around the clubhouse. At most clubs now, the superintendent and his family have nearly all the privileges of membership. At many places, in addition to playing golf with the members, the superintendent is invited to be their guest at football and baseball games, hockey matches, even their private parties. If that isn't an indication that our image and status have improved immeasurably over the last two decades, I'll mow every green on your course.

I sometimes wonder if the superintendents who complain about

snobbery at their clubs haven't pushed too hard and have been rebuffed. Some of us have the failing of wanting to over expand the beachhead after being accepted. I personally think we should never forget the employer-employee relationship and not take advantage of the social concessions we are given. Not a single one is owed to us. Now and then I've run into superintendents who have told me, "The members don't even know who I am." That makes me wonder if the superintendent himself isn't playing it too aloof. If he is shunned or kind of thinks of himself as a social outcast, and it rankles him, about the only thing left for him to do is start looking for another job.

Going back to the original thesis, image building, I'm convinced that 80 per cent of it should be with the members. And, simply stated, I think the kind of image we build depends on the kind of a course we give them. Everything is secondary. In return, I don't feel, as some superintendents do, that the members should be expected to fall all over themselves in praise of the beautiful course we give them, if that's what we do. I like to hear compliments as much as the next fellow, but at the same time if the complaints are few and far between, I figure I'm being indirectly complimented.

As for the role of the GCSAA, I feel that it is limited in what it can do for the superintendent. It should have a public relations program, directed mainly, I think, at providing information for the public, but not devoted to puffing up the superintendent. It should look into educational opportunities, but more important, I think it should provide an interchange of information for its members. We're looking for new ideas, explanations of new developments and things that will enable us to do our jobs better and more efficiently.

The GCSAA and our regional organizations can only build up the superintendent's image so far. He has to take it from there. □