

An informal survey of the three superintendents who still speak to me revealed there's one element key to survival and success in the golf course maintenance business. Disturbingly, it's an element of which many of the well-educated young leaders coming into the business have little understanding. We're talking about the basics of golf.

The turf schools and apprenticeships preparing tomorrow's superintendents have never been better in educating the younger set about turf maintenance and organizational skills. But when it comes to understanding some of the simplest elements of the game — namely history and architecture — there seems to be a lack of genuine understanding.

If you want to thrive in this business, a little knowledge of history and architecture will make your jobs easier and more fun. It also could be the difference between getting a good job and a great one.

Here's an example: A young superintendent gets his dream job at a nice country club. The green chairman knows everything about everything. The young superintendent knows his stuff, too, but has always focused his studies on turf and doesn't know how to talk golf as well as he should. Then it comes time for the green chairman's inevitable oddball ideas on redesigning the course. As a result of his lack of understanding, the young superintendent doesn't know how to articulately explain to his boss that the idea of strategically placed flower beds preventing Tiger from using his driver on No. 14 is, well, not a natural fit on a golf course.

But a basic knowledge of architecture can help the young superintendent form a sound response. Then the green chairman realizes he's barking up the wrong tree and tucks the idea away (for now anyway).

The truth is, most golfers are an easy group to please. Most just want to be listened to. So let them tell their boring stories on how they played the back nine or their observations on their home course design. But you must have the knowledge to respond intelligently and throw some golf talk back at them. Most golfers will listen to you and respect your skills as a superintendent because of it.

It's Smart Thinking to Grasp Golf 101

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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To watch veterans of the maintenance business handle lame proposals is a thing of beauty. Inevitably, the old guys' knowledge of history, lingo and architecture gives them more than enough credibility to weed out the freakish ideas, and the humility to take in the rare good ones.

But how do you take that quick Golf 101 class that the turf schools don't offer? Well, a little reading goes a long way. There are plenty of great books that can give you a nice, painless overview of the game. For superintendents, there is also much needed information on design.

If you want historical knowledge or some background in golf basics, the writings of Charles Price and Dan Jenkins offer the most fun reads. Even though most of their works are out of print, you can find them by searching a good used book Web site, such as abebooks.com.

Architecture is even easier to take a crash course in because many of the best reads are still in print. But be warned: Once you get into the elements of architecture, you might become a junkie. It can be that much fun. I've yet to meet a top-notch, well-paid superintendent who did not have a share of architectural expertise.

For starters, Tom Doak's "The Anatomy of a Golf Course" provides an easy read along with plenty of knowledge on the practical side of things. If you want more, check out George Thomas's "Golf Architecture in America." No person has ever opened this book and not become fascinated with design.

Don't take this personally, young leaders, but you need to know the basics of golf and architecture to be more successful superintendents. Such knowledge just might make your jobs more satisfying, too.

Geoff Shackelford is the author of several books on architecture which he promises not to shamelessly self-promote if you e-mail him for a list of his favorite golf reads at geoffshackelford@aol.com.