

Great Expectations

Battling the dreaded 'Augusta National Syndrome'

Each spring, the following scene unfolds in living rooms across the country:

Sitting in front of your television, you watch the final nine holes of the Masters. With Augusta National's flawless greens and fairways fresh in your mind, you grab your clubs, throw them in the trunk of your SUV and head to your local course in an attempt to emulate David Duval's rhythmic swing or Phil Mickelson's magical short game.

But on the first tee, reality comes crashing in like Gary McCord at the Masters dinner — your golf swing is one only a mother could love, your short game is long on miscalculations, and the conditions at your favorite course in no way resemble those of Bobby Jones' and Alister Mackenzie's masterpiece amidst the azaleas and dogwoods.

Sure, you may blame yourself for not having the game that will enable you to break 90, but should you be putting so much pressure on your superintendent to maintain Augusta-like course conditions?

"Players see tournaments on television and see how plush things can be, but it's impossible to get perfection on a golf course," says Richie D'Ambrosio, superintendent at Olde Stonewall GC in Ellwood City, Pa. "For major tournaments, courses prepare weeks in advance with hundreds of vol-

unteers. It would be impossible to maintain those conditions years around."

Make a few mistakes at any other job, and chances are no one will notice. But a lot of people notice when a superintendent has made a few mistakes on a course's greens and fairways. The next thing you know, some golfing publication finds out, and the news that such and such course has bad greens is as widespread as the Cincinnati Reds' Y2K bandwagon. The level of pressure that superintendents experience to keep their courses in tiptop shape varies according to course type and quality.

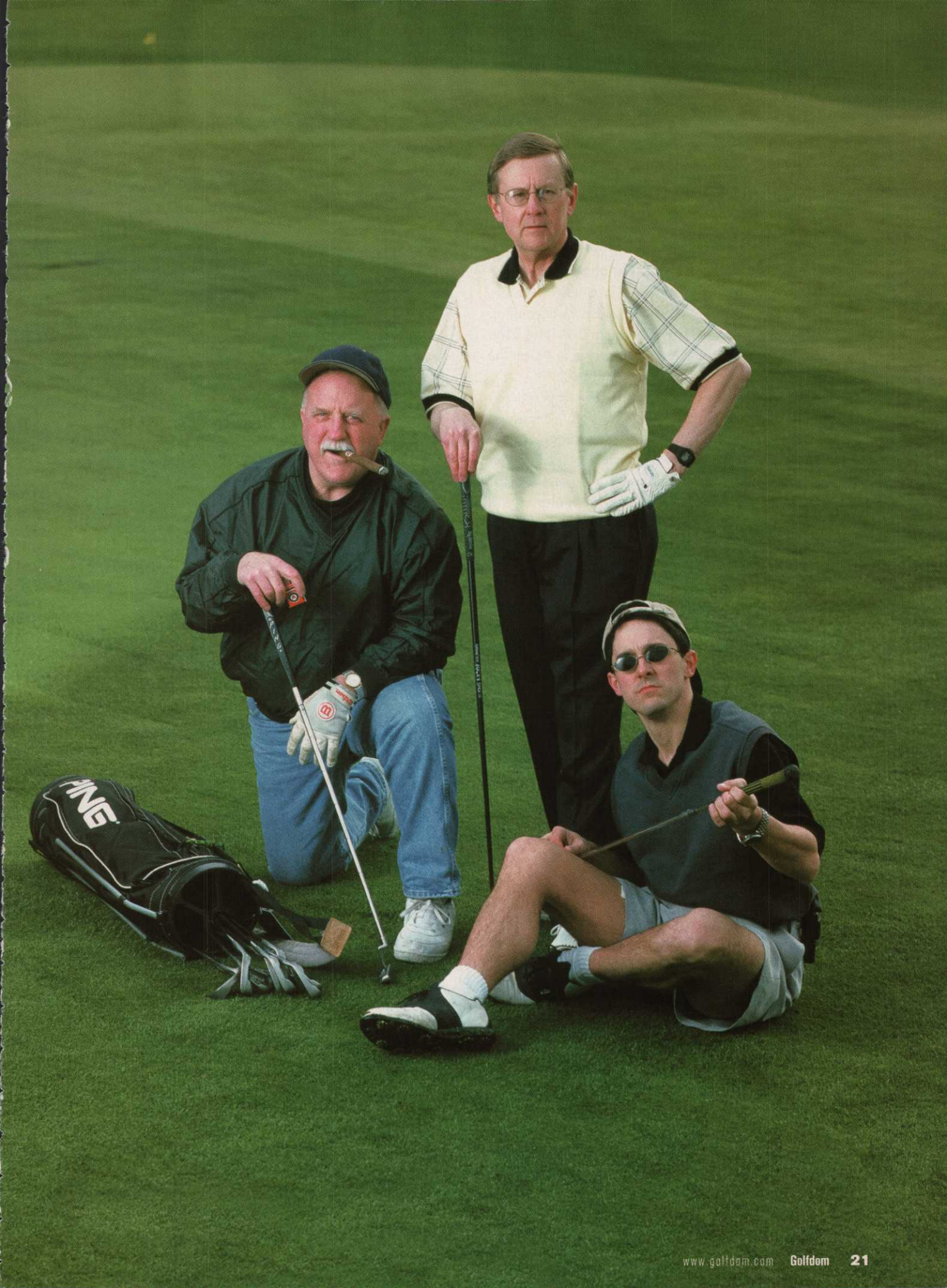
A superintendent at a private course with a high-income membership may feel the heat to keep the course in constant near-perfect condition. However, that same superintendent may have a membership that is more cognizant of repairing ball marks and replacing divots, since they are paying hundreds of dollars in membership dues. Likewise, a superintendent at a high-end daily-fee course may feel that his or her every move is put under the microscope when working stiff's are blowing their entire allowances on rounds of golf.

This seemingly eternal struggle between player expectations and superintendent reality brings to bear two important questions in the golf course maintenance arena: What should players expect out of a golf course in terms of playing conditions, and what should superintendents expect out of

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BY SHANE SHARP

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NEIL GLOGER



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players in terms of helping them fulfill their course conditioning goals? Even more importantly, can a happy medium be established between players and superintendents that will make the overall playing experience better for everyone?

The best of conditions, the worst of conditions

We've established that the golf-on-TV phenomena has pushed player expectations of course conditions beyond reality. But when a golfer has to pay between \$100 and \$300 for a round, it's understandable for that person to expect the course to provide the experience of a lifetime.

"The more golfers pay, the more they expect good conditions, especially the greens," says Art Stipo, a dedicated Myrtle Beach golfer. "At places like Tidewater GC or the Dunes Golf and Beach Club (in Myrtle Beach), they can charge \$150 if they have a good design, are in good shape and have smooth, fast greens. But the same courses not in good shape because of weather or whatever may only be worth \$100, and if they're aerated or overseeded should only be worth \$50. But these courses still want to charge their prime rates of \$150 — no matter what."

But for many players, good conditions within the playing areas on the course and overall consistency from hole to hole take precedence over perfection.

"I want the tee boxes, fairways and greens on the courses I play to look great, and I want to know what to expect on every hole in terms of green speed and fairway conditions," says Doug Carey, while walking off the 18th green at the Golf Club at Vistoso in Tucson, Ariz. "I'm not as concerned with the rough, the fringe and the areas of the course that are technically out of play."

It all starts at the greens

For many players, course conditions directly translate into green conditions — it's one of the great ironies of amateur golf. Your average golfer talks about nothing but the condition of the greens at the course he or she just played. But if you ask what the person spends time working on at the practice range, chances are it's not putting.

Nevertheless, greens are the showcase of any course — upscale or municipal. Why the obsessions? Perhaps it's the work it takes to maintain greens, or that discussing greens makes for an easy topic of conversation. After all, greens are easy to encapsulate at the 19th hole or over the phone with a golfing friend.

"In golf chat rooms that I visit, the discussion is dominated by talk about the greens," says Bruce Harper, head pro at River's Edge GC in Shallotte, N.C. "But watch any beginner at the range and all he or she wants to hit is the dri-

ver. People don't tie the two together — green conditions and being a good putter."

Not only do players expect pristine putting conditions, they are often unwilling to contribute to the maintenance of greens, even if it only requires bending over and fixing a ball mark. How many times have you approached the most striking green you have ever laid eyes on, only to be taken back by the sheer number of unrepaired ball marks when you get a closer look?

"Some groups tend to have a mentality that they paid such and such amount to play out here, and that ball marks come with the territory," says Scott Devaux, assistant pro at the Legends in Myrtle Beach. "I would like to think that's not the case, but sometimes it's true."

But are players doing it out of spite for having paid so much to play, or are they doing it just because they don't know any better?

Course etiquette

Each year, golf lures new players into its lair with its irresistible charms. The upside of this trend is that quality golf courses are being built at a record pace, competition is leading to lower greens fees in some regions and the nation is more aware of one of life's great games.

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The downside is that the definition of "average golfer" has suffered more than a Chicago Cubs fan. Simply put, most golfers are bad, and unfortunately, so is their knowledge of course etiquette. So what can superintendents do to educate the growing golf masses as to how to take care of a golf course?

"All the professional golfers on (the PGA) tour treat the course right, they replace their divots and fix their ball marks and they are getting paid millions of dollars," says Greg Plotner, vice president of operations at International Golf Maintenance in Lakeland, Fla.

Maybe the answer lies with watching more golf on television, when unrealistic expectations about course conditions are often attributed to the perfectly manicured layouts displayed through the cameras of ESPN and CBS.

"It would help if networks showed more etiquette going on in tournaments," says Wally Dowe, superintendent at the Lodge at Ventana Canyon in Tucson. "If the cameras showed a caddy raking a bunker or if there was a segment during the tournament on course etiquette, that could help tremendously."

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Picture David Feherty clamoring around in a bunker, raking sand and cracking jokes, or Gary McCord scrambling around a green repairing ball marks. Dowe just may be onto something.

And high-tech solutions for player education only starts with TV. Sam Green, director of golf operations at the Dataw Island GC near Beaufort, S.C., is tapping into his club's Intranet Web site to get the word out about course conditions and maintenance at his private golfing venue. But still, Green is not above using good old-fashioned meetings and newsletters to inform members regarding course improvements and topdressings.

"I have a good membership, as long as I educate them," he says.

Seeking common ground

So there remains hope that golf on TV hasn't completely warped expectations about course conditions, and there's even a glimmer of hope that golf on TV could serve to better educate players how to make superintendents' jobs easier.

Some players may spend half their paychecks to play a round on a high-end daily-fee course and expect to come face to face with perfection on each hole, yet many golfers are just

seeking good conditions and consistency. In sum, is it more likely that the L.A. Clippers will win an NBA title or that players and superintendents will see eye to eye on exactly what golf courses should look like?

"If I had that solution, I don't think I would be sitting here today," says Terry Todd, superintendent at the Golf Club at Vistoso. "Most players that play these type of (upscale) courses don't have good etiquette, and someone needs to teach them how to fix balls marks. Junior golf is getting bigger, but somehow the public needs to be better educated. Maybe superintendents as an organization should be out there trying to educate them more."

Maybe. But it's tough for superintendents to be running around giving five-minute seminars when they're expected to be tending to their masterpieces. And shouldn't players beyond the junior golf level take it upon themselves to get educated about course conditioning and maintenance? Or could it be that course etiquette won't be a problem once the learning curve catches up with the legion of new golfers?

Better yet, maybe the intense competition for the golfing dollar could push all courses towards conditioning perfection.

Nice idea, but take your chances on the Clippers. ■

Sharp is a golf writer from Myrtle Beach, S.C., and is editor-in-chief of TravelGolf.com.

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