

Senseless acts of destruction can drive superintendents to distraction,

but there are ways you can increase the chances for your course to...

# Vanquish Vandalism

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR., ASSOCIATE EDITOR



**S**uperintendent Ben Fish drove to Green Tree GC in Vacaville, Calif., on a Saturday morning in November just as the sun peeked over the horizon. On the job eight weeks, Fish enjoyed watching the sun's rays slowly embrace his course. As he approached, he noticed his foreman mowing the sixth green. He stopped his truck, jumped out and started to ask how the day was going when he noticed an anxious look on the foreman's face. Then Fish spotted the first signs of vandalism.

Tire tracks marred the putting surface in two 6-foot strips. Fish gulped as the foreman delivered further bad news. The same vehicle had trashed the second tee, and the foreman said the 17<sup>th</sup> green was the worst of all.

Fish's heart sank as the damage unfolded slowly before his eyes with each step he took up the mound that surrounds the 17<sup>th</sup> green. Shredded turf lay everywhere. Fish felt as if someone had punched him in the stomach. He felt he might faint, but he recovered quickly and surveyed the damage. Only a tiny piece of the Penncross turf remained in a sea of dirt and mud. The flagstick still stood, bowed but proud, a lonely survivor amidst the wreckage. As he soaked it all in, Fish couldn't imagine what would drive someone to such destruction.

"Vandalism on a golf green is a crime against morality," Fish says. "I felt empty as I looked at the green. It was so senseless."

Fish and his crew desperately replaced as

ROGER MOTZKUS



much of the tattered turf of the 17<sup>th</sup> as quickly as they could before it dried out. For hours, they devotedly tried to restore the green to its former beauty. But Fish, like a doctor in the emergency room trying to revive a dead patient, finally called off the attempt.

“What they did to that green was unbelievable,” Fish says. “It was horrific — and the green still isn’t open [in late March].”

For superintendents, vandalism means more than damaged turf. The combination of frustration, anger and demoralization exact a psychological toll on superintendents and their crews. Vandalism also stretches limited maintenance budgets to the breaking point.

But there are steps superintendents can take to limit the damage.

### Cut yourself off

Sometimes you’re forced to enclose parts of your course in a chain-link cocoon to prevent vandals from terrorizing it. That’s what Fish will do.

Fish says he will install a 2,100-foot chain link fence to protect his course along the section where the vandals first entered his course. A deserted public road bisects the course, and the vandals in the car accessed the course from it. Although Fish knows he must protect the course, it hurts him to do so.

“We’ve been a public course for 40 years, and we’ve never put a barrier between us and the community,” Fish says. “But after the destruction of that green, we have no choice.”

Even if the maintenance crew had been successful in their repair efforts, the tire tracks would have remained a brutal reminder of someone’s joy ride. Fish talked with his general manager, and they decided to re-sod half the green. The memory still haunts Fish.

The police told him the tire track bore such a distinctive mark that they’d never seen it before. “I’ve looked for a similar tread over the Internet and on SUVs in parking lots, but I haven’t found it,” Fish says.

Nell Frewin-Hays, general manager of Golf Hammock CC in Sebring, Fla., says superintendents should also consider creative alternatives to fences. Gate the front entrances and surround the edges of your course with low-



level shrubs. Some courses dig ditches around their perimeters to prevent vehicles from entering.

“Any barriers you can put in the way of potential vandals are good,” Frewin-Hays says. “You can even spruce up your course with a row of low-level bushes.”

### Set up a stakeout

Del Ratcliffe munched on his third Arby’s roast beef sandwich of the night, throwing the wrappers to the floor of his SUV. He had parked his car on the driving range to watch the main gate of the Sunset Hills Public GC in Charlotte, N.C. The pleasantly cool night air, combined with a nearly full moon and thousands of stars, created the ideal setting for a stakeout. The moon illuminated the entrance so Ratcliffe could see anyone entering the course.

Ratcliffe, owner of three golf courses in the Charlotte area, hoped to catch vandals who, for the past two months, had periodically broken into his golf car shed, stolen four or five cars and driven them recklessly around the course. They had done untold damage, and Ratcliffe had had enough.

Four hours into what he figured to be another all-night vigil, Ratcliffe hunched over the steering wheel, occasionally rubbing the back of his neck to loosen his tense muscles. His eyes darted back and forth in the darkness, from the maintenance shed to the front gate, as he awaited his prey. At 1:30 a.m., he took another bite of his sandwich — and he saw them.

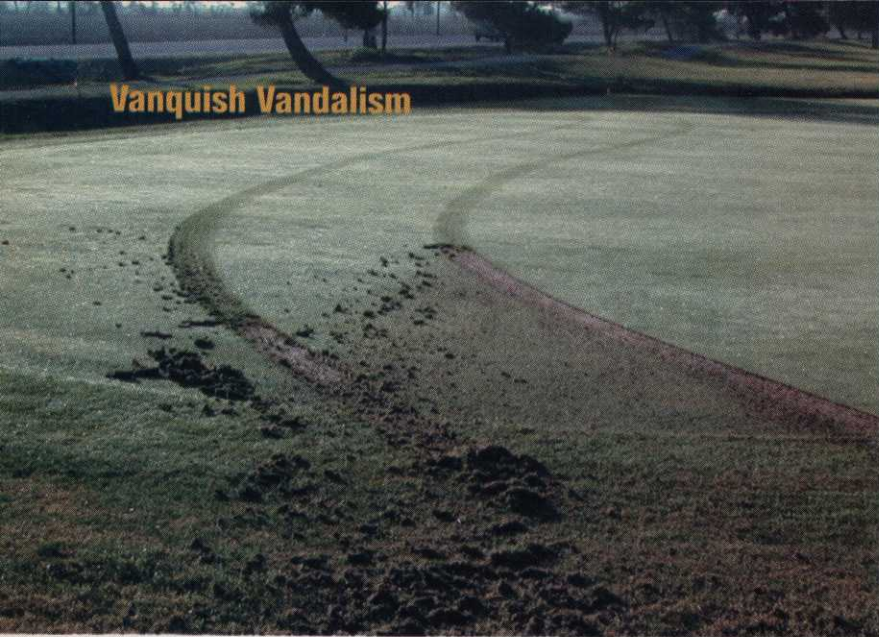
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**Ben Fish’s immediate thought when he saw the damage to the 17th green at Green Tree GC in Vacaville, Calif. (above) was that disgruntled former employees might have done it. The culprits have never been found, despite using a vehicle that produced an unusual set of tracks (left).**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GREEN TREE GC



## Vanquish Vandalism



**One superintendent compared having his course vandalized to having his home robbed.**

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Armed with bolt cutters, a group of teenagers, ranging in age from 15 to 18, cut the padlock on the shed. Ratcliffe immediately dialed the police on his cell phone. Once the kids entered the shed, he revved the engine on his SUV and chased the culprits. The kids scattered. One of them fled Ratcliffe in a golf car but, after a few futile hundred yards, the kid realized he couldn't outrun Ratcliffe's more powerful vehicle. In an instant, he dismounted, MacGyver-style, and headed toward the woods on foot.

"There's a lot of ground to cover on a golf course," Ratcliffe says. "That's the most frustrating part of trying to catch vandals. There are a lot of places to hide."

### **An Ounce of Prevention**

Nell Frewin-Hays, general manager of Golf Hammock CC in Sebring, Fla., and business watch coordinator for the crime prevention unit of the Highlands (Fla.) County Sheriff's Office, offers the following tips to keep vandals off your course:

- Join a neighborhood watch program. The course could loan cell phones to an existing local group for their nightly patrols, which could be returned to the course the next morning. In return, the group could watch the golf course.
- Make sure course management has the same goals as the superintendent. You have to ensure that your boss is going to support your decision to prosecute vandals. Otherwise, you could be left out to dry.
- Create a consistent policy on pursuing vandals. Haphazard enforcement only encourages more vandalism. The punishment must also fit the crime.
- Consider hiring a security guard during the night. Although it can be expensive (depending on prevailing wages), constant vandalism may make it the only solution.
- Alert your fellow superintendents when vandalism strikes your course. If the vandals have hit your course, chances are they will hit your colleagues' courses soon.
- Light prime targets for vandalism. Well-lit areas frequently discourage vandals. Maintenance buildings, pump stations and cart barns provide tempting targets and should have appropriate motion-sensitive lighting. **-FA.**

Within 10 minutes, 11 police cars rolled through Ratcliffe's gates. Slowly, the cops picked up four of the vandals (one of whom nonchalantly returned to his car and tried to leave, but police cruisers and Ratcliffe's SUV blocked his escape). The police roused the fifth kid out of bed later that night when his four accomplices ratted on him.

After meeting with the parents, Ratcliffe agreed not to prosecute them as long as they worked off the monetary value of the damage doing odd jobs on the golf course.

"I noticed one of them was mechanically inclined because he had hot-wired the golf cars they stole," Ratcliffe says. "It only made sense to have him service the cars for a few months."

### **Talk to the police**

Frewin-Hays says superintendents often can't communicate to police how serious a crime golf course vandalism is. It's hard to quantify the cost of vandalism to a course, so police have difficulty understanding the scope of the problem. Money spent on repairs is easy to document, but lost revenue from golfers who can't play the course while crews repair it isn't, she adds. Unless police understand the full damage vandalism does, they may be reluctant to pursue the case, Frewin-Hays says.

"It's hard for officers to understand the crime unless you can put a dollar figure on it," says Frewin-Hays, who also doubles as the business watch coordinator in the crime prevention unit of Highlands (Fla.) County Sheriff's Department. "Since some of the costs are hard to measure, you're in for an uphill battle."

So it's important to educate them. Invite local law enforcement officers and other community leaders to the course and take them on a tour, explaining the effects of vandalism, Frewin-Hays says.

Richard Raymond, superintendent at Sands Point GC in Port Washington, N.Y., says he curried favor with school board members and police officials and it paid off. His course abuts an elementary school, and groups of older students congregated behind it on weekend nights. They drank heavily, spilled on to the course, wrote obscene messages in the bunkers and damaged the course with their cars.

Raymond invited one of the police commissioners to the course to play a round with him.

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One of the worst effects of vandalism is the time and labor it takes to repair the damage.

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He also briefed school officials on his problems, asking them to illuminate the darkened schoolyard to make it a less palatable gathering place.

"Those contacts established the relationship we needed to combat the problem," Raymond says. "It was an eye-opener for them."

As a result, the police patrolled the course on foot for several weekends and

the school installed floodlights. The vandalism stopped when the students realized the course had powerful community allies.

Frewin-Hays says golf courses should press charges against offenders if the police catch them. Otherwise, the police have no incentive to pursue the case, she says.

"Don't think this problem will go away on its own because it won't," Raymond says. "We never had to prosecute, but we would have." ■

## Destruction by Daylight

Ron Ross, superintendent at Quarry Oaks GC in Ashland, Neb., says his course never suffers from vandalism at night. Quarry Oaks, located between Omaha and Lincoln, is so remote that only the most dedicated of vandals would travel to the course to do damage.



Ron Ross

But Ross says he deals with a far more insidious form of vandalism: damage done by inexperienced golfers. As the game's popularity has increased, fewer golfers learn the rules and etiquette associated with the game. Their lack of understanding increases course damage, either out of ignorance or insensitivity, Ross says.

"When people rent our course for a corporate outing, they look on it as their country club for day," Ross says. "When they're paying high-end fees, they don't care what they do to the course. They figure they've earned the right to do whatever they want."

One of Ross' most vivid memories of daylight vandalism occurred during a recent corporate outing. While he and his crew fixed an irrigation leak near a par-3

tee, Ross watched as a foursome of men tried to clear the water in front of the green. Their first four tee shots landed in the water, and they hit four more balls off the tee with the same result. They continued until their balls finally landed on the green. By the time they finished, Ross counted 24 divots on the tee.

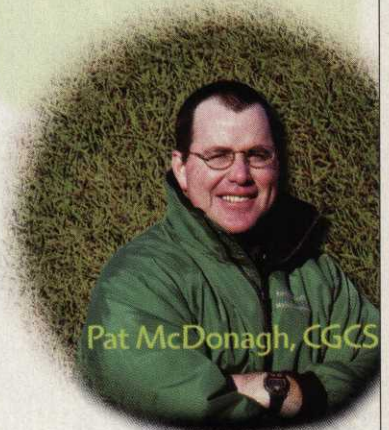
"They were determined to get their balls on the green," Ross says. "But I've learned not to take it personally. They've paid their money and they figure they're going to play the course the way they see Tiger Woods [play]. Unfortunately, they can't do it in one shot the way he does. It takes a toll on the turf."

Ross says pros do what they can, but they have limited access to the golfers at public facilities such as Quarry Oaks. Ross says he talks to groups about course maintenance before they tee off to educate them about avoiding damage. But he knows he can only do so much.

"This is part of the growing pains as more golfers join this great game," Ross says. "It's hard to keep up with the damage they do, but I hope that someday it will balance itself out." —FA.

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