

THE LYON KING

Dennis Lyon is his name, and Aurora, Colo., is his domain.
His management style is one reason why the city's municipal courses
are some of the best in the country

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JASON STAHL



As part of his “partnering” concept, Dennis Lyon empowers his employees to propose ideas and solutions.

Dennis Lyon is cruising in a golf car around the Homestead at Murphy Creek GC, the newest of seven municipal golf courses the certified superintendent oversees as manager of the municipal golf courses for Aurora, Colo. Lyon spots an employee, jumps out of the car and greets him like he's a long-lost friend. From all the smiles and laughs traded, you wouldn't think they had just talked about the day's job list.

That kind of manager-employee relationship is one reason why Aurora's courses are some of the finest municipal tracks in the country. Lyon exudes confidence in his employees. When he walks away from talking to them, he's confident that they'll do their jobs right — like Tiger Woods is certain that his six-iron shot from 218 yards will find the green.

Lyon is a nice guy, but he's also smart. Armed with a bachelor's degree in horticulture from Colorado State University and a master's degree in management from the University of Northern Colorado, he's not just touring his courses to administer back slaps and “nice to see you” to the members of his labor force. Lyon is ensuring that his particular management system, which he calls “partnering,” is firmly in place.

“The partnering concept involves the realization that we, as a unit, are dependent on each other with regard to success and reputation,” Lyon says. “If one area of the organization improves at the expense of another, it pulls us all down.”

Lyon won't get any points for originality for his partnering concept, but he does score a 10 in his administration of it. Many times, brilliant ideas get left on the chalkboard, but Lyon has

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taken steps to ensure his doesn't become an empty promise.

One such step is a partnering agreement which he asks his employees to sign each year at an annual meeting, verifying that they understand the partnering concept and commit to practicing it. In order to promote a sense of unity, Lyon organizes an annual golf tournament/picnic for employees and their families, as well as monthly staff lunches. "As a staff, we try to play each course once per season," he adds.

"A good example of the partnering concept is how we share equipment and personnel," says Jarrett Crowley, a technician at Meadow Hills GC. "Meadow Hills has a lot of trees, whereas Murphy Creek does not.

Right now, I'm borrowing two mulching mowers from Murphy Creek to help with the work at Meadow Hills. Sometimes we'll borrow employees from Murphy Creek if we're short on people, or Dennis will come out and spend some time here to help us out."

There's nothing fancy about the Homestead at Murphy Creek – and that's the way CGCS Dennis Lyon likes it.

In taking the partnering concept from theory to practice, Lyon is fulfilling something else he considers important — being a leader.

"The success of any organization depends upon leadership," he says. "I try to provide a leadership style that includes partnership and resolving issues before they become crises."

If there is a problem, Lyon doesn't ask that his employees look to him for the answer. He believes they're capable of finding their own solutions.

"We try to deal with problems at the level of the organization to which they're closest," he says. "We set standards and turn the employees loose on how they attain them."

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No one knows Lyon's open-minded approach to attaining goals more than Dean Lindsey, superintendent of Murphy Creek.

"Dennis is like a good parent. When you go to him with a question or idea and he thinks it's good, he'll go with it," Lindsey says. "If he thinks there's a better way, he won't tell you to do it that way, but he'll ask you to at least try it. He never says, 'This is my way, and this is the way we're going to do it.'"

One example of employees doing things their own way comes from a conversation Lyon had with his assistant superintendent.

"I asked him what his mowing schedule was, and he said he didn't know," Lyon says. "He said when the fairways need to be mowed, he mows them — whether it's seven days a week or five.

One gets the feeling, however, that Lyon has learned a thing or two about solving problems after what he calls "25 years of making mistakes." As one of the vice presidents of the Colorado Golf Association, he's keen on listening and learning from his peers.

"I'm a student of management," Lyon admits. "I'm always looking for new ideas. I listen to my peers in this business and my employees because they're great at telling me when I mess up and what I do well."

Crowley confirms Lyon's listening skills, admitting that he has more than once given Lyon an earful.

"If there's a problem at our course, [Lyon will] schedule a

meeting," Crowley says. "He sorts through all the bull and uses all the relevant information."

It seems that Lyon and his staff succeed more often than they mess up. An example of their most recent success is Murphy Creek, the centerpiece of an \$8 million, 1,100-acre residential development project. Aesthetically, the 7,456-yard, par 72 prairie links course designed by Arizona architect Ken Kavanaugh can only be called magnificent — a 1920s farm theme is achieved by numerous rusted pieces of farm equipment dotting the course, not to mention hitching posts with buckets for club washing, wooden bunker rakes and weathered signage.



The Homestead at Murphy Creek has a rustic touch, which was architect Ken Kavanaugh's intention.

Diehard players rejoice in the challenge of the layout — 80 ragged-edge bunkers and 5-inch Canadian blue fescue give the course a European feel. After experiencing tees, fairways and greens of a quality normally found at private courses, golfers are left dumbfounded at the reasonable greens fees: \$28 during the week (\$24 for residents of Aurora) and \$34 on weekends.

Lyon says the success of Murphy Creek and the rest of Aurora's courses is the result of commitment.

"We have a commitment by our city government to have good golf courses," he says. "They've allowed me to generate resources to do that, and there's also a commitment by our employees to provide excellent facilities." ■

Stahl is managing editor of Landscape Management and Athletic Turf, Golfdom's sister publications.



The Need for a Creed

Certified superintendent Dennis Lyon, manager of golf for the City of Aurora, Colo., takes the game seriously. He and other Colorado public golf course operators met in October 1999 to discuss how to improve golfer etiquette, which they believe has declined over the past several years. They devised a Golfer's Creed, or list of things

golfers should promise to do to respect golf and its players. Lyon is the keeper of the creed and has a framed copy visible at each one of Aurora's seven municipal golf courses. It states:

Golf has been good to me. As a golfer, I will RESPECT and be good to the game of golf:

Responsibility – I will follow the rules of the golf course and take responsibility for all of my actions on the course, including the safe operation of a golf car and the responsible consumption of alcoholic beverages.

Etiquette – I will abide by the rules of etiquette, awaiting the proper time to hit, refraining from foul language and boisterous behavior, and generally conducting myself as a lady or gentleman on the course.

Sensitivity – I will be sensitive to the environment and the course where I play and to those who maintain and manage it.

Pace – I will keep up with the group ahead and maintain an appropriate pace of play.

Educate – I will do my best to educate other golfers on the principles of this creed by sharing it and living up to it at every opportunity.

Conditions – I will strive to leave the course in better condition than I find it, by fixing my ball marks (and those of others), replacing my divots, raking bunkers, and properly disposing of trash.

Traditions – I will embrace the rules and traditions of this ancient and honorable game and respect my fellow golfers and the courses we are privileged to play.