

Caretakers of the Game



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As we celebrate Father's Day in June, I am fortunate to be able to count myself among those sons who have followed in their father's footsteps.

Bill Emerson, my father, was a golf course superintendent (CGCS) from 1962 through 1994. In the '60s and '70s, my Dad typically mowed greens at 5/16" to 3/16", and players at that time were content with the speed of the greens. It wasn't until the 1980s, with the advances in mowing equipment, and the subsequent demands by golfers for faster greens, that spike marks became a major problem in the game.

Today, our greens are regularly cut to below 1/8". My Dad and I agree that without plastic cleats, the more tightly mowed greens of today simply could not withstand the damage brought on by destructive metal spikes.

Putting green quality has been vastly improved, and the overall conditions at golf facilities are better today than ever before. Having been the superintendent at a course which has hosted a Senior PGA Tour event, I also have seen firsthand that better greens can lead to lower scores.

My Dad still is involved in the industry, marketing products to golf course superintendents. Along with Brooks Robinson and Johnny Unitas, my Dad remains one of my childhood heroes and my mentor to this day.

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Public Golf – Plight or Passion?

By Jim Black

Maybe you can help me with something. I've been wondering for some time about when and why being called a "public golf course" became a bad thing. Or when and why it became a bad thing to be the superintendent of a public golf course. It would seem that somewhere along the line, somebody attached some sort of negative stigma to golf courses that are accessible to those who wish to play the great game of golf. I find this hard to understand.

The terms "daily fee" and "semi-private" are glaring attempts to glamorize those types of golf clubs that should ultimately be held in the highest honor — those courses open to the public.

So dust off your father's clubs and come discover why he was obsessed with the game. Bring your children and introduce them to the ultimate in sportsmanship. You can even walk if you want. There's no monthly minimum, no initiation fee and no "cart path only" at public golf courses.

So tell me: What is the bad here?

I take great pride in being the superintendent of a public golf course. To me, it's the heart and soul of what golf is about. It's not about status and recognition. My customers come carrying bags full of sticks and orbs, ready to traverse the countryside in a battle of man vs. nature vs. self. My job is to make the course as fair and pleasing as possible so they will return. Granted, it's a challenging feat with a 12-man crew and a limited budget, but that's part of what makes it great.

We have aesthetically pleasing stripes, raked bunkers, trimmed trees, a great layout and, most importantly, satisfied customers. Whether or not these customers know or appreciate that I



Jim Black – public and proud of it

have a turf degree is not my concern. In fact, what my customers think of me is none of my business.

I've come to accept the fact that no advertising and no association can change the public's perception of who I am and what I do. Frankly, I don't care about that. What I do care about is doing my best every day and going home with no regrets.

The next time you encounter a member of your club who wants to second-guess what you're doing at your course, I invite you to remember this: Everybody thinks they can do everyone else's job better than they can. How many times have *you* said, "That doctor doesn't know what he's talking about." Or, probably a little closer to home, "That weatherman is an idiot!" It's no different in this profession, my friends.

My advice to you is be satisfied with yourself that you've done the best you can do. Don't feel sorry for me because I'm still at a public golf course. This may surprise some of you, but it's where I choose to be because I love my job, and I'm proud of the work I do.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go and help mow fairways today.

Black is superintendent of Twin Shields GC in Dunkirk, Md.