

One kid hijacked a golf car when its driver was putting on the 15th green, only to find out that the player was a state trooper with the wind — and the determination — to run him down and get it back.

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"It dug so deep that it actually had to be sodded," he says. "The sod's still a different color from the original grass."

"Vandalism is a constant problem," says Marty Storch, golf manager for Metro Parks in Louisville and Jefferson County, Ky. The nine county-operated golf courses have their share of stolen flags, flagsticks and tee markers, as well as golf car heists. But here's one for the books: About eight years ago, some pranksters brought a shovel and ax to the course. They started on the third green, digging a hole 4 feet in diameter and 3 feet in depth right on the putting surface. Then they went elsewhere on the course, chopped down a tree, hauled it over to the green and re-planted it not far from the flagstick.

The golf manager says that concerns about vandalism at the Jefferson County-operated

courses have risen to the point that he has asked supervisors at each course to track the damage in 2004 — everything from ripped-off flagsticks to golf car thefts. If the expenses are high enough, especially when combined with vandalism in the public parks that surround many of the courses, Metro Parks may consider bringing back park rangers. The rangers haven't patrolled public parks in the Louisville area in about 20 years.

Security seems to help when urban courses can afford its presence. The links at Forest Park, a near-downtown facility in St. Louis, used to see episodes of assault, larceny and gang activity. Car and truck drivers tore up the course, which runs along a busy city boulevard, with spin-outs after hours — generally when the bars closed. But according to Chad Carpenter, superintendent at the Forest Park layout

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# The Urban Superintendent

'YOU WON'T BELIEVE SOME OF THE THINGS I'VE FOUND,' HE SAYS

BY JAMES PATRICK MORGAN III

**W**hen superintendents arrive to work in the morning, they wonder what challenges the new day will bring. Will a green be dry or has a disease set in during the night? Were skunks feeding on grubs in the fairways? These are problems that most superintendents experience.

But some of us encounter other problems when we get to work — problems that have nothing to do with the condition of the turf. The "some of us" I'm referring to are superintendents who tend turf at public courses in large cities.

I'm one of those superintendents. I've been the superintendent of the John F. Byrne Golf Club in Philadelphia for almost four years. You won't believe some of the things I've found on the course.

Once, I discovered an abandoned car burnt black as the darkest night. And then there was the time I found a dead



BRIAN RUSHING

body, the result of a suicide by an elderly gentleman the night before.

Instead of chasing geese off the course, I and other city superintendents have had to shuffle off the less unfortunate. And imagine the feeling of emptying the trash and coming in contact with a dirty syringe, which I've done.

Ever have a member miss a putt and loudly complain? Sure you have. How about that same member pulling out a 38 and discharging a few shots? That happened to me a few years ago. Now that's deep-tine aerifying, Philly style.

Yes, we still have the same turf worries as everyone else, but being a superintendent in the city offers a greater responsibility. A reason is that some city people see golf courses as retreats from the everyday hassles that await them. I learned this from a gentleman named Al. Let me tell you his story.

Al would walk around the golf course everyday and shag balls, which is nothing unusual. But Al was different. Every ball he found he gave to the local high school teams so the kids didn't have to buy them. This was Al's way of giving back to the game and promoting it in his own special way.

One morning I was in the pro shop

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and the phone rang. Someone said there was a body near the 17<sup>th</sup> fairway with a gun nearby. I went out to investigate and found an older gentleman lying in the weeds on his side dressed in his Sunday best. At first, I thought he was just sleeping one off. But when I turned him over, I saw this man had shot himself in the eye. I will not describe the scene because the image still horrifies me.

At first, I was upset and yelling at the body, "Why my course?" I screamed. Then I noticed the man had a note in his pocket. It was an apology to his family and to the person who found him. Me.

This gentleman was 90 years old and had terminal bone cancer. He wrote that he couldn't take the pain anymore. The dead man was Al.

I realized that this golf course was Al's only freedom and only happiness, and he chose to die on it for one reason — it was his heaven on earth and where he received his satisfaction by giving all those balls to the kids. So Al put on his best clothes, his coolest derby and headed for the course one last time. He wanted his last vision on earth to be the place he loved most.

I understand this is an extreme example, but the city residents, not just the golfers, see these courses as their retreats. Depending on the situation, their mindsets can take a superintendent's responsibilities and frustrations to another level. Here in Philadelphia, the golf courses are part of the Fairmount Park Commission, which gives the residents the impression that the courses are like parks.

I remember going out to syringe my greens one day, and sitting next to the flag on a green were two hippie chicks playing their guitars. I had to be the bearer of bad news and inform them that this wasn't a coffee shop nor open-mike night at the course. They responded, "This is a public park, right?"

There's an art college located near the course. One day, an aspiring Picasso thought it would be a grand idea to paint a naked portrait of his girlfriend sitting on one of my tee boxes. Once again, I had to inform them that this was a golf

course, not a park where they could express certain freedoms.

I use these examples to illustrate some of the "unique" problems I and others experience as city superintendents. Yes, some are comical and are others heart-breaking. But all are real problems that must be dealt with on a recurring basis.

In the 10 years I've been working in the city as a superintendent, I've had to ask numerous nongolfers to leave the property, and I've had to have countless burnt-out cars towed from the premises.

**I remember going out to syringe my greens one day, and sitting next to the flag on a green were two hippie chicks playing their guitars.**

I know superintendents at private clubs have their share of problems, too. But I wonder if they've ever had to deal with homeless people using their courses' sprinklers as showers and washing machines? It's a real problem, considering that approaching a naked homeless man in the morning is not only irritating but also a little unsettling.

I've learned that one must have un-daunted communication skills to tell them not to do this — but I also feel pretty heartless when I tell them. So compromise is the art of avoiding confrontation, right? We allow them to use only fairway sprinklers, and we tell them that they must rinse and leave before anyone sees them.



The remnants of a car fire in the rough near the 10th tee at John F. Byrne Golf Club. The course is the site of two or three car fires a year.

BRIAN RUSHING

Why do I compromise? Because one will not find an aluminum can on my course. They are collected and turned in for money by the homeless. Besides, as long as they're not affecting my operation, how can I deny them a chance to live?

By now you are probably asking yourselves why I still work here. It's a great question, and let me explain.

I took this job to be a superintendent. I was the first assistant at a respected private club with visions of taking it over someday. Well, the superintendent is still at that club as I write this. I had to move on if I wanted to become a superintendent.

The game plan was to put in my time at a city course, gain experience and move on to a more respected club. Therein lies the problem: Not only do city superintendents have unusual situations to deal with, they don't command much respect in the golfing industry. A city superintendent is looked upon the same way a city golfer is looked upon at the private course — unacceptable. While that seems harsh, it is reality.

I believe I can grow grass and maintain a golf course as well as anyone. But private clubs would rather have an assistant from a club with a name than someone with experience from the city as its superintendent.

I and other city superintendents will continue to do our jobs to the best of our abilities. We all have the same drive and motivation as superintendents from upscale clubs.

So the next time you play a city course, remember to follow these local rules: If a ball lands inside the chalk line, you do get a free lift — and water running from the car fire is considered casual. ■