

Manners Matter

Proper etiquette among players has diminished on the golf course. What can superintendents do to help it return?

By Brian H. Kehrl

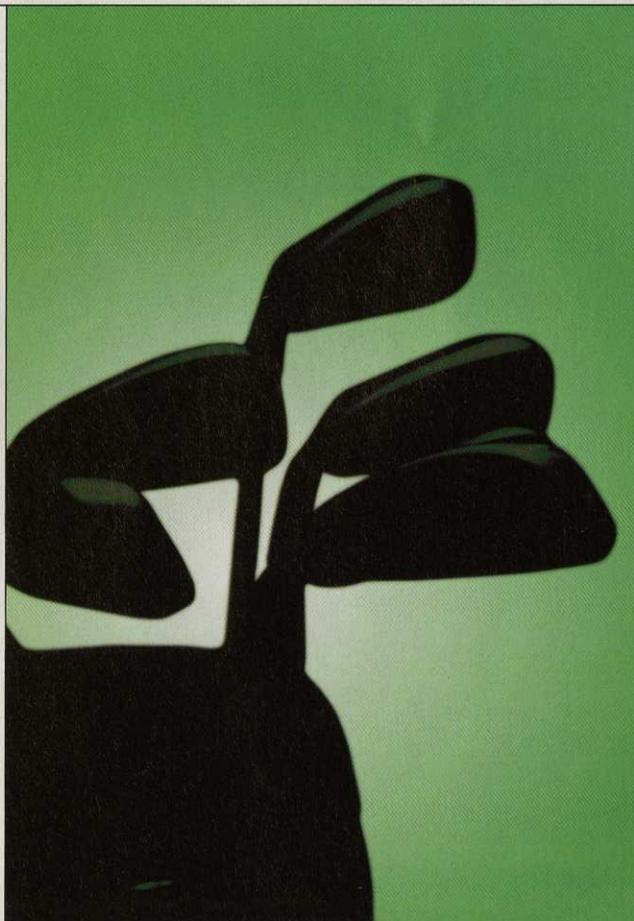
We all know it. We see it in the lengthy disgruntled lines and the dawdling six-hour rounds at public courses on Saturday mornings, and in the packed year-round reservations at private and resort clubs. We see it in the dusty jeans that a player wears to the course on Thursday afternoon, coming straight from the carpentry shop to the clubhouse with a six-pack in his hand. Even Martha Burke tried to tell the world: Golf is changing. Well, the sport isn't changing, but the people who play it are.

"Now people play for more than the sake of playing," says Ron Ross, certified superintendent of Quarry Oaks Golf Club, a public course in Ashland, Neb. "It's good to get away for a little, it's for male bonding, it's for a tournament with work, it's because their buddies asked them to play. It's not just because they love the game anymore."

The good news is that more people are excited about and interested in golf, bringing a host of new golfers and golf courses and ushering the game to its proper setting on the national sporting stage. The bad news is that more and more people are playing who haven't played much before.

These are golfers who didn't grow up playing the game, and didn't have their fathers, grandfathers or the resident

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DIGITAL STOCK/TOM JOHNSON

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sticklers hanging around the clubhouses, harping on them about the importance of taking care of the courses. They are golfers who weren't caddies as teenagers, and didn't learn to rake bunkers for the next guy, or to tread lightly on and around the greens. Put simply, these are players who don't know the rules — either the sporting regulations or the even more esoteric but equally important rules of etiquette.

So what about etiquette? With all these new, unschooled players, has it taken a hit? Was it ever there in the first place? Is it long gone, or is it maybe just hiding deep in the rough while waiting to be forcefully rediscovered by some fed-up course superintendents?

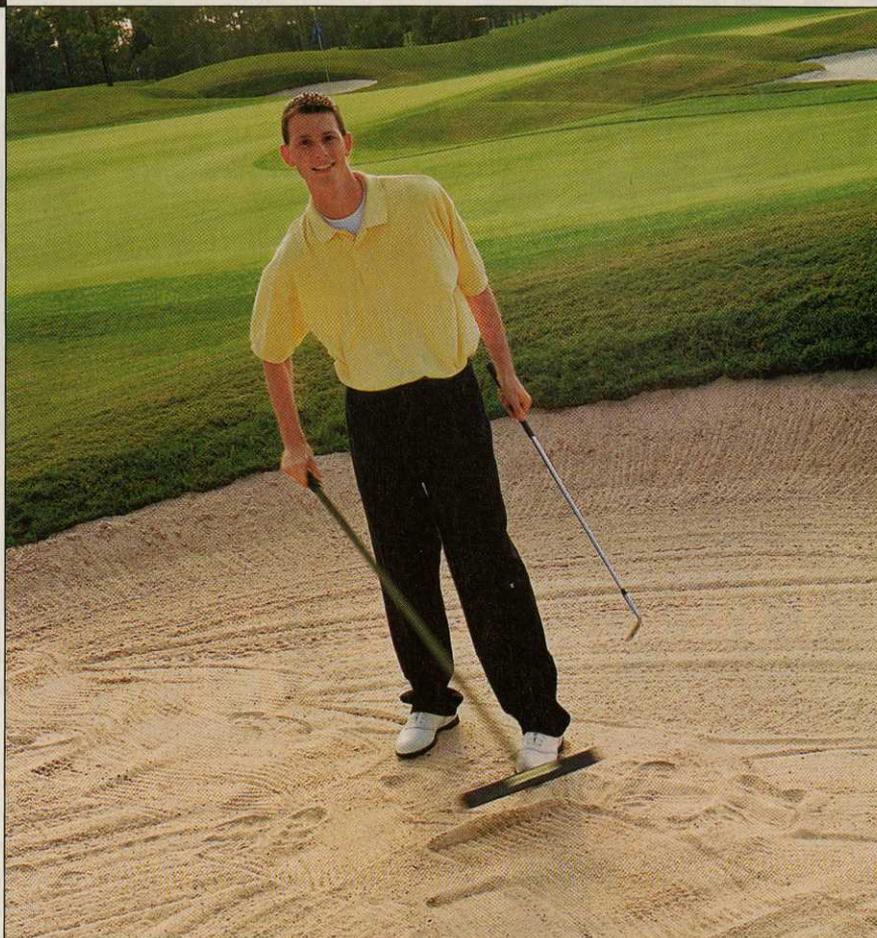
If it's on the ebb, what can you as superintendents do about the golf car tracks across the edge of the green, the hefty footprints right across the cup, the day-old dead brown ball marks, or the occasional 3-inch cavity in the green from an aggravated, unruly putter? Can anything be done to stop this carnage?

Defining etiquette

There's a wide spectrum of understanding of what exactly etiquette is: from general course maintenance during play, to keeping an appropriate pace, to courtesies such as tending the pin, to knowing the regulations and penalties for errant shots. The PGA provides a comprehensive list of the rules, starting with allowing yourself time to warm up at the start of a round, all the way to shaking hands after the last putt. A more straightforward working definition, though, eloquently summed up by Ross, "is just having good manners on the golf course and doing things in the proper way. And that means being patient and considerate of others and taking the time to fix the things that you mess up."

However general or specific of a definition you receive in asking several superintendents about their takes on etiquette, one thing seems sure: Many new players don't know the rules of etiquette, or often times, even that such rules exist.

"A lot of that has to do with the boom over the last five to 10 years," says Eric Johnson, superintendent at Bandon Dunes Golf Resort in Bandon, Ore. "The new players



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Re-education programs might be the best option to train golfers about the rules of etiquette, including bunker raking.

just don't have the respect that you learned a few years ago. They come out and expect this game to be easy and simple, and they have no idea what they're getting into."

The booming popularity of the game has tapped a new slice of the population. Tiger Woods' fame and national recognition has furthered golf's reach to a new and previously uncultivated audience. Plus, the increased number of courses across the country has driven down the price of many green fees, and lower-income players who previously couldn't afford to play much are flocking to the game like geese to a pond.

"With so many new golfers playing, especially lower-income golfers who don't know the game except what they see on TV, more people are coming out who don't know how things are supposed to work," says Charles DeCerce, superintendent at Mechanicville (N.Y.) Country Club in upstate New York. They don't see caddies fixing ball marks or raking traps on television, he says, and they don't see any of the work that goes into getting a course ready for a big tournament.

This is not to say that everyone who has played the

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game for a few years is playing straight from the USGA handbook, nor that all rookies can't tell a divot tool from a tuning fork. Len Berg, the head agronomist for Chicago's six park district courses and a 33-year professional in the business, says that course manners are as uncouth as they've always been.

"Etiquette hasn't changed one iota," he says. "[Golfers] still trash the course, they still don't rake the traps, they still don't fix their ball marks — they still don't do any of the things we ask them to do."

As to the player who still manages to be considerate: "Hooray," Ross says, "because right now he is the stranger. He is the exception."

The consensus seems to be, whether it's a recent occurrence or one that's had 33 years to lay its wicked roots down deep, that etiquette is not what it should be. There are some golfers who don't learn it at all, and some who just don't pay attention to what they have learned.

In most cases, Berg says, the lack of etiquette is not an intentional slight to the game, the course or to the crew working on it.

"The players I know have a lot of class and a lot of respect for the game," he says. "[Some players] even think they actually have good etiquette. But if everybody's doing it, and they say they do, then why are there so many divots and ball marks everywhere? It's forgetfulness. They get out of the habit and it escapes their mind."

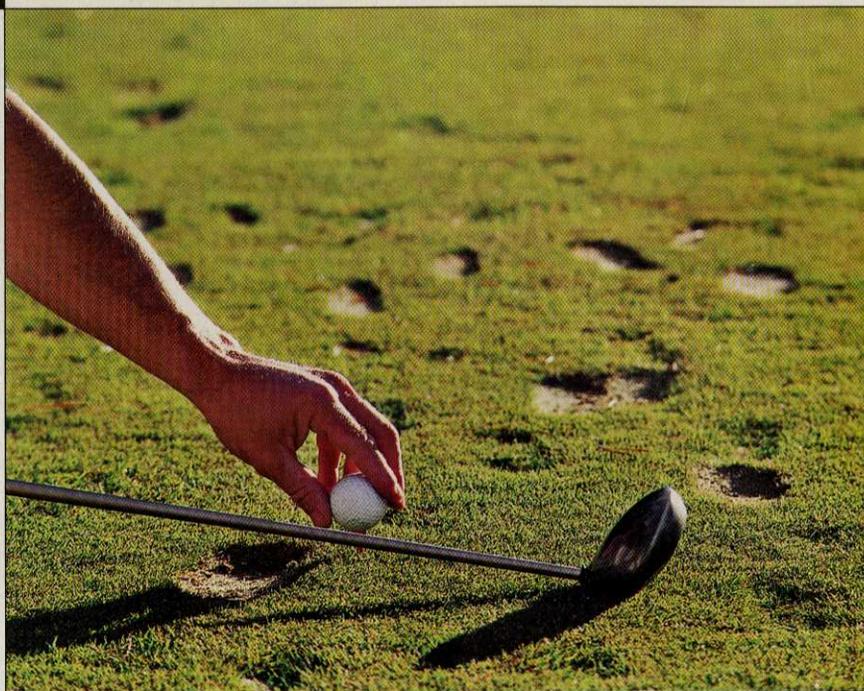
Don't give up

It's doesn't mean etiquette is a lost cause just because some players have forgotten or never learned the rules. Despite his otherwise unenthusiastic outlook on today's etiquette, Berg says that it's not too large a hazard to overcome.

"We cannot give up on this, on the education," he says. "It's too important for our courses and for our game."

But with so much on the line, what can be done to curb the scourge?

With the roots of the problem in forgetfulness and unawareness, player re-education programs might be the best option. Beyond the simple signage that most courses employ to remind their players to "Keep Golf Cars Off Greens," and beyond just posting some rules in the locker room, it should be nothing short of a vertical, concerted effort.



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The key point to make with golfers is: The more they take care of the course, the better it will look and play.

It should be a unified front involving the PGA Tour, retail stores, rental shops, pro shops and even the rangers. And they all need to repeat the message that players' behavior on the course does matter, and that it reflects on them and the course itself. "A little bit of education and better understanding will do a lot to bring things around," DeCerce says.

The key is to remind players about proper etiquette without nagging them or being obnoxious, says John Zimmers, the certified superintendent at Oakmont Country Club in Pittsburgh. You have to make the point that the more they take care of a course, the better it will look and play — what with smoother greens, fewer obstacles in the fairway and better tee boxes.

Another way to get the message across to some players, both old and new, is to establish friendly relationships with them. Then they might put a face and a name to golf course maintenance, especially when it comes to maintenance items directly related to etiquette. "When they get to know the superintendent and the staff, they seem to get a little better [with etiquette]," Berg says.

It's not worth it to get all worked up over etiquette, though, Ross says. It's true that it's important, but he also points out the importance of remembering that "it's not all doom and gloom out there."

"Things maybe aren't so bad," Ross says. "I'll gladly put up with any sort of etiquette [problems], as long as I'm out there at sunrise every morning, doing what I love to do." ■

Kehrl is a freelance writer from Chicago.