

# We've Got Mail

LETTERS FROM THE FIELD

## Is Perception Reality?

We're employed in an industry that serves millions of people annually. It can be a very rewarding career — when everything goes right and all is well in the universe. Unfortunately, this cosmic alignment rarely happens. The problem is that for many of us this is expected — everything going right and perfect conditions are *expected* daily. Why does this happen? Why are we subject to such scrutiny?

Recently, I attended the 38<sup>th</sup> annual Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium, and some of the top turfgrass experts in the country were featured speakers: Joe Vargas and Ron Calhoun from Michigan State University; Frank Rossi from Cornell University; Craig Currier from Bethpage State Park; Bruce Clarke from Rutgers University; Mike Morris from Crystal Downs Country Club; and Michael McNulty from the Philadelphia Country Club.

Currier, director of golf course maintenance at Bethpage, said something that most of us know, but very few of our customers understand: "It took six years to prepare for one week of golf." Yes, I know this was one the Majors for the year. But that's the point. What the golfing public sees on television weekly, especially if it's a Major, definitely is not the reality that they can or should expect at their local country clubs. Their perceptions are flawed into thinking that if the turf at Bethpage Black, Olympia Fields, Medinah and Oak Hill looks so great and perfect, why can't they have the same conditions at their courses?

With the advent of television taping *everything*, these events must portray "grainless" greens or be subject to the scorn of Johnny Miller. The perception must be perfect. But even with millions of dollars and hundreds of volunteers, the reality is that these fabulous swards of pristine turf are often pushed to near death. And if Mother Nature deems it, turfgrass dies.

So what can we do? When handed a handful of lemons, how do we make lemonade? This is a challenge with which we are all faced with, especially now with our slower economy and golf rounds spiraling. Morris, the certified superintendent from Crystal Downs Country Club in Frankfort, Mich., had some interesting comments. He took the offensive approach. He talked to members and asked them their expectations of the course. He took the initiative and collected data to determine what his daily green speeds were. He surveyed his golfers and asked them what target green speeds they would accept. Surprisingly, when he sped them up for a club event and tried to maintain the same speed afterward, the members asked him to get them back to normal.

I believe we are our own worst enemies at times. One of our greatest detriments is our lack of communication. I know that we preach to the choir in triumphant choruses, but are loath to carry the message to our employers. How well do we know that the squeakiest wheel gets the grease? Well, why not intelligently gather some data as Morris did and start squeaking?

Our livelihood demands the best of our abilities. Most of us strive well beyond the expectations of our clientele, but at what cost? Maybe we could all save a few gray hairs and save our employers some money if we took the initiative to assess our customers' expectations. Maybe that is the reality of our careers and our lives.

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