

Budget Blight

Although soaring gas prices will certainly affect the bottom line in 2006, it's pythium right now that's sapping the coffers throughout much of the country

BY THOMAS SKERNIVITZ, MANAGING EDITOR

Determined to keep their budgets balanced, superintendents are weathering the sky-high fuel prices this year. What's making them sweat, especially in the eastern half of the country, are the balanced dew points.

On too many mornings this summer, superintendents have gotten up on the wrong side of the heat index. When temperatures rocketed in June, July and early August, the dew points were never far behind. That type of humidity triggered disease — especially pythium — and necessitated control measures that tend to bust budgets as well as blight.

"I would wake up in the morning and the temperature was 74 degrees and the dew point was 74 degrees," Rick Slattery, the superintendent at Locust Hill Country Club, outside Rochester, N.Y., says. "When you get that kind of weather persistently, the disease pressure has really, really been heavy."

The chemical tabs have been just as profound, especially at transition-zone courses, where pythium can blow up overnight when the soil warms. Slattery is spending \$200 per acre to treat his greens and tees with Terrazole and \$174 per acre to treat his fairways and first cut of rough with Subdue Maxx.

"I'm going to assume that probably everybody is going to have trouble staying within their fungicide budgets this year," Slattery says.

Most superintendents have no choice; the alternative is dead turf and unhappy players. In Slattery's case, he's had to make three wall-to-wall applications against pythium in addition to an extra two broad-spectrum fungicide applications.

"I've been (at Locust Hill) 11 years, and I've been a superintendent for 35 years, and I haven't had this kind of problem in my career," he says.

Compounding matters, rainfall, which often dictates spray schedules, has been unpredictable. Reliable storm fronts have rarely appeared; instead, isolated shower cells have come and gone without warning. Too often an unexpected drenching has washed away a recently applied agent.

"Usually you get 21 days of control with most of the fungicides, but I'm noticing I'm getting seven, eight or nine days of control and then disease pressure again," Slattery says. "So I'm not only applying more fungicides because we're getting a lot of disease, I'm not even getting the length of control out of the products."

Slattery's annual pesticide budget, which also covers dollar spot, brown patch and anthracnose, is around \$32,000. About one-sixth of that total is dedicated to pythium control, although that allotment accounts for only spot applications or one full application to the greens, tees and fairways. As of Aug. 8, he was expecting to spend closer to \$45,000 on pesticides this year.

"We're probably a good \$10,000 to \$12,000 over budget with just pythium control, and we'll probably be another \$4,000 to \$5,000 over with other products because I'm not getting the length of control that I normally get," Slattery says. "That's a lot of money. And I know a lot of supers that are stressed out over that."

Slattery empathizes with the superintendent who doesn't enjoy a large budget or management team that is willing to bend financially in order to save the turf.

"We just had a greens committee meeting, and its basic approach was obviously they don't want dead grass on the course for any reason," Slattery says. "Some golf courses don't have that choice. They just don't have \$15,000 or \$20,000 extra to put into fungicide. They don't really have any choice at all but to hope things get better with the weather."

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Pythium blight has run rampant across courses in much of the United States, thanks to high humidity.

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Scott Brickley has a slightly smaller budget — \$419,000, including wages. But the superintendent at Bunker Hill Golf Course, a public facility in Medina, Ohio, also has an owner, Todd Ingraham, who fully grasps the “pay me now or pay me later” dictum when it comes to erasing disease.

Were Brickley to leave his course untreated in favor of the budget, he says he would essentially be adhering to the “old public course theory” — keep the greens and tees in the best shape possible and ignore the fairways. But in turn, the fairways would likely die and have to be reseeded and fertilized.

“Now you’ve got a whole other handful of expenses that are going to affect your budget,” Brickley says.

So they’ve forsaken the budget at Bunker Hill and attacked the pythium from tee to green every 10 to 14 days. Through July, the course’s annual fungicide budget — much like Slattery’s — was \$12,000 over, with 90 percent of that overrun specific to pythium control, Brickley says.

“I just stated to Todd that it’s all about pythium out there. So you gotta do it. You gotta protect yourself,” Brickley says.

At Rainier Golf and Country Club in Seattle, superintendent Sam Sprague enjoys many of the same luxuries afforded to Slattery, including a total budget of \$865,000 and an understanding membership. Through June it was irrelevant that he had slightly overspent on fuel (\$700), chemicals (\$1,500) and fertilization (\$5,000).

“The members are happy, and that’s the bottom line,” he says. “As long as my overall budget isn’t too out of whack, they don’t concern themselves about the categories unless there are special issues.”

Gas isn’t one of those issues, even if it is headline news across the country. Sprague’s fuel allotment is \$15,000, or less than 2 percent of his total budget. “It’s not a huge budget category,” he says.

In addition, the effects of higher fuel prices have been delayed at many courses because of early-order programs. In those cases, fertilizer — comprised largely of natural gas — had been ordered two or three months before fuel costs started to rise in January.

“Buying your fertilizer in November or December and having it delivered in the spring gives you two advantages,” Slattery says. “You’re taking advantage of last year’s prices, and you have (the fertilizer) on site and don’t have to wait for delivery. And a third advantage is you get little bit of a price reduction because you’re buying it in bulk.”

Of course, whatever hazards were postponed this year will eventually surface. And as 2006 budgets start to take shape this month,

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"I've been (at Locust Hill) 11 years, and I've been a superintendent for 35 years, and I haven't had this kind of problem in my career."

RICK SLATTERY,
SUPERINTENDENT,
LOCUST HILL CC

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even the most happy-go-lucky superintendent will have to think twice about rising costs.

At Locust Hill, Slattery's primary concern entering his Nov. 1 fiscal new year is replacing his irrigation system. The cost of plastic pipe — another byproduct of natural gas — has dramatically risen. The market is so volatile, Slattery says, that irrigation installers will guarantee their prices for no more than 10 to 15 days.

"All the experts I talked to said they don't think prices will ever come back down, even if petroleum does drop in price," Slattery says. "Once it goes up there, it stays up there."

As he had done with fertilizer last year, Slattery plans to pre-order irrigation pipe in bulk as soon as he receives the final design of his new system. The manufacturer will store the pipe until Slattery is ready to begin the project. The same goes for copper wire, another product that has become more expensive this year.

"If you know when you're going to use it and how much you're going to use, purchase it now," Slattery says.

With this year's price hikes in mind, most superintendents will seek bigger budgets for 2006. John Miller, the certified superintendent at municipally operated The Golf Club at Yankee Trace, in Centerville, Ohio, anticipates a slight increase, especially with rounds up at his course this year.

"Business has been good," he says. "In a worst-case scenario, we'll maintain status quo. But in reality, with the cost of fuel going up and potentially fertilizer going up, too, status quo would be like getting cut."

Sprague, in his fifth year at Rainier, will make his annual request for more staff. Unfortunately, fulfilling that proposal would necessitate extra dues from members, so the prospects of a bigger crew remain in doubt. "But we haven't been asked to decrease crew size," Sprague optimistically notes.

Good communication, according to Slattery,

is vital in requesting budget increases. "You have to be able to talk to (management) and explain to them the situation in a way they can understand it," he says. "As long as they know up front, things go a lot smoother."

If corners need be cut — either this year or next — there are plenty of ways to do so.

The first area Miller looks at — "unfortunately," he notes — is labor. And while employees are rarely let go because of budget constraints, their overtime hours are always susceptible.

"(Labor) seems to be the area where we typically have a little bit of flexibility," Miller says. "If we happen to be blessed enough to catch

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Fuel Costs Already Difficult for Some to Ignore

The inflated gas prices of 2005 are anything but an afterthought at Bunker Hill Golf Course in Medina, Ohio.

"As far as budget numbers are concerned, the two biggest factors for me are definitely gasoline and fungicide," superintendent Scott Brickley says. "Everything else is status quo, if not below."

Beginning with regular gas — including that which is used for the course's golf cars — Brickley is exceeding the monthly budget by an average of \$400. In April, May and June, he spent \$1,121, \$1,196 and \$1,702, respectively.

The monthly budget for premium gas has also gone over budget by about \$200; for example, from \$700 to \$933 in April. And the diesel budget is "just unbelievable," Brickley says. "We are \$600 to \$700 over every month."

Thus far, Brickley hasn't been asked to make any cuts, outside of limiting the only three applicable workers to no more than three hours of overtime per week.

— By Thomas Skernivitz



When it comes to budget woes this year, “it’s all about pythium,” says Scott Brickley, the superintendent at Bunker Hill Golf Course in Medina, Ohio.

“In a worst-case scenario, we’ll maintain status quo (with our budget). But in reality, with the cost of fuel going up and potentially fertilizer going up, too, status quo would be like getting cut.”

JOHN MILLER,

CERTIFIED SUPERINTENDENT,
THE GOLF CLUB AT YANKEE TRACE

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a rainy day, and we can’t really be productive, we’re looking to send some of our laborers home.”

Miller also rations his chemicals, if necessary. He’ll skip a spray if possible and rely instead on integrated pest management (IPM) strategies. “What we’re trying to do is stretch (the chemicals) a little bit, maybe

even into next year,” he says.

Sprague, meanwhile, has been able to spend more on fertilizer, largely because machinery upgrades in recent years have parlayed into fewer repair bills. “Last year we had some major breakdowns, and we kind of based our (2005) budgeting on history,” he says. “But it’s kind of unpredictable. You can get hit by a couple of big costly parts and get right back to where you guessed you’d be.”

Like Sprague, Slattery doesn’t want to skimp on fertilizer, regardless of how expensive it gets. He’d just as soon downgrade a tree-pruning program, reduce overtime or hire one less employee.

“Even when I was at golf courses with very small budgets, I may not have asked for more money in my budget, but I refused to drop my line items for fertilizer,” he says.

Anything less from superintendents, even in the midst of this summer’s pythium epidemic, would mean going down without a fight for their turf.

“We’re playing against Mother Nature, and we hope that we win six out of 10 times,” Brickley says. “But the other four times she just kicks our [behinds].” ■



On the Range

Good golfers love them, bad golfers need them, and like the rest of the golf course, superintendents have to diligently maintain them. They are practice ranges, and providing a facility that players deem “good” or even “excellent” can go a long way in building customer loyalty and bolstering course revenue.

While definitions of “good” and “excellent” vary, superintendents polled for this article generally agreed on the elements that make a practice range attractive and easy to use: The

BY SHANE SHARP

number of driving stalls should be commensurate with the number of members (private course) or average daily golfers (daily fee or resort); the putting green should mirror the actual greens on the course in speed and undulation; and a short-game area for chipping is essential for attracting serious golfers.

“Consumers want space, good conditions, nice golf balls and a realistic setting,” says Steve di Costanzo, president of the Golf Range

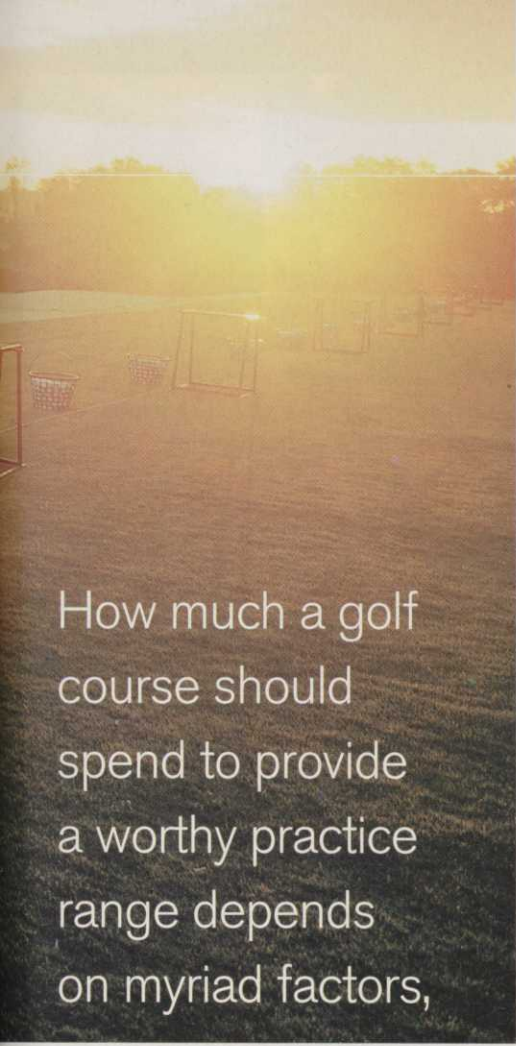
Association of America (GRAA) in New Canaan, Conn.

Each year the GRAA ranks the top 100 ranges in the United States by region, based on a variety of criteria. In addition to the above elements, di Costanzo says a practice range vying for a spot in the rankings should have well-defined target greens laser-measured with specific distances from each hitting bay, a natural turf putting green built to United States Golf Association (USGA) specifications, and a short-game area with quality turf that lets players check the spin on their chip shots.

“You can’t just have grass mowed short on the tee, you have to have the same grass that’s on the golf course,” adds di Costanzo.

So how much should a course budget to provide a Top 100-worthy practice range, or just one of which members or loyal daily-fee golfers can be proud? The answer exists along a sliding scale — one affected by geography, labor rates and climate.

At the famed Olympic Club in San Francisco, superintendent Pat Finlen spends up-



How much a golf course should spend to provide a worthy practice range depends on myriad factors, including geography, labor rates and climate

wards of \$100,000 on labor alone to maintain a practice facility that houses a 60,000-square-foot, four-level driving range with 28 stations, a 5,000-square-foot chipping green with two practice bunkers, and two putting greens that total 25,000 square feet.

"It's an expansive facility that the members love and utilize at astounding rates," Finlen says. "We recently reconstructed the Cliffs putting green and the Lake chipping green and we're looking at lengthening the driving range to accommodate today's technologically advanced equipment."

According to Finlen, the Olympic Club spends \$30,000 per year on materials — post reconstruction — including sand/peat mix, seed, fertilizer, water, tee towels, makers and other items. His staff mows the driving range three times a week to fairway height and fills

divots, daily.

The Olympic Club's members can't seem to get enough of the facility. Finlen says the driving range is at 60 percent to 70 percent capacity all day, and the chipping area is utilized about 50 percent of the time.

"We have 350 members with handicaps of 10 or under, so they appreciate the range and the way it is maintained," he says.

The gap in maintenance expenditures between a private club with a 12-month season and a resort course with a 30-week season can be more like a chasm. At Circling Raven Golf Club at the Coeur D'Alene Casino and Resort in Worley, Idaho, superintendent Brian Woster gets by on about \$21,000 a year — roughly \$100,000 less than Finlen.

"The maintenance costs of the practice putting green are absorbed into the costs of the other 18 greens on the course," Woster says. "We're able to provide a first-rate practice facility at a very reasonable cost."

Opened in 2003, the Gene Bates-designed course boasts a driving range and short-game area across from the clubhouse that gives the appearance of being endless in scope and stature as it blends into the surrounding hills and wheat fields. Golfers can pound balls into oblivion from a generous collection of 14 stations, or chip and pitch from nine stations to an expertly coifed chipping green.

"Golfers want large — a large driving range, a large putting green and plenty of space to maneuver," Woster says.

According to Woster, his staff mows the range landing area and target greens once a week and the range tees and chipping green every other day. Materials, limited to top-dressing, sand and seed, run just over \$5,500.

"I would think if you look at the national picture, this is a very good practice facility," Woster says.

Clubs and courses with average practice ranges looking to upgrade to top-notch facilities such as those at the Olympic Club and

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A short-game area for chipping is essential for attracting serious golfers.

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Circling Raven can expect significant increases in maintenance costs, depending upon the size of the expansion and the additional labor required to maintain it.

Dick Stuntz, superintendent at the 36-hole Alvarado Golf and Country Club in Lawrence, Kan., recently oversaw the addition of a 15,000-square-foot, three-tier bentgrass green designed to facilitate pitching, chipping and bunker shots. Alvarado also expanded its driving range from 30,000 square feet to 100,000, making it one of the larger facilities in the area.

"The entire project brought our annual maintenance expenses on the range from \$20,000 to \$75,000," Stuntz says.

Stuntz is quick to point out that what works for a 36-hole club with one public and one private course doesn't work for every course. He believes a 25,000- to 30,000-square-foot driving range should suffice for a small membership-based 18-hole private club.

"Range size and the maintenance costs depend on a number of factors," Stuntz says. "Amount of play, weather, staffing levels and even course classification come into play."

If there is one constant when it comes to budgeting for practice range upkeep, it's that most superintendents don't separate range maintenance from course maintenance. Finlen,

Woster and Stuntz each had to extract figures from their annual budgets.

The practice also holds true along the eastern seaboard.

"In my experience we haven't separated the range from the course in budgeting," says Dan Evers, superintendent at Reston National in Reston, Va. "Not that it would be a bad idea, we just haven't approached it that way."

Evers says his course and other Billy Casper Golf-operated facilities budget maintenance according to total greens, fairways and rough. Putting and chipping greens are budgeted with greens, the driving range stations with fairways and the landing area with the rough.

Average annual maintenance costs for practice ranges at Billy Casper Golf-managed properties in the Mid-Atlantic are about \$60,000, according to Evers, based on a 12-month growing season with cool weather grasses.

Figures in the balmy, bermudagrass-dominated Southeast are similar. At the Tega Cay Golf Club in Tega Cay, S.C., superintendent Aaron Nolan spends about \$55,000 annually to maintain what many local golfers feel is one of the top practice facilities in the Charlotte area.

"Our labor and materials costs are fairly close," Nolan says.

During a major overhaul that included the construction of a new nine holes, clubhouse and outdoor pavilion, Tega Cay installed a concrete slab with practice mats and tees on a tier just below the turf-teeing stations. Nolan says the addition was out of necessity and was not a cost-saving measure.

"Our grass teeing area is only 6,000 to 8,000 square feet," he says. "We use the mats three days a week to put less stress on the natural turf."

In addition to the driving range, Tega Cay features two putting greens and a chipping green that total 35,000 square feet, and a practice bunker on the far end of the range near the first tee of one of its three nine-hole courses.

"It's a unique setup that appeals to golfers," Nolan says. ■

Shane Sharp is freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C., and a frequent contributor to Golfdom.

BY RON FURLONG

Budget Busters

Superintendent offers "Top 10 Opportunities You Can Create For Yourself While Working Within a Tighter Budget"



As the money and resources available to superintendents continue to decrease, there are, I believe, two different mindsets to choose between when sitting down to attack your budget for the upcoming year. The first mindset is with dread; the second is seeing it as a great opportunity. Albert Einstein, who has been quoted a time or two, once said, "In the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity."

An opportunity for what, exactly, I can hear you asking? Well, let's see. How about for change? For challenge? For making your golf course even better within an even tighter restraint? Is that not an opportunity to prove your worth? Is that not an admirable challenge? "Too many people," the late U.S. politician and author James F. Byrnes wrote, "are thinking of security instead of opportunity."

It will come as no great shock to anyone reading this that many golf courses are currently operating under a budget very similar (even, in some instances, lower) to the previous year. This is the case even though the prices we pay for supplies are, of course, going up. My budget, for example, has basically remained status quo for three years. So how do we do it? How do we provide the same (or an even better) product with, essentially, fewer resources? That is the great question.

How, you may ask yourself, can I keep my

fuel budget the same even though gas prices have gone through the roof? Well, you can't, of course, but maybe you can lower your travel and expense line item to offset it; or lower your lease of equipment line item. Maybe you can get really creative and establish more "No Mow" zones in the deep rough, saving on fuel, equipment use and man-hours.

A tighter restraint could lead to, if you choose to look at it positively, opportunity. Opportunity could lead to creativity. Creativity, if utilized, could lead to a great level of satisfaction — the satisfaction of using someone else's money to its greatest possible effectiveness.

I've come up with a Top 10 list for your consideration. Let's call it the "Top 10 Opportunities You Can Create For Yourself While Working Within a Tighter Budget." Agghh, that's a mouthful. I need a swig of water after uttering that one. OK, let's get started:

Opportunity

#10

To become a better manager of people

A tighter budget means a smaller crew. It's hard to get around this one. It means hiring and keeping a crew you can trust and that can do the job — perhaps more of a job than you've asked from them in the past. You will have to hire the right people. You will have to motivate them. You will have to get the most out of them. The result, no doubt, will be that you will become a better manager. Or you won't succeed. It's as simple as that.

Opportunity

#9

To become a more thorough shopper

With limited funds you will no doubt become a more meticulous and a better shopper ultimately. You'll start to consider generic fungicides and maybe even off-brand mowers. Instead of two

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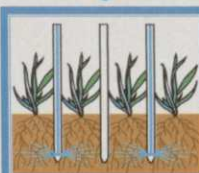
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Salesmen will suddenly seem more important to you for their prices than their companionship on the golf course.

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or three quotes for your new tractor purchase or drainage project, you'll get five or six quotes.

Also, it will suddenly seem like salesmen are more important to you for the prices they offer than they are for their possible companionship on the golf course. You will question your equipment technician's purchases closer. Does he really need to change his latex gloves seven times a day?

A tighter, stricter budget can only make you more of a micro-manager when it comes to spending. We won't go as far as to call you a penny pincher, but something in the same ballpark.

Opportunity #8 To get yourself in shape

Here's the facts: A tighter budget equals fewer people you can staff, which results in more work for everyone, including yourself. Undoubtedly, you'll find yourself behind a walk mower at some point or on the silly end of the shovel. This can only lead to shaving a few unwanted pounds.

Opportunity #7 To use a higher percentage of your brain

Let's face it, evidence shows we use only up to 10 percent of our brains. Anything that might stimulate the old noggin a bit more and maybe push us upward toward 10 percent or maybe even 11 percent has to be considered welcome.

Opportunity #6 To return golf to its roots (or to embrace the browns)

As I write this I'm also sitting here with an eye on the TV watching the British Open at St. Andrews, and I can't help but marvel at the beautiful yellowness and brownness of the golf course. You can't really deny that this golf course, with its illustrious history, is the true home of golf. This is how golf was first played and how golf was meant to be played.

I'm not saying we should exactly return to the times of goats trimming the fairways, but can't we embrace some of the traditional aspects? Can't we let go of a little bit of the green? Can't we welcome back some of the

browns and yellows of years past?

Ultimately, in time, we may have no choice.

Opportunity #5 To become more environmentally sensitive (in a sort of backdoorish way)

If you don't have as much money for chemicals, chances are maybe you're not apt to buy as many chemicals. Is this really such a bad thing?

I know, we're all absolutely perfect when it comes to the environment and protecting it. We've never overlapped or sprayed in any wind above 3 mph. Despite all of the warm and fuzzy environmental stewardship going on out there, it still might not be such a horrible thing if we had to learn to grow grass and manage some of those pesky diseases and weeds without quite as many applications. Just maybe?

Opportunity #4 To stimulate your creative juices

Consider this: If your budget has been frozen or even cut, would that not force you to become a more creative superintendent? Assuming, that is, you wish the product to remain as good as it was last year or even better.

Wouldn't you have to come up with new and innovative ways to do things — things that in the past didn't require a second thought? Consider no-mow zones, plant growth regulators and cultural removal of weeds. The list is endless. As the quote on my bookmark says, "The world of imagination is boundless."

Opportunity #3 To promote yourself and the job you do

This entails not only promoting within the local community or even within the golf management community but also promoting yourself and the job you do at your own golf course. If someone (owner, general manager, green committee chairman) puts a limit on your budget, and you come in at that budget (or even under) and produce a product of high quality, there should be recognition of your efforts. And if there isn't, then it's your job to make sure there is. Let them know what you've done. Stand up and be applauded.

Opportunity

#2

To become an overall better superintendent

Tighter budgets are going to make all of us think twice about spending. It can be debated whether this ultimately results in a better product, but I don't see how it can hurt. But what can't be debated is that people rise to the occasion in trying times. This has been proven time and again throughout history. We make do. We get creative. We stimulate our minds. We rise to face the challenge.

Opportunity

#1

To feel the ultimate satisfaction of a job well done

Succeeding in the face of adversity is a heck of a good feeling. This is true in many things in life, including golf course management. When you can take a product, with limited resources, and turn it into something to be proud of, well, I can't

think of a more rewarding career experience. I would venture to guess the satisfaction felt under this circumstance might even be better than that of doing the same great job with unlimited resources. Since I've never had unlimited resources, this is only a guess.

Frank Lloyd Wright once said, "I know the price of success: dedication, hard work and an unrelenting devotion to the things you want to see happen."

Any challenge you face in day-to-day life is going to make you a better person — and a better manager. If you decide to accept the challenge of a tight budget with optimism and resolve and try to employ some of the above opportunities, you will no doubt find you've improved yourself and your golf course. ■

Ron Furlong is the superintendent of Avalon Golf Club in Burlington, Wash., and a frequent contributor to Golfdom. He can be reached at RF7500@aol.com.

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