

Call in the Cavalry

Superintendent turns to USGA's
Turf Advisory Service for help
on golf maintenance front

BY CHARLIE FULTZ

As superintendents, sometimes we feel as if we're alone on a desert island. When everything is going smoothly and the golf course is in great shape, we are heroes and can do no wrong. But when the stresses of course maintenance set in, many times we realize we're on our own.

Few people, other than those of us who are intimately familiar with turf, understand the multitude of factors that can affect a golf course. Yet we are constantly compared to nearby courses on appearance

Problem

Few people, other than superintendents, understand the multitude of factors that can affect a golf course. So it's not like superintendents can consult just anybody when they need advice.

Solution

USGA's Turf Advisory Service can provide the sound advice that superintendents require. And that advice is tailored toward individual needs.

and playability. Such assessments are always unfair because the course down the street from us is different in so many ways. Still, we all face this type of scrutiny at some point.

What happens when your course is struggling with playing conditions that are out of your control, perhaps because of extreme weather (i.e., high humidity,

fluctuating temperatures and untimely rain) or intense pest pressures? Too often, unfortunately, such a scenario causes upper management to wonder, "Is my superin-

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tendent doing everything he can to give me the best course under the conditions we are facing?"

There will come a time in almost everyone's career when that question will arise. It happens to the best of us and the worst of us. In fact, in golf course management, we can morph from being the best to the worst, in some eyes, in a matter of a year, a month or even a week. Let's face it: This is a business of "what have you done for me lately."

As superintendents, we may even begin to question our own

abilities, especially when everything we're doing just isn't getting it done. So, what can we do to answer the naysayers and help ourselves in the process?

Call in the cavalry — as in the United States Golf Association, which offers a Turf Advisory Service (TAS) that includes a visit by one of the USGA's turf agronomists. On this visit, any and all areas of golf course management can and will be discussed.

For instance, some things that can be discussed on such a visit include course conditions vs. budget allowances; equipment in use vs. equip-

ment needed; agronomic concerns (proper turf for course, greens construction, drainage issues); and ways to implement changes.

The best thing about a TAS visit is that it is tailored to each course's needs. It isn't a generic approach to golf course maintenance. Each course's individual needs are discussed and evaluated as they pertain to that course.

I've heard that some superintendents feel this service is a headhunting expedition (with the hunted head being their own). Superintendents who feel that way should perhaps question their own abilities and their chosen fields. If you've truly done all you can to prepare your course and still it fails, then you should be able to objectively self-reflect and admit that you could use some help.

The TAS provides an impartial review. The agronomists aren't there on your or the upper management's behalf. They are there on behalf of the golf course, serving as an intermediary to each side's questions and concerns. Each person has a say, and each can ask whatever he or she wants, knowing the question will be addressed.

At the end of the course visit (half day or full day), a discussion is held with all parties. In a matter of a few weeks, an official report about the visit comes from the USGA. It details all of the areas of concern presented, and it gives the reviewer's opinion on how to provide the best golf course you can provide.

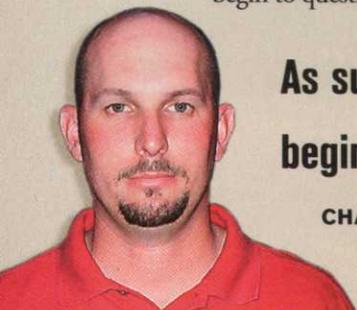
This is where the service is so valuable. Coming from a professional who sees hundreds of golf courses a year, it can be the most influential report ever conducted on your golf course. Most importantly, it can serve as a guideline on how to improve your course in both the short term and long term.

In 1998, I asked the USGA to come in and do a review of the course where I was working at that time. Although I felt I had done everything I possibly

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could with our limited funds, staff and equipment, other people felt I hadn't done the best possible job. The general manager, a green committee member, the board president, another board member and I attended the TAS' half-day visit.

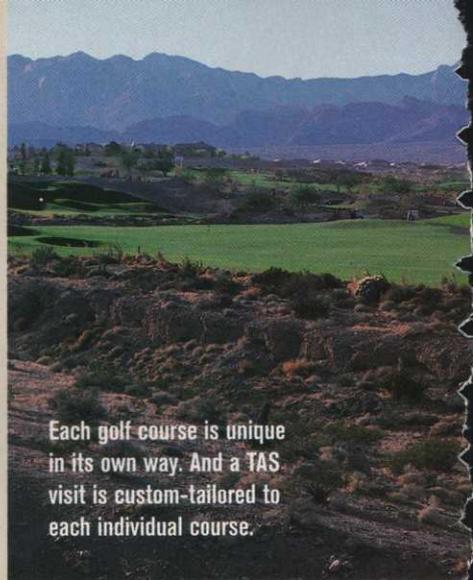
Afterward, upper management was able to realize that we were grossly under-financed, under-staffed and short on equipment. With the USGA report in hand, I was able to make substantial improvements to the entire golf operation. Increasing the budget and staffing, changing fairways from ryegrass to bermudagrass and removing some troublesome trees around greens and tees were just a few of the changes made. We were also able to begin plans for a bunker renovation, which began two years later.

These changes were most notable

when I asked the USGA to come back in 2000 for a quick visit. The agronomist was coming through my area and upon my request made it a point to stop in and review some of the changes that had been made per the TAS. The agronomist noted a huge change in the appearance of the golf course, and we were able to build on that for the future.

I find the TAS visits are among the best things I've ever done for myself and for my employer. They help me focus better on what's needed and give my employer the most for the money spent on the golf course. Together, we are able to give the members the most for their membership dues. Plus, we are able to lay out short-term and long-term plans for the golf course. It's a win-win situation for all of us.

Yes, in a way, each golf course is an island unto itself. Each is unique in its own way, just as the superintendent



Each golf course is unique in its own way. And a TAS visit is custom-tailored to each individual course.

running it is unique in his or her way of maintaining it. Because the TAS service is custom-tailored to each individual course, using it can be one of the most beneficial things a superintendent, general manager or board does to improve and preserve their most vital asset. ■

Charlie Fultz is superintendent of Shenvalee Golf Resort and a member of Golfdom's Advisory Staff.

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