

# Don't Get Complacent!

Experienced superintendents offer advice on how to stay fresh, focused and frank in an ever-changing and demanding profession



BY KEN KRIZNER, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



**EXPERIENCE MIGHT BE** the most important asset for a golf course superintendent. You know every contour in every green or what a heavy rain will do to a particular area on the course. You rely on instinct, because your experience tells you what is the correct — or incorrect — solution to a problem.

But as good as experience can be, there can be a downside to it. Relying solely on experience can lead to complacency — tending to make the same decision on the same question each time, notwithstanding the facts. And whether you're dealing with agronomic issues, communicating and maintaining good relations with golfers or remaining passionate about your job and your course, avoiding complacency — or the appearance of complacency — is critical.

"When you're in the industry for as long as I've been, you tend to approach some situations with a certain amount of negativity," says William Anderson, director of greens and grounds at Carmel Country Club in Charlotte, N.C., who has been with the club for nearly 37 years. "A member will come to you with what he regards as a new idea, but you've heard the idea three or four times before, and you know it won't work."

But you can't let that history distort your enthusiasm, Anderson stresses. You owe it to the golfer to hear his or her idea.

With experience can also come the feeling that superintendents "own" their golf courses and that their proposals should be adopted without debate.

"It's not my course; it's the members' course," says Ken Mangum, director of golf courses and grounds for the Atlanta Athletic Club in Georgia since 1988 and a 35-year veteran of the industry. "I make proposals all of the time, and I don't take it personally or get upset if members decide not to adopt them."

To Sandy Clark, certified superintendent of Barona Creek Golf Club near San Diego and a third-generation golf industry veteran, avoiding complacency starts with exceeding the expectations of the members.

"From start to finish, you have to pro-  
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PHOTO BY: ROB GHOSH



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vide a better experience for your customers," he says.

Another key to avoiding complacency is to stay actively involved.

"It's not hard [to stay away from complacency] because every day there are challenges and new things to learn," says Michael Morris, the certified superintendent of Crystal Downs Country Club in Frankfort, Mich., for nearly 25 years. "If you get to the point where you're complacent, where you think you've arrived and know it all, that's when the rug gets pulled out from under you. There is always something new to learn."

### About the golf course ...

Providing "a better experience for your customers" starts with the golf course's condition. There is no shortage of agroeconomic issues that superintendents face in their day-to-day jobs. During their

tenures, superintendents have seen dramatic changes in expectations related to course conditions. Roughs are now cut at a level once reserved for fairways. There are lower mowing heights for greens and fairways. Chemical-wise, there are improved insecticides, fertilizers and herbicides.

State-of-the-art clubs found in most golfers' bags today add to the challenge

to maintain course conditions. Golfers can now hit the ball farther than ever. This has forced many clubs to either make the course longer or move back fairway bunkers and other hazards.

In 1976, the Atlanta Athletic Club hosted the U.S. Open. Mangum says the course conditions for the tournament then wouldn't be acceptable that tournament today. The challenge to maintain course conditions that are considered superior helps superintendents keep complacency at an arm's length, he adds.

"The level of conditioning is so much better today," Mangum notes. "Everybody expects better conditions, but no better conditions than I expect of myself."

That's why superintendents can't for one moment be content with the conditions of their courses.

"It's all about education," says Jim Nicol, certified superintendent of Hazeltine National Golf Club, near Minneapolis, since 1996. In Nicol's tenure, Hazeltine has hosted the PGA Championship in 2002 and 2009, the 2006 U.S. Amateur Championship, and it's scheduled to host the 2016 Ryder Cup. "We're constantly reading up on new fertilizers and plant protectants. We're always trying to be more efficient."

"What I learned 30 years ago, doesn't hold true today."

### Talk, talk, talk

Members demand more of their courses and from their superintendents than ever

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**Mike Morris** stays away from complacency by challenging himself to learn new things daily.

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before, says Nicol, who has been in the industry since 1978. That said, regular communication with members and golfers is a sure way to avoid complacency.

Part of the increased demand stems from the fact that today's golfer is more knowledgeable than ever about the intricacies of course conditions and playability.

"The minute [a member] reads about something new, he wants to try it at our course," says Gregg Guynan, superintendent of O'Bannon Creek Golf Club near Cincinnati.

Sometimes, what a golfer demands can't be done, as Anderson attests when he speaks of the golfer who comes up with the same stale, discarded idea that has been around for years. Then the most important tool is not found in the maintenance facility. It's communication.

"I heard a long time ago and it holds true today — a superintendent's job is 10 per-

cent grass, 90 percent people," Morris says.

Superintendents emphasize that keeping the lines of communication open between themselves and the membership and the member committees is paramount to avoiding complacency.

Guynan says he has worked hard over the years to establish good working relationships with O'Bannon's committees and their chairmen. Anderson makes sure all calls and e-mails are returned. "You may not make them happy with your answer, but at least you won't make an enemy," he points out. "In this business, you can't make enemies. Because they accumulate, and that will be your downfall."

Superintendents take advantage of all the modern forms of instant communication to convey their message to the membership, including posting information on the club's Web sites and sending e-mail newsletters.

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## FIVE WAYS TO AVOID COMPLACENCY

- 1 Don't think you know everything because of your many years of experience.
- 2 Don't ever stop striving to please your members or golfers.
- 3 Stay actively involved with what's going on around you.
- 4 Keep communication lines open with everyone.
- 5 Get out of the office and on to the course. Be seen!



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Not knowing what nature will throw him next keeps Gregg Guynan from getting complacent.

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Mangum subscribes to the theory that if one member asks a question, there are at least 10 other members wondering about the same question. He distributes a weekly e-mail update to the membership.

Mangum also uses e-mail to stamp out rumors before they can spread. He points to a situation last September when the Atlanta area recorded more than 20 inches of rain in about a week, which led to significant earthworm activity on the course. This led members to mistakenly think Mangum's crew was aerifying the fairways. Using e-mail, Mangum assured members that what they were seeing was a result of worms, not aerification.

### The customer service business

Keeping open the lines of communication can also help a superintendent avoid the appearance of being complacent.

"It's important to remember that we are in the customer service business," Morris says. "We have to work with our customers and the owners to tell them what we're doing. We don't do things the same way we did years ago, and we have to communicate that to members."

Another way to remain relevant to the membership is to be out of the office and on the course. Guynan has been with O'Bannon Creek since 1977, as superintendent for more than 30 of those years. He has spent much of his time on projects to upgrade the course.

"I have literally spent 32 years improving the course," Guynan notes. "That helps keep me alert and away from complacency."

Being on the course has helped Guynan's image.

"I'm always visible to the membership," Guynan stresses. "It's important that they see me on the course and being active. If you're always in the office, it's easy to be accused of something that's not true."

During his tenure at Hazel-tine, Nicol has always engaged

in at least one ongoing project when the club hasn't hosted a major tournament. His current project is improving the quality of the greens.

"You can stay relevant in the eyes of the members by increasing the quality of the maintenance every year," Nicol says.

This philosophy can be summed up as being proactive in your approach to the job — planning for the next project even while the current one is ongoing and making sure you're never caught without an answer when a member approaches you with a question concerning ways to improve the course.

### Passion obscures complacency

Superintendents interviewed for this story says they remain passionate about their jobs, their courses and the memberships they serve, and they're in agreement that they're ready to tackle unforeseen problems. It's such passion that drives them to continually grow and evolve in their jobs.

"I'm constantly trying to learn and innovate," Morris says. "You always have to come in and be prepared for the next big challenge."

The inherent nature of a superintendent's job, where nature can be your best friend or worst enemy, helps to keep complacency at bay, Guynan says.

"I can honestly say in the years I've worked here, I can't think of too many days that were exactly alike," he says. "You have to keep on top of your game at all times." ■

*Krizner is a freelance writer.*

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