

Sectioned

Off

BY STEVEN TINGLE

“**T**icking away, the moments that make up a dull day,” sang Pink Floyd.

For superintendents, those ticks, especially the early morning ones, are anything but dull. They are precious and often too few as the staff prepares the course for play. There’s grass to mow, markers to place, bunkers to rake, holes to cut and golfers chomping at the bit. And there never seems to be enough ticks.

Staying ahead of play — and working between it — requires planning, efficiency and sound logistics. Some superintendents have found section or zone maintenance helpful in achieving consistent playing conditions and managing employees.

Owning it

Golf section maintenance and a hotel’s housekeeping department operate in much the same way. Each housekeeper, for instance, normally is assigned a section of rooms to clean. And he or she’s responsible for cleaning every part of each room in the section.

It would be terribly inefficient for one housekeeper to vacuum a room while another dusts it, another makes the bed and another cleans the bathroom (that one drew the short straw).

That’s how most golf course maintenance crews are set up, too. There’s a guy who mows greens, a bunker guy, a tee

mower, a garbage collector, a divot filler and a cart path blower.

Section maintenance turns tradition on its head. It gives an employee several tasks to complete on a series of holes. Some superintendents create six sections of three holes each, then direct a staff member to handle specific tasks on those three holes.

The staffer hand mows the greens and tees, rakes the bunkers, fills divots, fixes ball marks and blows the cart paths, spending his or her entire day on the three holes. Other superintendents limit section maintenance to the greens and green banks. The staff then ends section work mid-morning.

“Without section mowing and cross training of employees that mow, bunker rake and clean the course, my staff would spend the majority of their day driving,” says Brian Sullivan,

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Section maintenance gives staff ownership and supersedes a well-groomed course.

PHOTO BY: SETH JONES

To Each His Own

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CGCS at the Bel-Air Country Club in Los Angeles. “Bel-Air Country Club is situated in seven separate and distinct canyons,” Sullivan says. “The 13th green and 14th tee are over a mile away from the maintenance facility.”

The benefits

Section maintenance is a must for Sullivan. He has to grapple not only with the course’s unique layout, but also with a noise ordinance barring early morning mowing on half the course. Sullivan’s staff works in sections of two to three holes each and is responsible for mowing, raking bunkers, filling divots and cleaning up. The system keeps his staff in front of play and reduces transportation costs on a course comprising more than 130 acres.

Rick Holanda tried both traditional and section maintenance during his

tenure at Shadow Creek Country Club in Las Vegas, a Tom Fazio design consistently ranked among the world’s top courses.

“We tried both ways, and the regular strategy didn’t flow very well,” Holanda says. “We actually had a staff meeting and asked the crew which they preferred, and they chose the section strategy.”

Holanda attributes travel time to his staff’s decision. “They didn’t like to be traveling all over the golf course,” he says.

“Section maintenance really cuts down on travel time and cart and equipment traffic.”

What happens in Vegas doesn’t always stay in Vegas; Holanda is starting a section maintenance program at his new course, Oakmont Country Club in Glendale, Calif.

But section maintenance’s benefits go far beyond efficiency and keeping staff in front of play. “It’s an effective way to promote responsibility and accountability,” says Pat Finlen, CGCS at the Olympic Club in San Francisco.

Finlen uses a section maintenance system on the Lake Course, which will host the 2012 U.S. Open. He uses section maintenance on the greens as staff members mow, rake greenside bunkers and fix ball marks in their sections. The section maintenance work usually ends by 9:30 a.m. By that time, the staff has efficiently manicured the greens and surrounding areas. For



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Finlen, having the same staff member on the same holes each morning adds to the consistency of maintenance. Each employee can easily spot the slightest changes in turf quality.

Like ‘prepping the dinner table’

Just a few hours down the coast from Finlen, you can find Chris Dalhamer, CGCS at Pebble Beach Golf Links. “Section maintenance provides a great opportunity to evaluate an individual’s time management and organizational skills,” he says.

Dalhamer breaks Pebble Beach into four sections, assigning each staff member five greens, including two practice greens. Each section worker repairs ball marks, preps the green for mowing, mows the green, rakes greenside bunkers and spot-waters the green area. “It’s like prepping the dinner table,” Dalhamer says.

Unlike Finlen at the Olympic Club, Dalhamer’s staff continues section work through the afternoon. The staff spot waters, rotary mows around the greens, trims irrigation heads and blows off bunker faces.

“It provides a good opportunity for interns too,” Dalhamer says, “since they are on the same putting surface every day.” The consistency allows interns to see daily changes in turf conditions due to play, weather and environmental factors.

Section work also gives staffers a sense of ownership in their jobs. Section workers often take pride in making their holes the best they can be, Holanda says. “And it’s better quality control since I know exactly who’s doing what instead of the whole crew taking care of the whole golf course. It gets rid of the ‘who did it, who didn’t do it’ problem.”

The system also generates a little friendly competition. “Each employee wants to have the best section,” Dalhamer admits. Some superintendents fuel the competition with contests for the best section.

So as the moments continue to tick away, take a minute to evaluate the benefits of section maintenance at your facility. If your course requires significant travel time from hole to hole or if you’re looking for a new way to motivate staffers and give them ownership in their work, then section maintenance may just be for you.

As we’ve seen, superintendents at some of the world’s most renowned clubs are using this system of management to maintain their courses. It’s helping them improve efficiency, consistency and something else Pink Floyd sang about — “Money.” ■

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