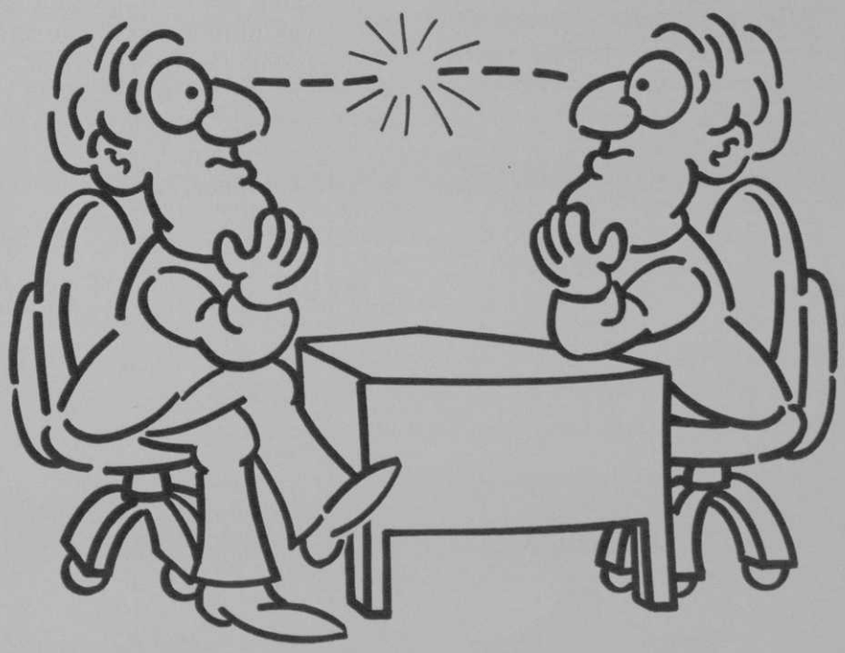
QUESTION COMPLACENCY

Analyze your operation

By Jerry Claussen

Any golf course today that doesn't have enough customers/members is either 1) in an overbuilt market (rare); 2) in an area too lightly populated to support any golf course (also rare); or 3) improperly managed (common).

To be sure your course doesn't fit in any of those three categories, ask yourself these questions: Do you have enough business? Is the business growing? Is the financial return worth the investment and effort? Have you reached your/ownership's goals?



"Look at your operation as would an outsider—a prospective buyer or a banker."

Golf is a people-service business. The crux of a successful golf facility — public or private — is to attract enough people to visit the course, to spend their leisure time and money.

The quality of experience must be high enough to create motivation to return — often. As one daily fee course owner put it so well at a recent National Golf Foundation management workshop: "We are selling memories — good or bad. If they take home good memories, they come back."

How do you sell these memories? You simply become aware of what humans and golfers need to be satisfied. It is easy for management to worry about today and its own needs. But what about the customer?

The growing popularity of short courses — par 3's and Executive length — and the high percentage of 9-hole rounds played on many 18-hole courses indicate that more people than ever play golf casually, for fun. They don't want to spend all day, or work too hard, on golf.

By the numbers

Meanwhile you must constantly be measuring the success of your golf business by the numbers.

A private enterprise golf course owner naturally is interested first in the bottom line of his financial statement.

A nonprofit membership club is usually measured in terms of members' willingness to pay for the quality of physical plant and services they demand. The goal is break-even.

A municipal course is something else — providing volume public recreation at low cost, and almost always subsidized. But the social scientists are advising public administrators to measure the effect and pleasure of the golf experience on people, not just how many rounds are played.

No matter what type of golf course you own or manage, it will pay you to analyze it — now, this month, this year. Look at your operation like an outsider would look at it — a prospective buyer, for instance, or a bank judging a loan. Review your financial statement, your physical plant, the quantity and quality of your services.

Then ask: what do we have and what are we doing that should be improved for the future?

Start with your FINANCIAL

Facility development consultant for the Rocky Mountain region of the National Golf Foundation, Jerry Claussen has authored eight books on golf instruction and dozens of national magazine articles on the business of golf. He holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master's in communications research and has been a partner in a golf course architecture/consulting firm, a golf magazine editor, and a daily newspaper writer/photographer/editor.

STATEMENT. Analyzing your own financial statement must take into account what type of golf business you are in and why.

Membership clubs may have a financial goal of limiting the membership to a certain size and making dues equal operating deficit plus costs of improvement. If the members want more, they pay more. Simple.

For a municipal course, the policy-making body should have a philosophy of service: either the golf course must be self-supporting and fees set accordingly, or (*not and*) green fees will be low because the course can be subsidized out of general funds. Income goals might also require paying off a bond issue or other debt. Another question: must golf course income pay a pro-rated share of city hall administrative costs?

For the daily fee owner, trying to make a living, the questions are different. These are important:

- Are you making an acceptable living out of your business? Measure reward against expectations, the hours you work vs. freedom and off-season vacation time, and the satisfactions from working in golf.

- Are you making at least a 12 percent annual return on investment after taxes, debt retirement, and depreciation? To do this, most golf businesses must make 50 percent gross profit from golf-related income, before those three deductions.

- Is the value of your golf course property growing, not depreciating? Even with depreciation, the overall value of your assets should be growing faster than the inflation rate. Someday you will want to sell and retire, or leave an estate to your heirs.

- Do the numbers show a record of growth? If you don't get more rounds of use, more customers and/or more gross income — and the same net or better — you are losing ground.

Your recordkeeping system will be helpful if it tells how many rounds of golf were played on a given day, week and month; what kind of rounds (18 vs. 9, daily fee vs. annual member, etc.); food and beverage sales, golf car rentals, etc.; total income per round, cost to produce each round, and net in every department of sales. Those should be compared with past years', at least by the week and month.

At any golf facility, 100 rounds per day is fair, 150+ is good, 200+ is excellent. That means per day of actual days open for play.

A successful daily fee course, in all but the highest and lowest-price markets, will probably average $4 or more income per 18-hole round from golf fees. All other income — pro shop, driving range, snack bar — will about equal golf fees income.

How close are you to 200 rounds per day and $8 per round (or $4 per round if 9 holes)?

By the look and feel

Next, analyze your PHYSICAL PLANT. Look at your golf course with a critical eye. Walk it and make notes about it, like a superintendent judging turf problems, or a tour player measuring distances and looking for the percentage shots. Rate the course overall, and each hole — tee, landing zones, green area, hazards, golf car paths.

Ask yourself, or each other if a management team, these questions about the course:

- Hole by hole, does the overall design and condition meet modern criteria, such as length and greens size?

- Does the course compare favorably with other courses of the same type in the area? (If you don't know what the competition looks like, go visit them!)

A fine golf course or hole should have:

Eye appeal. The esthetic values of harmony, proportion, balance, rhythm, and emphasis — a thing of beauty, like art in a painting or photograph.

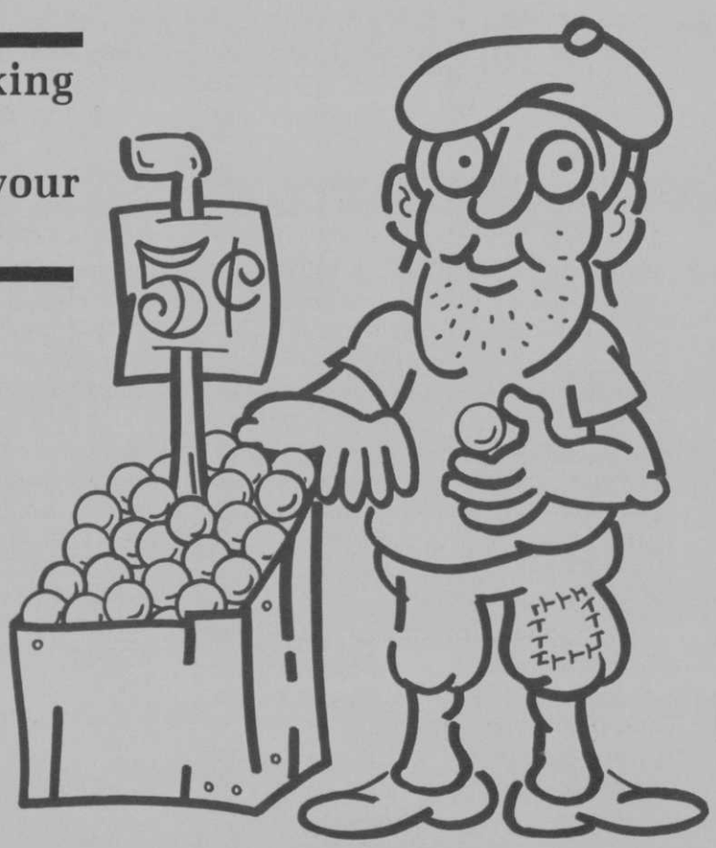
Shot values. Be fair to play for golfers of all abilities and strength, sensible length vs. par, no blind shots from tee to landing zone and approach to green, and adequate safety space between holes.

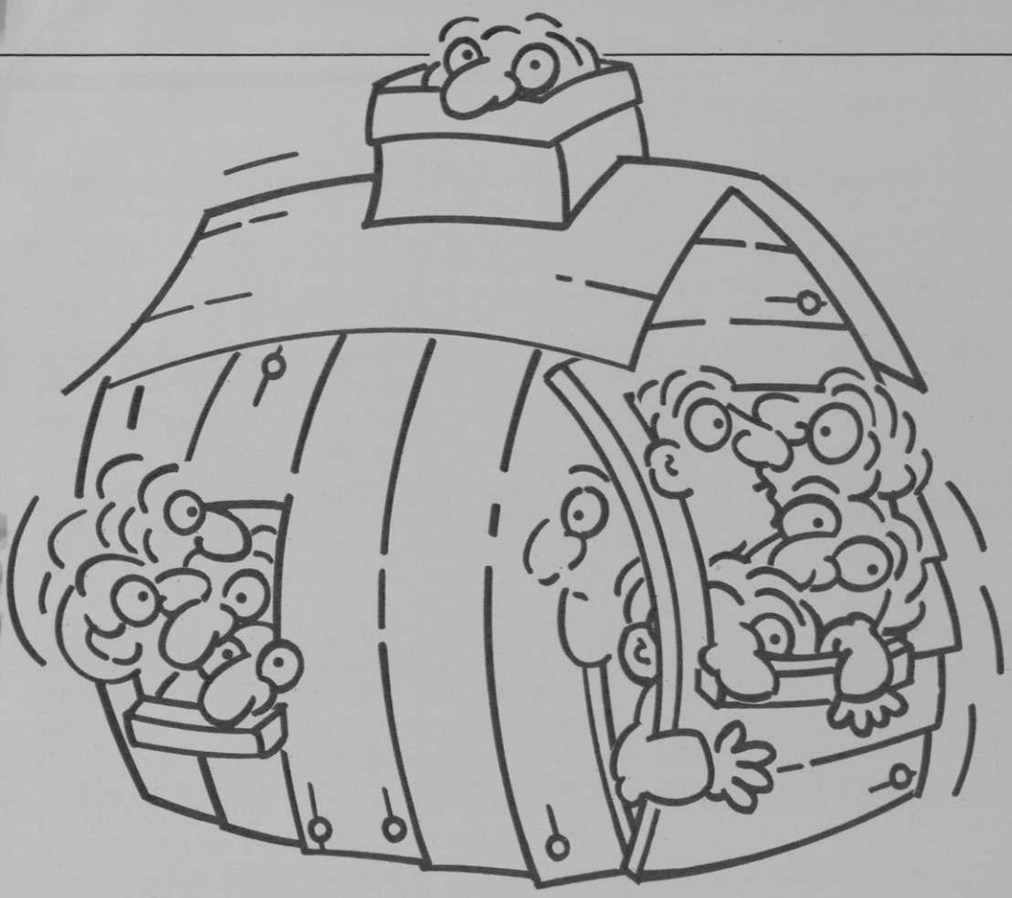
Maintenance quality. Greens and tees contain fine turf, slopes and hazards easy for large machines to mow, golf car paths in good condition, reliable irrigation system and water source, drainage patterns that have minimal effect on play.

The opposite of these qualities is an ugly, "blah" course. "Blah" courses and holes are all too common. How do they happen?

First, the site may not have been suitable for a fine golf course in the first place. Economics or bad judgement forced the project to be built anyway.

"Are you making an acceptable living out of your business?"





"Is your clubhouse large enough for serving your customers?"

Second, the golf course may have been designed and/or built by amateurs. They neither understood the fine points of the game nor the technology of creating a golf course that stands up under weather extremes, traffic, and ever-higher standards.

Third, not enough money may have been budgeted to do the job right the first time. Out of ignorance or capital shortage, corners were cut. Then it becomes more expensive to repair the problem later.

That golf course is your basic reason for existence. But it isn't the total of your physical plant. Also look at:

The clubhouse. Is it large enough, clean and convenient for serving your customers? A serviceable clubhouse should have only space that is necessary and/or pays — golf shop, snack bar/lounge, restrooms, office, storage space. Anything else (for a public course) may be desirable sometimes, may produce income, but lose money.

The inside arrangement and siting should allow you to have good control of play, and provide economical service. Notice the decor, too, and the landscaping. Do they help or hurt your image? Also ask: is your clubhouse warm enough on cool days and cool enough on warm days to be comfortable?

Equipment. Is it in good working order when you need it? If not, maybe the off-season maintenance program is weak. Equipment includes not only major maintenance machinery, but irrigation/pump system, kitchen, clubhouse utilities, golf cars, the practice ball machine (and good practice balls), even rental clubs.

Things that don't work right cost you money and customer goodwill.

SERVICE is the all-important aspect of your business. Unless you give quality service — sell "good memories" — your business will surely stagnate.

Service is an attitude, an atmosphere, created by purposeful planning and dedication to excellence. It is a feeling all through the staff team that "we try harder." The boss must set the example.

It is hard to measure atmosphere with statistics. But the customer knows — he can see and hear and feel how he is treated.

So ask how your operation compares with your competition and other service businesses in:

- Friendliness and capability of the clubhouse staff?
- Appearance and merchandising in the pro shop?
- Cleanliness and quality of food and drink service?
- Ability and energy devoted to teaching by our pro?
- Effectiveness of promotion and advertising programs in reaching out for new customers?

Promotion and advertising programs are simply methods of communication with people. Do you have good contacts with local newspaper and TV editors? Do you go out to community groups, schools, and companies to talk golf? Do you offer golf lessons with rules and etiquette for beginners?

Your business and your job depend on pleasing other people. Everyone on your staff should be trained to treat every customer with respect, courtesy, and good humor. Remember TUCA: "Thank You, Come Again."

If you want feedback from your customers on what they think and want, ask them. Do it in person, informally from day to day, or by written questionnaire. You will get "gripes" — some valid, some not — and you will learn.

As a test, the NGF recently helped the staff of a busy western suburban municipal course gather information about its customers. Some results, from a written questionnaire:

- Average age about 48; five of six over 30.
- More than half were earning more than $15,000 annually.
- Slightly over half had handicaps; average 13. Non-handicapped golfers averaged 96 for 18 holes.
- About 45 percent had played golf less than 5 years; 33 percent, more than 10 years.
- One of four played more than 50 rounds annually; all averaged 27 rounds annually.
- Reasons for playing the course, in order: 1) close to home; 2) friends play there; 3) quality of course; 4) good service.
- Almost a third were spending more than $300 annually on golf.

For your research, the most important question would be: What one or two (or several in order) improvements or changes would you (the customer) like to see at our golf course?

Try it. Analyze your financial statement, your physical plant, and your services, on your own. They give your customers a chance to talk. Listen. □

from wholly water . . . to water hole

FLOODPLAIN GOLF COURSES

Making profitable use of wet land

by Michael J. Hurdzan, Ph.D.

The dangers of land development in a floodplain are well recognized, and as a result most communities have written floodplain zoning legislation to control development. A particular problem in floodplain development is that they must continue to function as temporary reservoirs for flood waters. The Corps of Army Engineers will not allow movement of fill material into a floodplain, so construction is limited to using the resources already in the floodplain, or removing a volume equal to the imported material. Therefore, floodplains have found their best use as farms, fallow ground, or recreational areas — including golf courses. But even building a recreational area on a site with a potential for flooding requires the golf course architect to do special planning and engineering which sometimes make recreational development economically unfeasible. However, a golf course can produce revenue and so reasonable development

Mike Hurdzan is a partner in Kidwell & Hurdzan, golf course architects and consultants, of Columbus, Ohio. He is a member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects.

ABOVE: The clubhouse is built on high ground where the least amount of damage could occur during a heavy rain. RIGHT: This green is designed to flood. There are built-in water surface swales and no sand traps.

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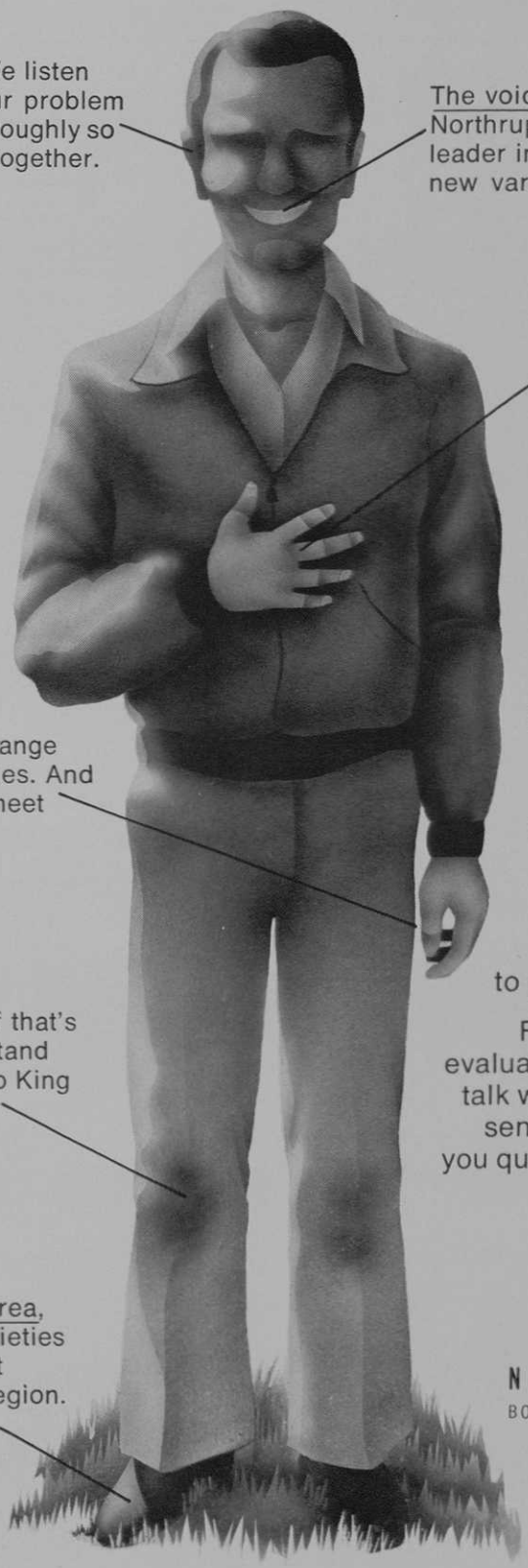

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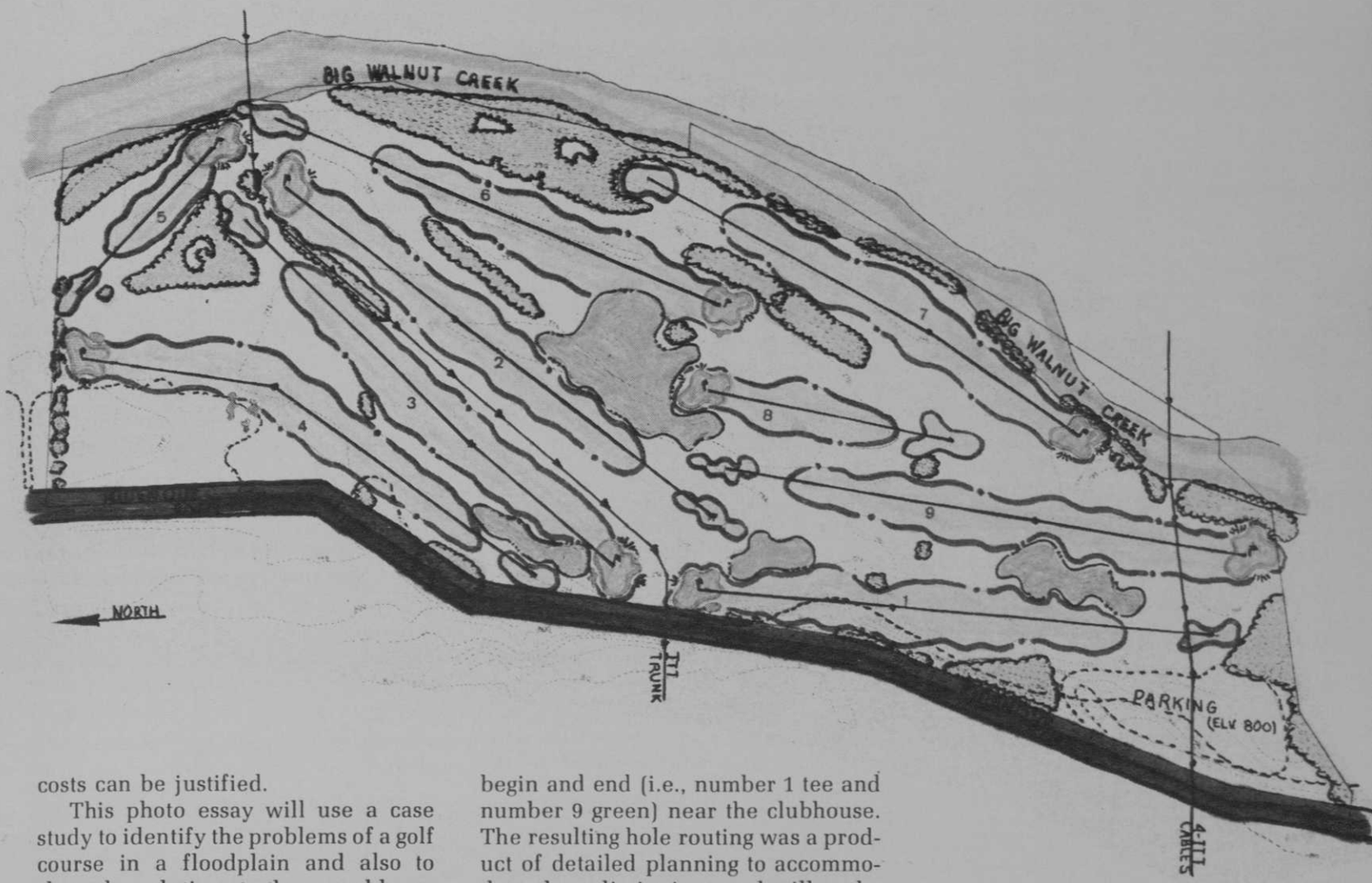

costs can be justified.

This photo essay will use a case study to identify the problems of a golf course in a floodplain and also to show the solutions to those problems.

The big flood

The city of Gahanna, Ohio, owned 51 acres of floodplain ground along Big Walnut Creek, and wished to use it to expand the park and recreation system. In 1959, this area experienced a 100-year flood and much of this ground was covered by 8 feet of water, except for a high plateau along the southwest property line. The land was studied and it was concluded that only a golf course could be economically justified on the site. The high plateau area would be used as a clubhouse site and the low land for the course, but it required extensive drainage systems and special planning.

The special planning of the course began with the basic design which had to allow for certain physical features. The area was bordered by a well-travelled road on the west, the Big Walnut Creek on the east, and proposed road extension on the north. In addition, there were two large aerial telephone trunk lines bisecting the property perpendicular to the long axis of the land. As well as working around these physical features, the course had to begin and end (i.e., number 1 tee and number 9 green) near the clubhouse. The resulting hole routing was a product of detailed planning to accommodate these limitations and still make the golf course safe and easy to maintain.

Also a sewer contractor had earlier installed a large line across the property and left in his trail piles of soil, a ravaged woodland, and 30 acres of swamp caused by destroying tile and surface drainage.

First, a system of surface waterways, storm sewers, sanitary sewers, a drain tile was planned to handle water running onto the property and to allow water falling on the site to be quickly removed. An extensive system of 4-inch tile was planned for subsurface drainage of major play areas such as greens and fairways. Including lake overflow, over 16,000 linear feet, or 3 miles, of tile was installed.

A land developer had bought the high ground to the west of the golf course and was intending to develop it into houses and streets. This would have increased the speed and amount of water flowing onto the course, so a 48-inch storm sewer line was installed across the golf course to handle the anticipated runoff. In addition, a side-opening catch basin in the 48-inch tile was constructed to accept

The Gahanna municipal golf course has nine holes: seven par 4's and two par 3's. It measures 2,845 yards. The course, completed in August 1975, averages 150 players on weekdays and 230 on weekends and holidays, said pro manager Steve Gray. He said the course required a small government subsidy to operate last year, but is "more than self-sustaining" this season.

"Many floodplains are being treated as waste ground, but they have the potential to become a recreational asset."

surface water directed to the tile by a grass waterway developed from a second developer's tile.

This 48-inch tile contained several drop inlets and also served as a discharge point for some of the 4-inch tile lines. Because there was so little difference in elevation on the site, the 48-inch tile is very near the surface in some places and had to be planned to miss the lakes, tees, and greens of the proposed golf course. To accelerate the movement of water into the tile, some areas were gravel backfilled or gravel drops were installed over the 4-inch tile.

Fill material to build the tees and greens was excavated from pond sites within the floodplain, so that one earthmoving operation built the golf course and pond at the same time. (Also, no fill material had to be imported into the floodplain). The ponds serve as not only safety dividers and aesthetic installations, but also water storage facilities and terminal points for tile lines.

One large pond serves as a source of irrigation water for the golf course. Because of the danger of strong flood currents, possible damage to electric motors, and a limited construction budget, the irrigation pumping system required some original thought. The main irrigation pump is a 40-horsepower submersible pump placed on a frame with wheels and rolled into the large lake on surplus aircraft landing mats. The controls for the pump and irrigation valves and clocks were located at the lake's edge on a mound built up out of the floodplain. The pressure relief valves, electrical connections, and isolation valves are housed in a drained pit at the base of the controls. Not only is this system functional; it does not destroy the aesthetics of the lake.

To fill the irrigation pond from Big Walnut Creek requires a 5-horsepower centrifugal pump mounted on wheels and a tow bar with a quick-disconnect 4-inch aluminum pipe connection and an electric four-prong plug. In only a couple of minutes, the golf course superintendent can remove the filler pump when a flood threatens. The main electric service was located above the floodplain elevation.

To minimize flood damage to tees and greens, they were elevated and placed in areas of expected low flood current.

Greens were designed to receive flood waters in that it was planned for water to flow onto the greens and then back off at a uniform rate. This was to minimize siltation from slowing water and to prevent cutting from currents.

Sand traps were not used in areas likely to flood often. They were confined to higher areas and were also tile drained.

Trees and natural vegetation along creek banks were not disturbed, in order to reduce erosion potential. Lower limbs of the trees were trimmed to expose the view of the creek and to permit execution of golf shots on the creek bank, but few or no trees were removed. Although this area requires some hand maintenance, it looks pleasing and the creek banks are intact.

Not all floodplains are suitable for use as golf courses because of the different types of flooding, soil limitations, water quality factors, and money available. A qualified golf course architect or golf course designer should analyze each particular case as to its special problems. Currently, many floodplains are being treated as waste ground when, with proper professional planning, they have the potential to become a recreational asset.

A grass path helps water from a nearby housing development run into a 48-inch catch basin.

Sand traps near this green were built in an area unlikely to flood. All were tile-drained.

One of several drop inlets located on the Gahanna course.

Surface water directed by a grass waterway will flow into this side-opening catch basin.

This mound was built out of the floodplain to house pump controls and irrigation clocks.

Below is the pit with electrical connection to submersible pump and clayton and isolation valves. Also shown are the pump controls and irrigation clocks.

The refill pump, main disconnect, and electrical pump plug are placed above flood potential's elevation.

A dozen ideas for keeping pro shop displays at peak efficiency

1

Make display maintenance a constant practice. It should be the job of everyone working in the shop. The moment something amiss is noted in even the smallest display is the time for the person noticing this to set things right again or see that it is done.

2

Watch customer reaction and response to a new display as soon as it has been completed. Change things to conform to what is being observed by your customers. Not all ideas will be good ones, but a few can do a great deal toward assuring the peak efficiency of each of your displays.

3

Look on the slightest evidence of disarrangement in even the smallest display as a cardinal sin. Nothing of that nature is unimportant if maximum sales returns are to be realized from the effort put into the display and the space given it in the shop.

4

Cleanliness has top importance with respect to all merchandise displays. Peak return from any display can only be assured when everyone in the shop, hour by hour, gives personal attention to maintenance of cleanliness in every element of that display setup.

Lighted display cabinets aren't cheap, but keep merchandise neat, clean, well-lit, and prominent.

5

Call customer attention to the display when it is first being presented. Many customers are so mentally preoccupied that they could be overlooking the display completely. It even pays to continue this referral from time to time afterward — particularly so with those customers who are in a big hurry.

Effective displays tie in related merchandise, tie in seasonal promotions.

6

Efficiency declines with time on even the best display. Note when sales are dropping off and give something else a chance at that good spot. Peak efficiency cannot be maintained indefinitely, even with the most desirable merchandise.

7

Get maximum variety into display patterns, styles, formations, etc., used in the pro shop. Following a set pattern for all of them soon reduces the attention-getting capability of each one. It's a sure way to be certain peak efficiency is never secured by any display.

8

Check the lighting on each display (and in the area immediately around it) from time to time during the day. Any change therein will reduce attractiveness of even the best-constructed display. Lighting is just as important around a display as upon it.

9

Construct each display so that it can be changed without total reconstruction. That keeps efficiency high through upgrading without difficulty as new ideas surface or are suggested by customers. Just one such idea may have greater sales value than the original one itself.

10

Arrange items of a tie-in nature close to the major display (such as shirts near slacks) where they can be easily seen by customers. It's a good way to make certain that special delivery has its peak efficiency insofar as developing sales is concerned.

11

Restock merchandise regularly as customers pick up items from the display. Any half-filled presentation can be only half as effective as a full or near-full one. By all means avoid blank or open spaces in displays (brought about through sale of items) for this presents a ragged and uninviting offering.

12

Back up major displayed items with advertising in the newsletter or local publications. Clip the ad (or portion of it) to the display so that customers can be reminded they are looking at the items they saw featured in the advertisement. They are unlikely to go around the shop looking for it or may have even forgotten the advertising message it self.

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