

Design

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

Times have changed in golf— sort of. There are no amateur architects and only a handful of designers who have the clout to overrule problematic clients without fear of being canned. In most cases, client design ideas become the focal point of projects regardless of the clients' architecture backgrounds — just like green committees when they cluelessly overrule superintendents and then blame everyone but themselves when things go wrong.

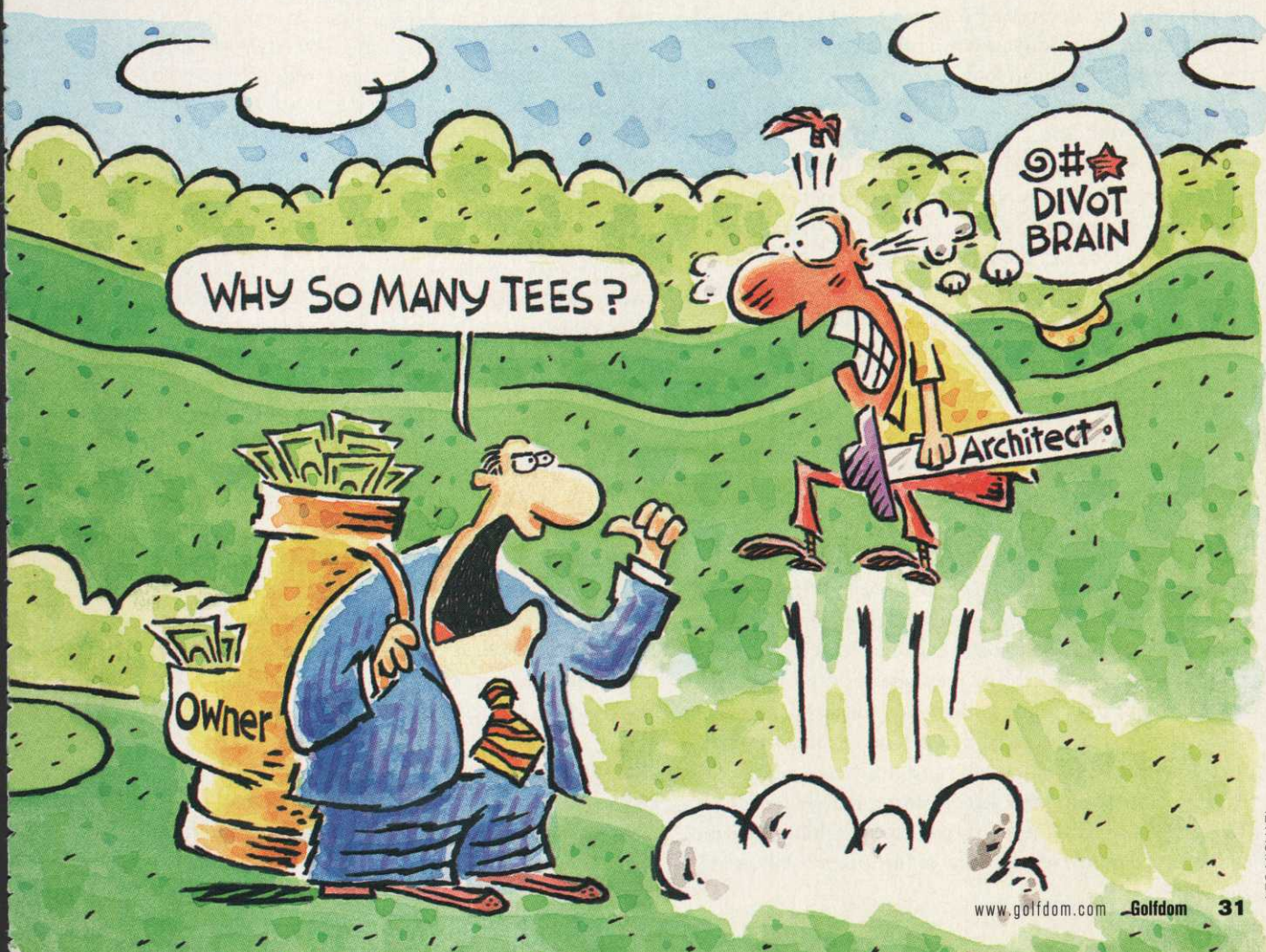
Modern course design involves a peculiar mix of clashing egos, miscommunication, artistic beliefs, maintainability and politics — all converging as dirt is moving, but rarely to the betterment of a project. Yet this power struggle in the golf business goes on because, unlike a building or home design that relies on precise engineering, a golf course can be built and

maintained no matter how many odd ideas are injected into the design.

However, the balance between client involvement and architectural wisdom has tipped so far into the client's favor that many of the courses opening cost millions more than necessary. Worse, many of the courses are falling apart because the architect wasn't given enough freedom to make the holes work or because superintendents weren't hired during construction.

Several architects shared their horror stories with *Golfdom*, all off the record out of fear that even the mention of their names will be used against them by future clients and their peers. Many of these tales are humorous, but others are disturbing, considering what's at stake.

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The Politics of Design

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A few architects did share their advice on dealing with politics in golf (see sidebar), but as anyone involved in the business today knows: There are no clear-cut answers to dealing appropriately with tricky political situations. Because as superintendents, managers, professionals, contractors and architects are finding out too often, golf course jobs live and die by who treads most carefully through a set of land mines laid out by developers, who are usually doing their first and often last golf projects. Now, for the stories:

Par 4s equal bad fortune

One architect, who deals with several overseas projects, offered his worst client nightmares, including the story about the Chinese fellow who didn't want any par 4s because "four" in Chinese means "death." The fellow said par 8s were good, though, because they mean prosperity. "The more par 8s on the course, the better," the architect recalls the man telling him.

Then there was the client who insisted on combining French Renaissance garden design philosophy into golf course architecture. "That was interesting, too," the architect says.

Trees of life

We've all heard of hugging memorial trees, but how about the famous club that desperately sought a U.S. Open, but told USGA officials it wouldn't cut down problematic trees nor even trim them because human souls were entrenched in the bark?

Right, left, right, left ...

Another successful architect told of the client who bitterly complained about the fairway bunker built on the right side of the first hole. The client said, "It shouldn't be there because everyone slices [their balls]," the architect recalls.

"I was confident he would like the second hole, with its fairway bunker on the left," the architect said. "But when he saw it, he said, 'Why not put a fairway bunker left if no one hits there?'"

Tee-d off

A popular and respected architect recounted this typical development nightmare:

"One day, the money half of the partners was making a rare site visit. As we walked the holes, I tried to give him a play by play of what was going on, and what the finished product was going to look like. When we got to a par 3, I figured there was no way our tour could not brighten, especially with such a naturally wonderful golf hole. I explained that the back tee played to about 185 yards and the angle of the wetland bank favored a right-to-left shot. Pointing out the first peninsula, I showed how the angle was less difficult and the distance on the hole was reduced to about 140 yards [from the middle tee]. Then [we moved on] to the last tee setting and a hole of about 105 yards. I turned to the money guy expecting him to toss me a crumb, and he said tersely, 'Why so many tees?' Only mildly



Do Your Research

Several architects note that researching who you might be working for is one of the best ways to avoid tense situations during the designing of a course. It's simple but important advice. Consider this story from a former American Society of Golf Course Architects president relating a classic example of someone not researching his client, which led to disastrous results:

"An architect went to a prestigious club in the Minneapolis area to be interviewed for a potential remodeling project. During the course of the interview, he extolled the virtues of Rain Bird Irrigation Products. Had he done some research, he would have known that some board members were executives of the Toro Corp."

The same architect points out that simple research — perhaps a phone call to a superintendent in the area who formerly worked for the client — is the kind of basic research many designers don't do because they are too excited about the prospects of working for particular clubs or developers.

"Any club that frequently changes architects is likely the cause of its own problems," the architect says. "While architects certainly can do poor work or not fit the bill at a particular club, any club that goes through four well-known architects for four renovation projects is trouble."

So if you're a superintendent or architect, don't go to a club with the idea of removing several trees without knowing they are part of the club's current memorial tree program. And don't respond the way one architect did when a green committee chairman asked him, "Can you save this tree?" To which the soon-to-be-unemployed architect replied, "No problem, just tell us where you want us to stack the logs." — **Geoff Shackelford**

flustered, I waded in with the typical stuff about par 3 and players of various abilities and playing lengths and angles, and all that stuff. I went on for three or four minutes only to again be greeted with, in an even more terse delivery, 'Why so many tees?'

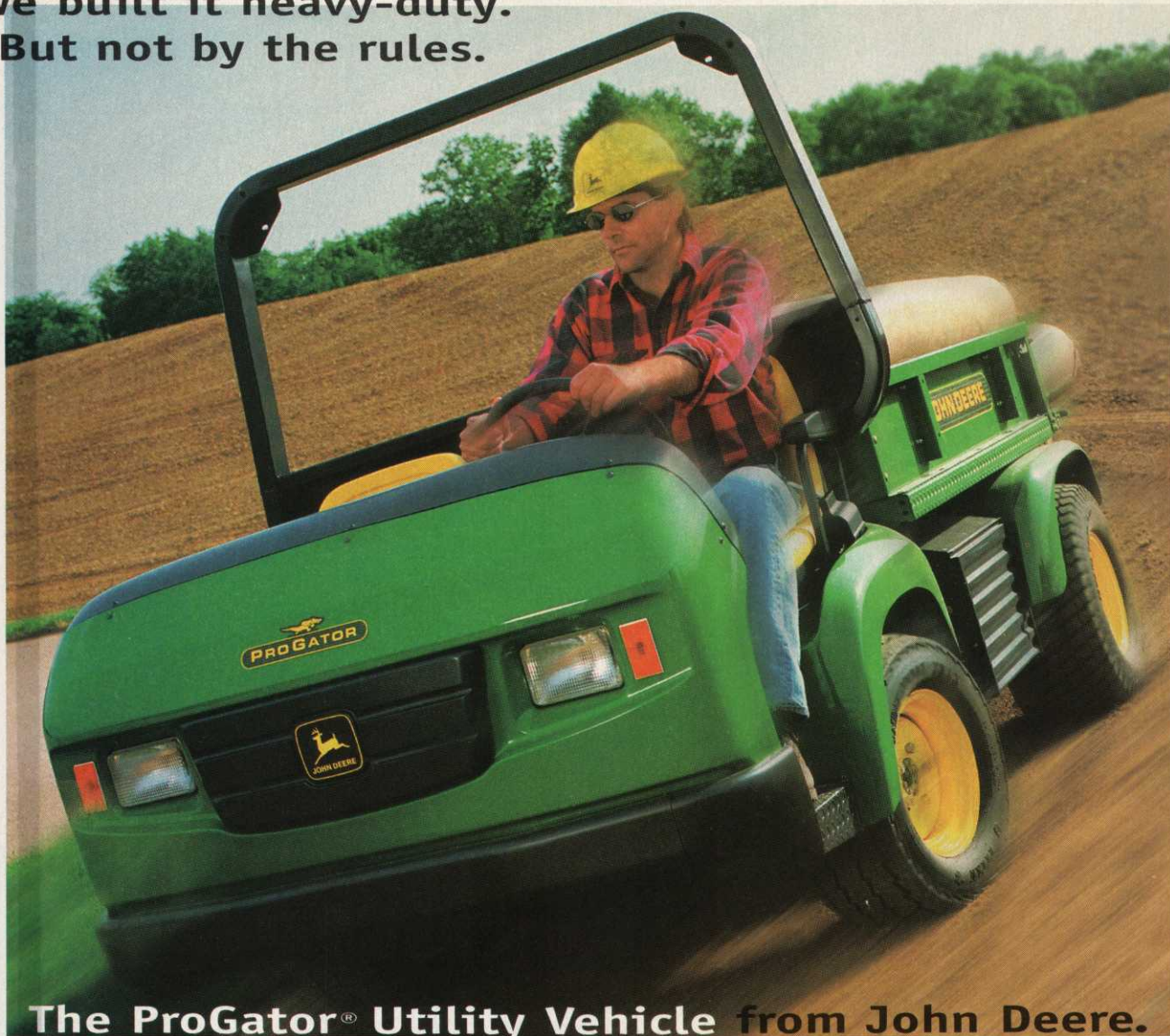
"Then I got more direct, something to the effect of ... it's a par 3 ... people take divots ... you need the extra space for the turf to repair itself ... and so on. Giving new meaning to terseness, the money man said, in a totally serious fashion, 'Why don't you just use a rubber mat?' With no further words, we moved on to the next hole."

Not funny

A long-time architect known for his graceful handling of tough clients had this to say when we contacted him:

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The Politics of Design

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"The political issue! Will you make it politically correct? Will we have elephants and donkeys? You have a difficult subject. I have found little that is comical about committees and golf course remodeling. Unfortunately, most of this end of the business is uncomfortable and often confrontational."

A failure to communicate

How do you make situations less confrontational? Architects and superintendents, even though sometimes pitted against each other on design issues, tend to be the victims in the end. Even the consensus of two knowledgeable industry veterans is usually not enough to convince committees and developers to listen to the experts.

Many of the architects questioned for this article said each case is distinct, but there are some ways to handle these delicate political situations. Most say that superintendents and architects must find creative ways to give clients an out so they can admit they were wrong and not turn situations into tense battles.

"When committee persons have their own personal design 'solutions,' I find it best to direct the conversation toward design 'concepts' and 'philosophy,' says Don Knott of Knott-Brooks-Linn Design. "I'll say, 'I like the concept of your idea,

but we should look at a variety of design options that accomplish your concept.' Or I'll say, 'It's an interesting idea and one that I will certainly consider in relation with other variables and options.'"

Renowned architect Brian Silva advocates open communication and involving all parties in the design process as the best way to deal with differing viewpoints and to help create the best result.

"Often when looking at a problem, a great deal of good is derived from standing there and asking, 'What do you think we should do here?' That's key — because a lot of clients have a general idea or concept in mind — and it's your job to convert that on the ground to grading, shaping, fine shaping and the like," Silva says.

The bottom line: Most everyone tries too hard to make their points or to settle situations without simple non-confrontational communication and good listening skills. It's always difficult dealing with egos, armchair architects and experts on everything, but skillful communication is your best bet in dealing with the politics of design. ■

Geoff Shackelford, a contributing editor for Golfdom, knows that politics make the world go 'round. He can be reached at geoffshackelford@aol.com.

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JOHN DEERE

Aug. 6, 2000: Minutes of the Swamp Ranch CC Green Committee, Vyagra Falls, Fla. Committee members present: Ed Thomas, chairman; A. Greene Boucher, vice chairman; Henzel Hozzletunian, seniors' representative; Birdie Noble, ladies' representative. Staff members present: Charlie Besieged, superintendent; Hans Kruger, general manager. Meeting called to order by chairman Thomas at 6:01 in the Old Tom Morris Room. Staff members not present: Chuck Golfpro.

Debate ensued over last month's minutes before 4-0 approval. Thomas then asked for the superintendent's report. Superintendent Besieged thanked the committee for its support, even though the putting surfaces are only rolling 11 feet on the Stimpmeter. Two brown spots in the right rough on No. 14 will also be addressed.

Vice chairman Boucher interrupted to ask if progress was made on adding another foot to the Stimpmeter speed. Besieged noted that the higher the number of feet a green is rolling, the tougher it is to increase speed without seriously harming the long-term health of the greens.

Serious discussion ensued. The committee urged Besieged to aim for 12 feet on the Stimpmeter even if it means jeopardizing his job and upsetting those who don't like five-hour rounds.

Birdie Noble asked why the two foursomes of lady players were being disrupted by noisy fairway mowing crews during their Tuesday and Friday morning rounds. Besieged was asked by Boucher if the mowing schedule could be changed. The superintendent reported that fairway mowings could be moved to Monday and Thursday mornings. But seniors' representative Henzel Hozzletunian objected because "those are his regular playing days." Chairman Thomas objected because he would have "shaggy" lies for his regular Sunday morning game. A subcommittee of Thomas, Hozzletunian and Noble was appointed to meet with Besieged to discuss.

Hozzletunian asked if the senior tees could be painted another color besides canary yellow, which he said is too feminine. General manager Kruger said he would have the engineering department come up with color samples Hozzletunian can study.

Got the Green Committee Blues

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



WHAT IT'S LIKE

INSIDE A MEETING

OF THESE MINDS?

READ THESE MAKE-

BELIEVE-BUT-CLOSE-

TO-THE-TRUTH

MINUTES TO

FIND OUT.

Besieged said the course will be closed for three hours Monday morning, Aug. 12, for an urgent chemical application. This will ward off a serious disease, that if left untreated, will kill all the greens. But vice chairman Boucher informed the committee that his insurance firm is hosting its client golf event that afternoon and asked that the spraying be postponed. Although Besieged said it was imperative that the spraying take place in the next five days, the committee voted 4-0 to postpone it until Monday, Aug. 19. End of superintendent's report.

Chairman Thomas reported on the Restoration Subcommittee's architect search. There are many willing architects interested in laying out a master plan to restore Swamp Ranch's original Sandy Barrens' design. However, the committee felt such architects were not right for the club at this time in light of a USGA staff member's recent visit and purported mention that Swamp Ranch could host a USGA sectional qualifier if a few back tees could be built.

The Green Committee voted 4-0 that the subcommittee be renamed the Course Modernization Committee. A search will begin promptly to hire an architect who will modernize the course to address the modern-day tournament player in hopes of luring a USGA qualifier.

General manager Kruger reported that he received many letters from older members thanking him for the new large font on the snack-bar menu. The committee thanked Kruger.

Besieged reported on *Golfdom's* article naming him one of the top young superintendents. But chairman Thomas reiterated the importance of Stimpmeter speeds reaching 12 feet in time for next month's member-guest.

Meeting adjourned at 7:44 p.m.

The 18 months that Geoff Shackelford spent on a country club green committee seemed like 18 years. He can be reached geoffshackelford@aol.com.



Consultants have a place in the industry, but it's elementary to know who you're dealing with before hiring one

The Search for Sound Advice

BY LARRY AYLWARD
EDITOR

The moral of this story is as unmistakable as a push-up green: A good consultant can help you as much as a bad consultant can hurt you.

Those who have worked with consultants will tell you that good ones can only make you more capable superintendents. Bad consultants, however, can take you down for the count.

"Consultants are there to make you better," says Jim Ferrin, CGCS at Whitney Oaks GC in Sacramento, Calif. "I use them to help make me a better business person. I've been able to save money because they come up with programs that can enhance the facility."

"There's a fear of consultants and rightfully so," contends Mark Clark, CGCS for Troon Golf & CC in Scottsdale, Ariz. "I've seen a lot of dead bodies follow some of these guys around."

Most superintendents agree that good

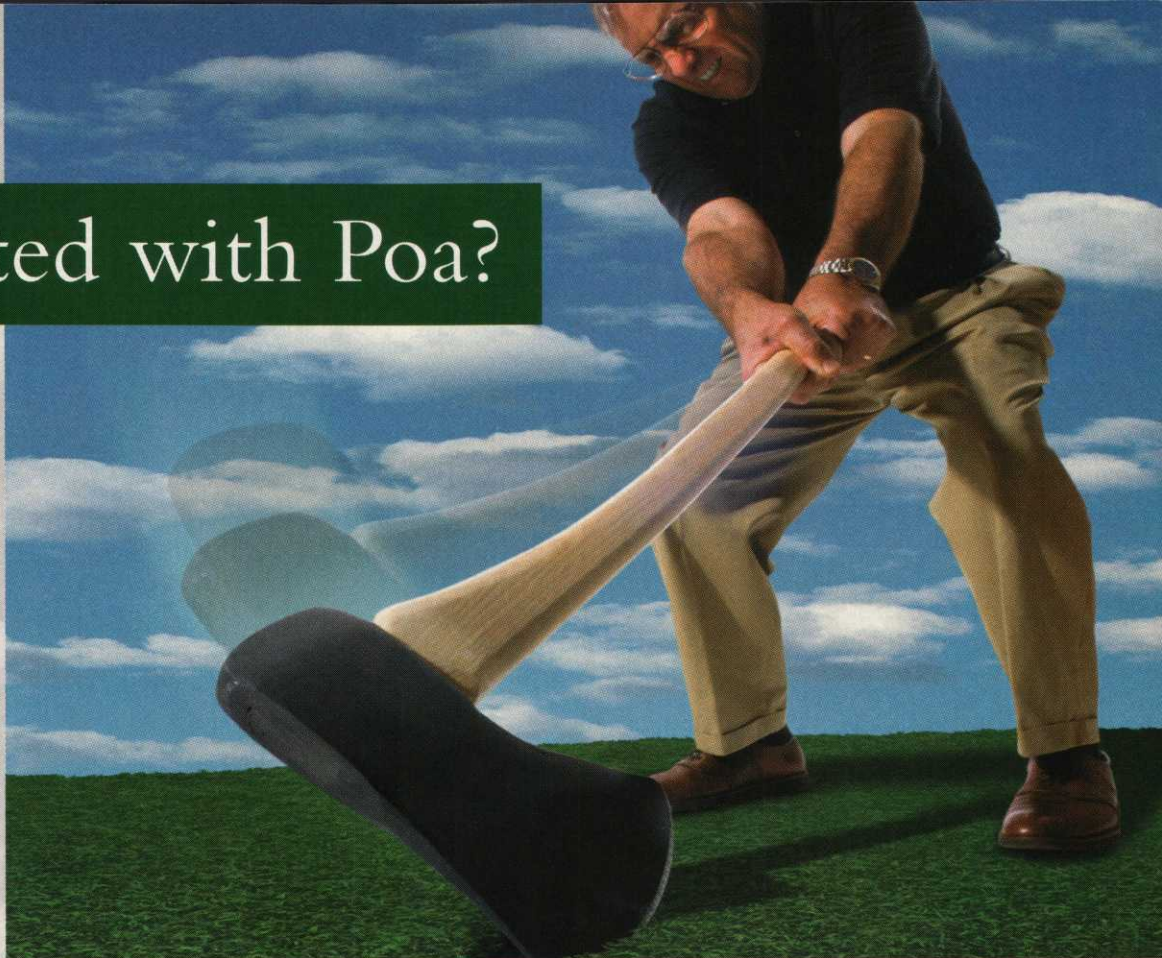
consultants have a place in the industry. What William Bengeyfield reported in the *USGA Green Section Record* in 1976 remains true today:

"Turfgrass consultants are a product of today's technology and golfer demands," wrote Bengeyfield, the former editor of the USGA publication. "There's a need to share and exchange information among all those interested in professional turfgrass management."

"The truism, 'No one has all the
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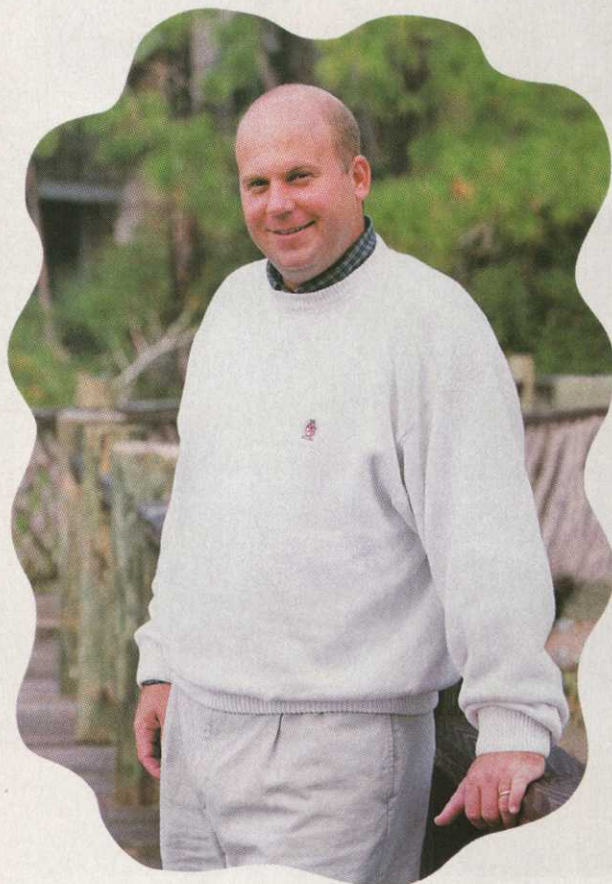
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“Find someone who understands your objectives and is going to support you.”

**—Allan Pulaski,
The Landings Club**

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answers’ is more applicable today than ever before.”

But what makes a good consultant, and how can you identify the profile of a bad consultant? Let us count the ways.

Allan Pulaski, director of golf course and grounds maintenance at The Landings Club in Savannah, Ga., says a good consultant is foremost a team player.

“Find someone who understands your objectives and is going to support you,” says Pulaski, who was interviewing irrigation consultants in August. “My objective is to find the best team player. You need someone who’s going to walk in stride with you.”

Good consultants also won’t tell you just what you want to hear, Ferrin says.

“They will tell you if you’re not doing a good job,” he adds. “They’ll tell you what you don’t want to hear.”

But good consultants won’t tell others — most importantly, your supervisors and peers — what you don’t want them to hear about agronomic problems on your golf course.

When a superintendent and a good consultant meet with the general manager, the green committee chairman and the board of directors, a superintendent knows what that consultant is going to say because the two are united in their views. “[The consultant] won’t pull a 180 on you and say things you don’t agree with,” Pulaski says.

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USGA Wields Powerful Name

For years, USGA’s Green Section has been a popular consulting service for superintendents. And from a political standpoint, USGA consultants wield plenty of power.

While superintendents are the agronomic voices for their respective courses, most realize that green committee members and owners deeply respect the USGA’s opinions. Throughout his career, Jim Ferrin, CGCS at Whitney Oaks GC in Sacramento, Calif., has lobbied members to do this and that to the golf course. But on many occasions, they only conceded when they heard the same things from a USGA consultant.

“In terms of a political element, the USGA has been wonderful,” Ferrin says. “USGA is a powerful entity and should be respected.”

While Ferrin has found the USGA helpful, he prefers the more specific information offered by private consultants that he has hired. Mark Clark, CGCS for Troon Golf & CC in

Scottsdale, Ariz., says his peers have criticized the USGA for its lack of in-depth information, but he still believes the organization is superior.

“A lot of people don’t like the USGA because they don’t think the USGA tells them anything,” Clark says. “But I disagree.”

Clark prefers USGA consultants because they have visited so many courses and have excellent experience.

“When they get to our course, they have all kinds of tid-bits about things that are working and not working,” Clark says. “That’s the kind of stuff I like to hear.”

Clark also notes that USGA’s name carries clout. He says his members don’t know the names of independent consultants, but they know the USGA.

“I’d just as soon pay money and have the USGA’s name stamped on Troon CC,” Clark says. “I’ll get more bang for the buck.”

— Larry Aylward



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“[A good consultant] will tell you what you don’t want to hear.”

– Jim Ferrin
Whitney Oaks GC

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Good consultants possess solid agronomic backgrounds, and they aren’t afraid to get down and dirty — literally, Ferrin says. More than that, they aren’t afraid to tell you that you need to do this and that, and they will follow up with you to make sure you do.

“They will call you and get on your case,” Ferrin notes. “Those are the kind of consultants I want.”

A good consultant also understands the ins and outs of your course and the demographics of its location, Ferrin says. Just because a consultant has an impeccable reputation doesn’t mean he can slack off in preparation. A good consultant knows how much a course can afford to spend to upgrade. “A good consultant knows how to find the right equation for you,” Ferrin says.

“[The person] can enhance the programs you’re having success with, and direct you into other programs to offset failures,” Clark adds.

Good consultants can also help you save money. For instance, a salesman might try to sell a superintendent a new supercoated slow-release fertilizer that will work wonders on the golf course. But a good consultant might advise the superintendent that the course doesn’t need a fancy fertilizer and can be spruced up by simply adjusting mower heights, Ferrin says.

“So then I’m paying roughly \$1,800 every other month for fertilizer rather than \$7,000,” Ferrin says. “The aesthetics are just as good, and the grass is as hardy as ever.”

So what makes a bad consultant? The last thing a superintendent wants is a fly-by-night consultant who provides him with a canned spiel and is never heard from again. Likewise, a good consultant is genuinely concerned about a superintendent’s efforts to improve the course and will tweak his program to fit the superintendent’s agronomic and fiscal needs.

Clark is cynical about some consultants. He says he has seen at least six superintendents lose their jobs in the last five years over the backlash caused by consultants’ accounts of what superintendents weren’t doing to maintain their courses. “What happens is upper management hears what a consultant has to

The Consummate Consultant

Jim Ferrin, CGCS at Whitney Oaks GC in Sacramento, Calif., lists his qualifications for a top agronomic advisor:

- ▶ Has a background in golf and possesses the agronomic sense to make decisions to benefit the business of the club and the conditions of the course.
- ▶ Someone with whom to compare notes.

- ▶ Doesn’t just tell you what you want to hear.
- ▶ Makes proper determinations.
- ▶ Understands your financial limits.
- ▶ Follows up with you to see how things are going.
- ▶ Makes you more organized.
- ▶ Someone you can trust.