

The periphery

Sometimes netting is an unavoidable safety requirement on one or more sides of the range, but the most attractive practice facilities use mounding, tree plantings, and other natural features to delineate boundaries. The esthetic advantage is obvious, but trees and other such forms also sharpen practice by providing framing and aid depth perception.

At TCG we maintained the dense woods on the left side of the range that separate it from a road. We also preserved a dense stand of trees at the back of the range to add perspective. We created landforms standing 10-feet to 20-feet tall on the range's right side to emphasize the physical and psychological barrier between the practice range and the first hole.

Ins and outs

Delighted as we are with TCG's redesigned practice facility, we offer the following tips:

- As a sort of stepchild of some golf facilities, proper construction and maintenance are often given short shrift. Treat your practice facility with the same high standards you treat your course and you will be rewarded.
- Its effectiveness as a game-improvement tool aside, your practice facility often sets the tone for everything that follows.

We think of some of the most scenic ones around — White Witch in Jamaica comes to mind — and recall a sense of excitement and anticipation before we ever see the first tee.

- Trust all of your contractors' technical expertise, past experience, advice and direction just as your members or owners trust yours.

- Devise a specific communication plan with your members, owners or boards. We took pictures daily during the project and included two or three progress photos in a brief e-mail every Friday afternoon to the entire membership.

Old Tom Morris may never have considered a practice facility, but he was, after all, playing with hickory shafts and a gutta percha ball.

Today, St. Andrews has an elaborate practice facility. And we are just as pleased with our redone facility at TCG and continue to enjoy the many benefits it confers on the club's members. Naturally, it took commitment and energy, but proved well worth it.

Raymond Hearn, president and founder of Raymond Hearn Golf Course Designs in Holland, Mich., can be reached at ray@rhgd.com. Steve Hammon, golf course superintendent at Traverse City Golf & Country Club, can be reached at steveh@tcgcc.com.



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Quality (of Cut) Control

Manufacturers know just what superintendents want in a greens mower

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

With golf rounds clocking in about flat for 2007, the competition among golf courses to increase their businesses has become fiercer. There's no doubt this battle could be won on the hallowed turf known as the greens, where golfers demand fast, consistent and carpet-like conditions.

Realizing that a big reason golfers return to a course to play is because of the quality and condition of the greens, golf course superintendents have turned to technology to help them manage their turf better. That technology includes mower manufacturers, who are listening to superintendents' ideas on how to make a better greens mower.

That said, representatives from the Big Three — Jacobsen, The Toro Co. and John Deere — agree that superintendents aren't looking for any new out-of-this-world features in a greens mower.

They are, however, looking for improvements in current features.

"They want to be able to do all the things they're doing today easier, faster and bet-

ter," says Brian Melka, director of product management for Charlotte-based Jacobsen. "A resounding message we hear is to build more flexibility into the machines. Superintendents want to be able to adapt machines to certain conditions."

Last year, Jacobsen unveiled a new electric greens mower — the Eclipse 122F — which addresses the flexibility issue, especially in terms of a new cutting head attachment with more float to eliminate scalping and provide a consistent height of cut on undulating and contouring greens. "We set out to create a machine to give the absolute best quality of cut," Melka says.

Ahh, those magic three words — quality of cut. The mower manufacturers realize quality of cut is at the top of their collective lists in regard to giving superintendents what they want.

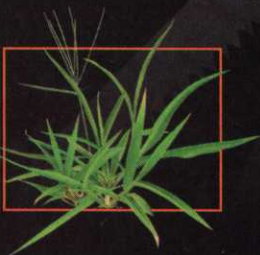
"Quality of cut is the main issue superintendents look at when purchasing a new greens mower, whether a walking mower or a riding mower," says Helmut Ullrich, The Toro Co.'s senior marketing manager for greens mowers and greens cultivation. Ullrich says he recently completed a market

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THE ARMY KNIFE OF TURF HERBICIDES



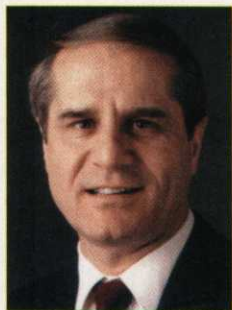
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Helmut Ullrich

"Price is one thing, but price is not everything. Service goes along with it."



Tracy Lanier

"The golf market has always been very competitive. We operate assuming it will always be that way."

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research study that reveals superintendents are "very satisfied" with greens mowers on the market and their quality of cut.

Toro's Greensmaster FLEX 21 addresses the quality-of-cut issue head on. The cutting unit of the FLEX 21 not only flexes from side to side around the bedknife centerline, but also forward and backward around the reel centerline.

Tracy Lanier, product manager for John Deere Golf & Turf, says his company introduced the 2500E Hybrid Riding Greens Mower, which features an electric reel motor, with quality of cut in mind.

"Superintendents continue to expect the highest quality of cut on greens, and with electrical-drive cutting units they get a more consistent clip ratio than with normal hydraulic-drive units," Lanier maintains. "While hydraulic systems are good, we think that electric-drive cutting units answer our customers' demands for the next step in greens mowers," he says.

Service and support are also vital issues. Replacement parts for greens mowers need to be easily obtained, and equipment needs to be easily serviceable.

"That comes down to your relationship with not only the local dealer but your relationship with the OEM manufacturers," Melka says. "That's a big focus for us."

Relationship building is a priority for Toro, too. "Price is one thing, but price is not everything," Ullrich says. "Service goes along with it."

Going electric

Electric technology with greens mowers has never been more prevalent. Jacobsen is investing heavily in the technology. Ryan Weeks, Jacobsen's vice president of engineering, says the company doubled its spending on new product development in 2007, with 50 percent to 60 percent going to next-generation technology, which largely involves electric technology.

While Jacobsen has pursued the electric technology for several years, Melka stresses the company didn't set out to be a trailblazer in the technology. It did so because the company

thought superintendents could benefit from it. He says the technology has progressed.

"While there's often a higher initial cost for electric mowers, the total cost of ownership for them is much lower," Melka says. "Operating costs go down, service costs go down, productivity improves and flexibility improves."

In terms of future technology, Lanier says Deere continues to examine ways to advance the benefits that come with the 2500E.

"The electric drive cutting units on this machine have helped address numerous issues our customers face, and we are exploring ways to possibly use this same technology in other areas," he says.

Ullrich says there's room for improvement in the electric mower technology. "How many greens can you mow without having to recharge the battery?" he asks.

Ullrich also says "there's a false impression" that electric reels cut better than conventional reels. "A reel doesn't mind if it's driven by a belt, a shaft, a pulley, a hydraulic motor or an electric motor," he says.

Ullrich says the future will bring more electric technology to the mowing industry. "But I also sense some hesitation because the technology today still has flaws in it with regard to reliability," he adds.

With golf course construction down from the 1990s and early 2000s and rounds runnings flat, it might be assumed the competition between mower manufacturers is similar to that of the Dallas Cowboys versus the Washington Redskins on a fall Sunday afternoon.

"The golf market has always been very competitive. We operate assuming it will always be that way," Lanier says.

Ullrich points out that business has a lot to do with relationships. That said, he agrees competition is intensifying.

But competition often breeds innovation. And while mower manufacturers have made tremendous technological strides with greens mowers, there's still plenty of innovation out there to be had, Melka says.

"If you create an artificial boundary that says, 'This is the best we're going to be,' then somebody is going to pass you," he says. ■

stamp out Gray Leaf Spot in perennial ryegrass

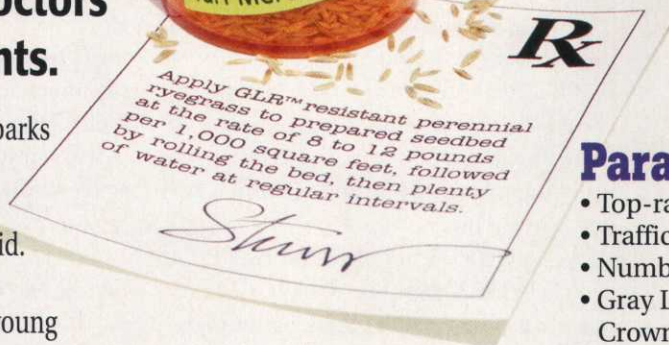
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Behind *the* Scenes



Administrative assistants help superintendents stay the course

BY ROGER KAMHOLZ

(From left) Ann Shelton of the Atlanta Athletic Club, Dianne Rabkin of the TPC at Treviso Bay and Tracey Zimmers of Oakmont Country Club are vital to their respective clubs' maintenance operations.

One of Dianne Rabkin's favorite job perks is the Florida sunrise. As superintendent Todd Draffen's administrative assistant, she greets it at the start of every workday.

"There's something about getting up early," Rabkin says on a recent morning. "The view is magnificent. There was a little bit of fog this morning, and you can watch it as it burns off."

As light floods her office at the TPC at Treviso Bay in Naples, Fla., Rabkin often stops to listen for the familiar sounds of morning.

"I love the sound of the equipment in the morning," she says. "I'm kind of hooked on the maintenance department."

Many golf course superintendents, especially those with larger staffs, employ administrative assistants like Rabkin to handle the heavy doses of clerical work that come with maintaining a golf course. General managers ask superintendents to adhere strictly to budgets, so administrative assistants watch spending closely, and give their bosses weekly and even daily accounts of how much cash remains for the month or year.

Administrative assistants also are responsible for staff payroll, supply and equipment orders, and human resource functions. And

the more knowledge they absorb about turf management, the better they can support their bosses.

The 56-year-old Rabkin joined the TPC at Treviso Bay a few months ago after spending two years as the administrative assistant for superintendent David Smith at Pelican Marsh Golf Club. She worked at Bonita Bay for eight years prior to Pelican Marsh. At an early age, Rabkin helped in her father's interior decorating business. Later, she worked as an administrative assistant in several fields, including finance and insurance.

"I've always been a support person, and [enjoy] that," she says. Rabkin's love for the outdoors is what drew her to golf courses. Her family often went hunting and fishing when she was growing up, so the job let her stay close to nature. She even helped start a bird watch group at a course where she previously worked.

At the Atlanta Athletic Club, director of golf courses and grounds Ken Mangum has had the same administrative assistant, Ann Shelton, for 22 years. Also a nature lover (she once had a small family business selling plants she grew at home), Shelton manages payroll, benefits, sick leave and vacation for about 70 employees. Shelton purchases uniforms and

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(FROM LEFT TO RIGHT) PHOTO BY: LARRY AYLWARD; PHOTO COURTESY: DIANNE RABKIN; PHOTO BY: LARRY RIPPEL



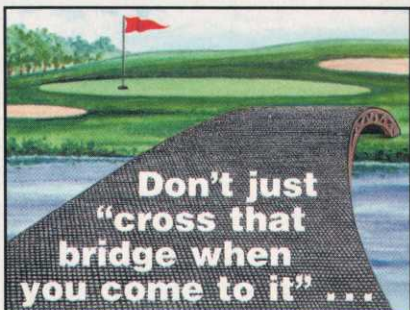
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Behind the Scenes

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gloves, tracks capital requests, and balances the monthly and special-project budgets. During the past six years, the club has hosted PGA events, rebuilt both its golf courses and expanded its practice facilities, and Shelton's assistance has proved invaluable.

"When you're doing \$5-million to \$6-million projects . . . and keeping up with all that and all the invoices aside from your normal budget . . . it's a pretty big job," Mangum says.

"One of the things she's really good at is taking care of our guys," Mangum adds. "A lot of them don't know about insurance or their benefits. She really takes good care of them."

And they reciprocate. Whenever the landscape department trims flowers around the course, the workers bring them to Shelton instead of throwing them away, and they avoid coarse language around her. "For me, they have a lot of respect," Shelton says. "And I think that is directly related to Ken."

Some affectionately call her "granny," though she's only a spry 58 years old.

Grounds department office manager Tracey Zimmers nurtures her guys, too — and that includes her husband of 16 years, John Zimmers Jr. At Oakmont Country Club near Pittsburgh, where John is golf course superintendent, she likes to help new staff members get acclimated, advising them on where in town to shop or bank. The Pennsylvania course takes on several interns each season who hail from all over the country and the world, and it's not long before Tracey is attached to the group.

"It's great to watch all these guys who are young and ambitious grow in the industry," she says. "Then it's sad when they go on to their own jobs. In the same regard, it's a proud feeling."

John says the grounds staff gets as much from Tracey's presence as he does. Tracey and John have worked together since 1997, when he was involved with building Sand Ridge Golf Club in Chardon, Ohio. They came to Oakmont

in 1999. Before that, Tracey worked 10 years in the mortgage business.

Besides hefty accounting work like keeping tabs on John's five budgets, she was absorbed last June in readying Oakmont for the 2007 U.S. Open. It was the course's eighth U.S. Open, more than any other venue. Oakmont hosted more than 100 volunteers, which presented a logistical headache that John was glad to have Tracey oversee. She arranged the hotel rooms, catering, uniforms and transportation for the volunteers.

“A person in this position has to be a self-starter and has to be able to get along with a lot of people. And don't take yourself seriously.”

ANN SHELTON, ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT, ATLANTA ATHLETIC CLUB

Oakmont is a demanding, high-profile course where the members expect championship-level conditions daily. "Ultimately, my responsibility is how [good] this golf course is," John says. "That's what I get judged on."

And the scrutiny takes its toll. "The hardest part of the job is having to watch these guys be placed under so much pressure and stress," Tracey says. "Some of it is uncontrollable, like the weather."

Working alongside her husband, Tracey understands John's job and the long hours that come with it. She often counsels other wives of superintendents who wonder why their husbands must work so many hours.

Moral support is another important intangible that administrative assistants bring to the work setting. ■

Kamholz is a freelance writer from Chicago.



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