



A Classic Chairman, A Classy Man

by Monroe S. Miller

Call it a memory or call it an image. Whichever it is, it won't likely leave my mind for as long as I am in the golf business.

I'm speaking of my first awareness of a green committee chairman and how he should execute the duties of that chair.

The picture in my mind has been there since 1972, the summer I worked on the golf course staff at Maple Bluff Country Club. It's a picture of a man, dressed always in a coat and tie, hustling down the road to Maple Bluff's shop in a small white convertible every Monday morning.

It was Dr. David Cookson, green committee chairman that year, many years before and nearly two decades hence. His closely cropped white hair neatly matched his car. Back then I figured his barber was twenty years behind the times. Only lately have I realized he was actually twenty years ahead!

It should have dawned on me that the way he cut his hair may be been a subconscious reflection of one of Dr. Cookson's strongest personality traits— independence. He was not influenced by what was fashionable or "in". That independent thinking was one of the things that has for so long made him a classic green committee chairman.

The decisions reached by Cookson, his committee and Tom Harrison over the years were arrived at by calculating what was best for the golf course and the people who played it. The man has never been a "bandwagon" chairman; his choices were independent of what was vogue at any given time. And with golf, golf courses and golf course management, something is always in vogue.

When Dr. Cookson pulled into the shopyard, all of the guys who were around the area sort of snapped to it. I'd only been out of the Army for a short while and remember thinking his arrival was treated a little like the commanding officer's walk through the barracks. All the analogy meant was that it was fairly easy to see who was in charge.

Frankly, I think this is how it should be.

I learned a lot from observing those Monday morning meetings. They were important enough that they ALWAYS took place, a reflection of how seriously Cookson felt about the chairman's responsibilities. They were always on time, too.

Within hours of his departure, most of the staff was aware, albeit second-handedly, of what had transpired at the meeting. Likely by day's end we were on a project or a job requested by the chairman. His influence on the operation was very evident.

Interestingly, I cannot recall either Tom Harrison or Bill Eckert ever bad-mouthing or bellyaching about any of his decisions. My guess as to the reason for that is because one of Cookson's trademarks, from my observations, has been logical thinking. He's been deliberate in the way he approached golf course problems. Common sense and the good of the game prevailed. Pretty hard to argue about that.

The most logical thing he did was to hire Tom Harrison when Bill Eckert resigned for another career opportunity. I bumped into Dr. Cookson in our clubhouse shortly after that and complimented him on promoting Harrison. With a quizzical look he replied with something like, "that's why we have an assistant superintendent. To have done otherwise would have been unfair to Tom and unwise for the club." That sure made sense to me!

All of this doesn't imply, however, that Cookson wasn't creative in his approach to golf course management. He offered up the word "why?" to Harrison more times than he could count. And more than once, when Dr. Cookson and I would discuss some golf course matter, we would end up in full and complete disagreement. Both of us thought we were right!

I must say that he was open minded enough to always listen to all sides of an issue and I have seen, over twenty years, his philosophy evolve and change with the game and the players.

Cookson never foisted a program onto Harrison without proper funding; that is worth more to a golf course superintendent than words can express. Too often, maybe even most often, expectations are not accompanied by budget considerations.

If it seems my interest in the green committee chairman at another club, even though I had worked at that club, is somewhat unusual, let me explain. Dr. Cookson lives on the shore of Lake Mendota directly across from our 15th hole. Our paths have crossed more than a few times over the years. His oldest son worked for me for a couple of seasons. And as you know, he has written many articles under the flag "A Player's Perspective" for *THE GRASS ROOTS*.

All personal notes aside, how many green committee chairmen have you known who have done more for golf than David Cookson? Here are the highlights: club president (and board member and holder of other club offices), green committee chair for three decades, all offices including president in the WSGA, a long time USGA committee person and a rules referee at the U.S. Open for many years.

As he steps down from the green committee chair at Maple Bluff, I cannot help but feel sentimental. Many years have passed by since I first met him; his "retirement" affects me much like the retirement of Professors Worf and Newman. One just sort of thinks people like these will remain at their posts for all time. It is a tough look at reality when they decide to move on.

Tom Harrison is going to miss him a lot, too. Medicine may have been Cookson's profession and occupation, but golf has been and still is his obsession and passion.

Those who work in golf are grateful for players like Dr. Cookson—stimp-meter in his golf bag, always walking the course while playing and thinking about the game. If you ever are wondering if he is playing at your golf course, just look for the little white convertible. He still has it. It's a classic, just like he is.