



# Working For Private Owners

By Pat Norton

Working as a superintendent at a privately owned public golf course is different. It's different than working in either a municipal or private member owned operation. It is certainly different than any other employment situation I've ever encountered.

How is it different? Is it any better or worse than other management opportunities? Comparing and contrasting the differences in these different golf course management situations could be very interesting. It should also be very thought provoking as we all approach the 1992 golf season.

Over the past ten years, Wisconsin superintendents have seen an enormous amount of change. Changes in our public image, in our sense of professionalism, and in the technology available to manage today's golf courses, have been rapid and constant.

The emergence of the "upscale" public golf course has certainly helped bring about these positive changes. These new public golf courses have really become showcases for the talents of some WGCSA members. Ten years ago we didn't have Blackwolf Run, Geneva National, University Ridge, Trapper's Turn, or Cedar Creek. The development of these golf complexes has really brought golf course superintendents into the full field of vision of the Wisconsin golfing populace.

Awareness of these "upscale" public courses first came with the construction of SentryWorld and Lake Arrowhead in the early '80's. The professional demands on Bill Roberts and Jeff Parks must have differed profoundly when compared to other traditional superintendent positions. These courses were developed essentially by private groups, tied up millions of dollars, and took years before they generated any significant revenues. The superintendent, to his credit, was and is the person chosen to oversee the transition from construction site to grassy sward to bona fide, revenue producing, profit-making golf club.

Those of us who have followed Roberts and Parks soon discovered a

new and different set of rules. They are as follows:

- 1) build the course quickly, but economically;
- 2) build the course correctly, but economically; and
- 3) build the course without spending a dime. If a dime is spent, it had better be spent economically!

As the new course evolves, so does the management philosophy of the superintendent. Huge amounts of capital are being spent and enormous expenses are being incurred. Justification to the owners for just about everything becomes the pattern. Accountability to a non-golfing businessman or banker is the game, not to some easily molded committee. Mistakes that cost money are not forgotten, and not often forgiven.

The management philosophy changes during this whole process. My philosophy now is that quality has a price that is sometimes far too expensive to justify. And besides, both the owner and the public golfer have a tough time seeing the subtle differences in quality that often times dramatically drive up costs.

A big factor in managing a golf course under these circumstances is the enormous amount of scrutiny that is placed on the superintendent and other staff by the investor/owners. This scrutiny ranges from operational and capital expenses incurred to a scrutinization of one's management style and job performance.

This scrutiny is used as a tool by owners and management alike. Owners examine the actions of management, which prompts management to closely self-examine (and often time second guess) management decisions. This constant review process is usually positive, sometimes too negative, but always geared toward the common goal—operating a golf club for profit.

Operating a golf course for profit means that the superintendent has to think like the owners. Golf becomes a business, not a sport or a game. What

is desirable or important to the management staff is usually not affordable. What is *absolutely necessary* will be considered for acquisition, and nothing more.

The question then becomes, "What is necessary?" Necessary items in my mind are many times viewed as luxuries by the investors. I usually try to opt for higher quality on the golf course, which drives up costs, and puts me in conflict with the cost conscious owner.

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My rationale is always that a higher quality golf course brings in more revenue, which is a well-proven fact. It's also a proven fact that if I don't constantly check prices and grind down on expenses, my feet will be held to the fire. It's sometimes tough to remember that it's not my money invested in this golf course. I am not the one having to pay all those bills.

The superintendent in this situation soon begins to think like a businessman. He must balance wants and needs endlessly, always with an eye toward doing without. A temporary lapse in this tough attitude has resulted in a few interesting chats between my owner/investor/boss and myself. These chats usually come as we mutually review all previous month's expenses over a suddenly inedible breakfast.

This businesslike attitude has become a very strong part of my operating philosophy. Will my desired programs and recommendations really be visible on the golf course? Do these programs somehow translate into more golfers

on the course and more revenue for the club? Many of the new products in the green industry are hard for me to justify for our operation. The costs are too high, and the apparent benefit is much too low.

Quality playing conditions aren't always the most important consideration. I sometimes cynically chuckle when I think of the stated mission of the golf course superintendent at many private clubs. Their basic mission is to provide quality playing conditions for the club members and their guests, within the confines of well established and defined budgets.

Privately owned public courses operate with a different set of goals, resulting in a different mission for the superintendent. Quality to a degree is the goal. Profitability is the ultimate goal—we do not exist to simply break even. Consequently, budgets that are defined on paper may be ignored in the quest for profitability. Management staff must constantly strive to save money or face the consequences.

This businesslike attitude, which I do believe is necessary and has been beneficial for myself, leads me to think about the logical next step. That would be to own a golf course of my own. Many superintendents think about this idea, but not too many actually pursue this dream.

What would it take to own a golf course? What are the risks and benefits? Many superintendents would certainly need to change some attitudes and practices in order to survive as business people. Exposure to privately owned operations easily leads one to consider the possibilities.

Some superintendents, through exposure to public golf, have taken the plunge into course ownership. Most have turned it into a successful venture.

The subtle encouragement of this idea by one's owners/employers is a very real benefit of working in public golf. Exposure to their business experience rubs off, gets under the skin, and starts the itching.

More superintendents should consider scratching that itch.

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