Country Clubs, Pride & The Bottom Line

By Dean Musbach

Like many superintendents, I enjoy my job immensely. One might even say that being a superintendent is in my blood. After all, I am a third generation superintendent and I'm proud of it. My grandfather Frank was a superintendent for fifty years and my father Bob has been a superintendent for thirty-five years. I literally was born and raised on a golf course. I have many fond memories of riding in the back of a F-10 fairway mower, playing in flooded sand traps after a rainstorm and climbing on the big Milorganite pile in the storage building. Throughout my life. I've spent many hours on the golf course. This is where I witnessed what commitment, pride and work ethic are all about.

Both my grandfather and my father worked at private country clubs. Like many superintendents, they had extremely high standards and they were willing to do whatever possible to achieve their goals. Pride and self motivation drove them to give the members high quality playing conditions. As times changed, it became increasingly more difficult to satisfy the membership's desires.

Today, club members continue to want more. Thanks to television, Augusta National has become the standard. But what most members don't realize is that Augusta has an open-ended budget to prepare the course for two weeks of the year. The affluent clubs think they can buy perfect playing conditions, so they infuse massive amounts of money into the maintenance budget. Because most superintendents are self-motivated competitors, they try to attain perfection; unfortunately, perfection is unattainable. To be successful, the superintendent must give realistic appraisal of the situation, and then he must do whatever is needed to attain the goal.

Private equity clubs are different from other golf operations because the bottom line isn't the first priority. They do not exist to make money, they exist strictly for pleasure.

What does all of this have to do with me? Timber Ridge C.C. is a privately owned non-equity club. Prior to my employment at Timber Ridge, all my experience was with private equity clubs. Upon hiring, the owners of Timber Ridge told me that they wanted their course to be the best. I approached the proposition as my father and grandfather would, with hard work and money.

The maintenance budget nearly doubled within my first two years. Although the owners were pleased with the progress of the course, reality set in. The bottom line was not good and the club was losing money, so the owners needed to reevaluate their expectations for the course.

The problem wasn't the course. Memberships were up and total golf course revenues increased. The problem was with the clubhouse; its inconsistent food quality and service caused members to eat elsewhere. As a result, the clubhouse incurred huge losses and Timber Ridge needed to cut expenses, including golf course maintenance expenses.

This was difficult to accept and I resisted the change. Moving backwards was difficult for me, especially when my past experience was quality oriented. I felt the course was a reflection of me and that any slip in quality would tarnish my reputation with the members.

During the following two years, the golf course budget didn't really decrease; it remained stable. The small amount of fat that was in the budget was cut, tree maintenance and planting were discontinued, and the small tools budget was cut. It was difficult to differentiate the fat from the meat, until I looked at this situation from the owners' perspective. The only unaffected areas were turf supplies, irrigation repair and equipment maintenance, but despite this effort, the club still continued to lose money.

Although the club was doing better, the owners decided that holding the line was not good enough. It was time to cut back, but another cut in materials was not feasible, so I decided that the cut had to be in labor. Every superintendent knows that when labor is cut, management practices have to change.

This proposition of cutting expenses was not simple because the owners also wanted a satisfied membership. I didn't guarantee anything; as a matter of fact, I thought the membership would be in an uproar. Despite my feelings, I developed a priority plan for different areas of the golf course. The golf course was prioritized as follows:

1. *Greens*—The program for putting greens did not change.

2. *Tees, Approaches & Fairways*—Regular mowing remained the same and a strict IPM program was implemented. Previously these areas were aerated as frequently as three times a year to correct a thatch problem. Aeration was cut back to once per season.

3. *Green & Tee Surrounds*—Mowing was cut in half and weeds were spot treated only.

4. *Rough*—Roughs were allowed to grow much longer than before. A twenty-five foot intermediate rough was established to pacify members. Trimming around trees and fences was deceased by two thirds.

5. *Bunkers*—Previously, bunker bottoms were raked every day and edges were raked three days a week. This changed to raking bottoms three days a week and edge raking was discontinued. Also, annual edging was discontinued.

In addition to the priority plan, all capital expenditures were canceled and any other course repair projects were put on hold.

When the plan was presented, I made the owners well aware of the possible consequences. I reiterated my concerns several times to the owners because I didn't want them holding me responsible for complaints.

To my amazement the complaints never came. In fact, the consensus of the membership was that the course was as good as ever. At times I had to bite my tongue because I thought the

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course was in the poorest condition in four years. It was then when I realized that I was my biggest critic and worst enemy. I was striving for the course to be Augusta National on a shoestring budget, and this was not realistic. My country club experience had blurred my vision.

All in all, the plan was a success. As a result, the labor expenditures were cut by twenty percent. I eliminated two crew positions and cut labor hours from forty to thirty hours per week for seasonal employees. This amounted to a net loss of four employees. The total budget expenditure was equal to the 1989 budget.

Despite the success in cost control, the restaurant, while improved, continues to struggle. As a result, the bottom line still isn't to the owner's liking, and this program will be continued for another year. Because the new manager and chef are very competent, I am very optimistic that the program will be successful this year.

There are two lessons to be learned here. First, with the exception of private equity clubs, golf courses are a business and the bottom line is the first priority. As a superintendent, you have a responsibility to act in the best interest of the company, even when those actions make your job more difficult or are in conflict with your maintenance philosophy.

The second lesson is, don't be so damn hard on yourself. Whether you realize it or not, you are your toughest critic and your golf course is probably in better shape than you realize. Next time you are disgusted with the condition of your course, take time to view it from someone else's perspective.