



BEING A "PEOPLE PERSON"

By Pat Norton

A "people person": a guy who really enjoys being around people, dealing with them, and providing services to them. A guy who can deal with club politics, who can deal with the whims of the "powers that be" while never getting annoyed or upset at stupid decisions. A guy who loves dealing with the golfers, or the members...schmooze 'em a bit...always knowing just what to say...and always feeling comfortable around people.

That's what I'd like to be, I used to tell myself. I can do this "club manager's routine". Organize a few golf specials, staff the clubhouse, open the doors, let the golfers beat the door down, and DEPOSIT, DEPOSIT, and keep on DEPOSITING all of those green fees.

What a crock!! Unfortunately, it's just a bit more complicated than that. A most important asset in public golf is to be established — an established course in good condition, an established management, and an established base of loyal golfers. The road to establishment in public golf isn't always so easy...tough to establish yourself when you're 30 - 45 minutes away from all of the golfers.

And every golf course needs a truly good "people person". This person acts as host, organizes and promotes the golf program, and manages the clubhouse. That person must be someone with the above mentioned "people" qualities and someone with a professional background in golf.

I found out during 1994 that I was not that type of person. I am not an office person. Like everybody else reading this, I am an outdoors person. I hate being inside doing office work (except on cold, windy days). I am a superintendent of a golf course, and I love it. It's an unusual occupation, and an honorable one.

The golf course down here at Nettle Creek was really hurting when I got involved in April 1994. It was new, raw, and extremely unfinished. The previous owners put this course together through performing miracles and then simply ran out of money. It is a commonly heard story. The new owners buy it at a great price and sort of put it all together and make it into a successful public golf operation.

What John Tobie and I jumped into here last year was kind of a tough situation. No pre-season shop time... not a semblance of a well-trained crew...and a golf course needing so much attention that it was difficult to focus everybody's attention on the real priorities.

We had to organize a golf program from the ground up, also. There were green fees established and that's about it —no golf policies, no membership program, and because of it all, no certainty that we'd be able to attract golfers!! I'd never done any of that before in my career, but it's no problem, so why worry?

Now add into this boiling cauldron four new golf course

owners, all successful local businessman, all wanting to be very involved, and all with their respective ideas and opinions. I had been dealing with one owner representative/green committee chairman, which is far superior to having everybody so involved.

So what developed was four owners always being at the course, kibitzing JUST A LITTLE BIT, a general manager (myself) not really suited for inside management, a young and headstrong superintendent getting caught in the middle, and by late season the realization that changes were inevitable.

For my part, I was at serious fault for not dealing successfully with these people. That's because I'm not truly a great "people person". I am very poor at doing what people ask of me, especially if I consider it to be wrong, stupid or of a low priority. A good "people person" deals with the request and gets it done regardless of its perceived merit. There are politics in any line of work, I guess...

Some of us in this business, myself included, would probably fail in our duties if placed at a high-end private club or resort course...I probably could not handle the people as well as others do. But, I am learning as I



age...heck, I ought to be an expert at dealing with new and different course situations. Maybe my mother was right ... I always was a slow learner!!!

What has transpired here since last season is very encouraging. Our management team has been bolstered by the addition of John Keegan as PGA pro and general manager. John is a true "people person" — he's been the golf professional at the local private club and is the ideal person to fit that role at our course.

I am now assigned to golf course operations and improvements exclusively. Oh, darn! And really, that's what I love and where I belong. I love being out on the course, thinking of course improvements, tasks to finish, problems to solve, and priorities to establish. If you all are like me, then most of your best thinking really does occur when outside, unencumbered by the confines of office walls.

Our mission for the golf course is constantly being updated and redefined. We spent a lot of time and effort in the off season on planning, budgeting and forecasting of our golf future. In the past few weeks, though, there have been some really serious discussion on the merit of accelerating the rate of course improvements.

Original planning called for cartpaths to be established with gravel in the next two years and the beginning of asphalt in 1997. Now we are planning on doing all of the cartpath work this year. That is really good thinking for

this course situation — you are dead on a super-sized public course such as ours without good asphalt paths.

The same acceleration may take place with our drainage, our bunkers, our tree planting/landscaping and the establishment of our regrassing/wildflower/pheasant habit/native grasses program — stuff that all superintendents just love to have happening on their courses!!

So, do I mind giving up my duties as club manager? Yes, a little bit. Overly zealous owners dictating course policy got a bit much last year, but time has healed that wound for me. Overall, I don't mind these organizational changes at all. There came a critical point for me when I totally realized that golf course management was "my cup of tea", not inside club management.

I do not mind giving up the bartending, the total week-end time commitment, or closing up at 10 p.m. I do not miss any of it at all.

What we "non-people" types thrive on is taking a lousy golf property and converting it from a sad to a grand condition. We all love that...seeing the constant improvement ...touring "our" courses...surveying our kingdoms, so to speak.

And we superintendent types generally are "people people". We would just rather be dealing with people out on the course instead of on a daily basis in the clubhouse.

Which is as it should be. Out on the course...doing our thing ...making it beautiful. ♣

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