



BACK TO THE BASICS

By Pat Norton
Nettle Creek CC

Tracing through our collective history as golf course superintendents, we can all say that we've witnessed and been a part of the huge wave of popularity that golf has enjoyed for many years. We've all certainly been a part of the evolutionary changes in golf course maintenance. Many of us, through our involvement at newly built courses, have had the good fortune to be involved in the sweeping changes in golf course design and construction during this same period.

The definite trend in golf course construction over the past fifteen years has been that of the professionally designed and built golf course...marked by extremely high design/construction costs, every possible amenity for the golfer, and a very high green fee. The result of all of this is known as the 'upscale public golf course'.

All of these courses are great... every hole, every feature is perfectly built. They are marked by USGA

greens, four or five sets of multiple tees, extensive drainage, lots and lots of earthshaping, continuous cartpaths, and other features to numerous to mention.

Sometimes though, these new golf courses are built and backed by ownership groups who, as businessmen, should really know better. They are sponsoring golf course projects that really are too expensive. How many of these new courses have gone bankrupt or been in a forced sale situation after about three-five years? How many more are struggling financially under the weight of too huge a mortgage, while year after year not reaching their financial income goals for the golf course operation? More than a few, I think!

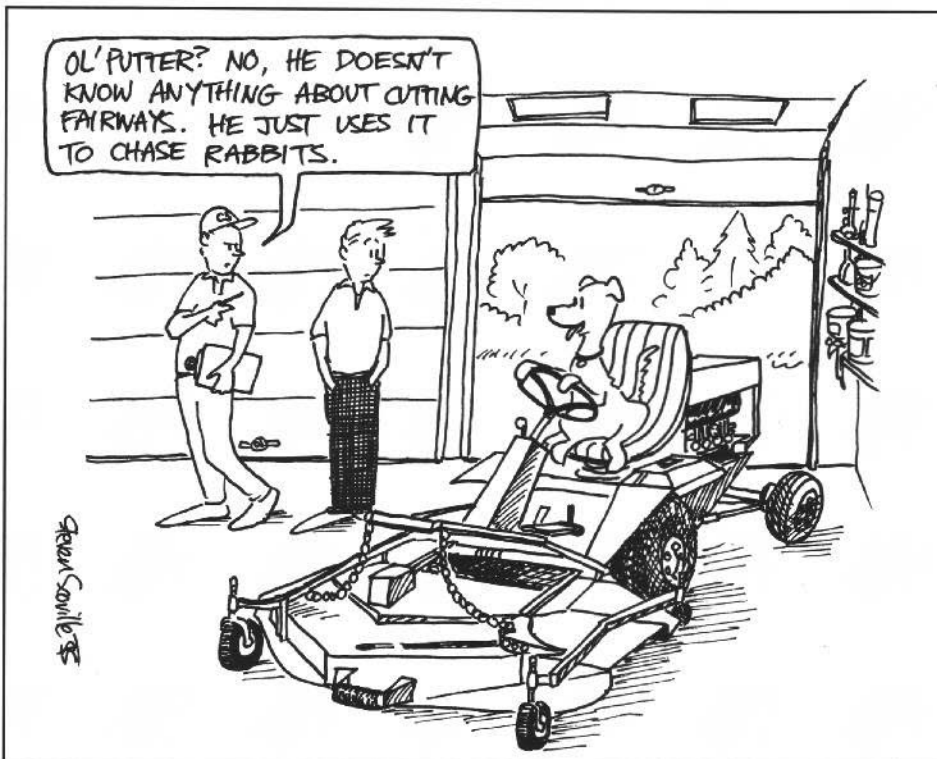
I get a chuckle out of the new courses that continue to be built for the high price tag...are these owners sure of the 'successful formula' that's vitally necessary for financial success in the public golf market? Sometimes

I really wonder!

Upon contemplating the construction of a new golf course, doesn't it make sense to downscale the scope and the intensity of the project to a financially manageable or profitable level? How many golfers are out there in ChicagoLand willing and able to pay that \$60-100 green/cart fee? Quite a few, apparently, judging by the number of upscale public golf courses in this region. The question is...how many more of these type of courses can be built before the golf market is saturated with them?

Lots of counties and park districts down here are the backers of these new courses, supposedly for the enjoyment of their core residents and citizens. Then the new golf course turns out to be both too difficult and too expensive for many people, the course struggles financially, and the government body is stuck with a boondoggle!

It seems, though, that there are some new trends in course design and construction. The trend is, and will be, towards new courses that cost



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less to build and maintain, resulting in a more affordable fee structure for all. One component of this more affordable trend will be that more and more courses will be built with native soil or modified native soil greens.

When I first began playing semi-serious golf as a high school youth in the early 70's, we of course all played the game on older courses that all had native soil greens. I will not mention that almost all of the host courses for our high school golf team had pretty lousy greens in those days...thatchy, spongy, and slow! Fortunately, at least two of those courses have upgraded with the times, and have enjoyed the fruits of the past efforts of two good superintendents...namely Tom Schwab at Monroe CC and Mike Kactro at Koshkonong Mounds)...to name but a few of such situations.

All of the golf courses in those days had native soil greens...for one very simple reason. These courses were all built in an earlier era...when courses largely followed the 'lay of the land' and were built with whatever soil happened to be on the site. Greens construction materials, such as sand and peat were incorporated into the soil profile, to be sure.

But, to think of building greens with all of the expense of the 'USGA spec' method? I don't think so!

And that is what I predict will be the wave of the future. There will be more and more greens built out of native soil materials, especially on the types of new courses that will be built to attract new golfers to the game. The economics of the situation will dictate this.

I'll bet if any of us called our favorite architect with the question of whether he has observed this trend, he'd answer in the definite affirmative! He would also undoubtedly call it the 'minimalist design' trend, which is gaining in popularity, I think.

As a matter of fact, our little old golf course down here in north central Illinois has native soil greens. This is largely the result of Buz Didier, the course architect, not believing at all in the USGA green concept. The owners/developers here were definitely on a budget, so the whole idea of native soil greens fit in perfectly with their goals and limitations.

What has resulted, somewhat by coincidence, is that we have a very heavily played golf course with very large native soil greens. They do not undulate wildly, but have great charac-

ter because of the skillfully designed and constructed green complexes.

These greens, if they had been built to USGA specs, would have been much too costly for this project. In other words, because almost all new greens are USGA spec greens, they are oftentimes too small for the amount of play that they receive!

Some of us have had the privilege of managing both types of greens. In my earlier days, I had experience with native soil greens on older courses. No big deal...it's what everybody knew and managed.

Then I switched to what I thought was the ultimate...USGA greens...80/20...choker layer...collar hot spots...localized dry spots...algae...then the dreaded black layer!

What evolved is that we had to constantly watch, worry, and try to protect the greens!

Native soil greens, on the other hand, have some very real advantages. Color and nutrient retention are much better, and moisture retention is far, far superior. Turf quality and density are also much better...resulting in greens that withstand traffic beautifully, stay dense season long, and are much more worry free!

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Since there are always two sides to every argument, what are the disadvantages with native soil greens? Importantly, they require two regular aerifications every year (with plugs removed)...versus only one time for USGA greens (no plugs removed unless they stink with black layer). They obviously do not infiltrate and percolate water like sand based greens...we have had too many times when golfers go back out to finish their rounds on greens that are too wet.

In October 1996, we took the plunge and deep tined our greens with the Verti-Drain from Wisconsin Turf Equipment. We plan on aerifying twice this season with our GA30. We use straight sand topdressing, lots of Milorganite during spring and fall, and liquid fert, micros, and CarboAid over the summer. Those basic cultural steps have helped our greens tremendously...so it's a program that will continue here indefinitely. And our greens look and putt great...better than I ever experienced with USGA spec greens. That whole aerification concept is tried and true for native soil greens in the Midwest and elsewhere, isn't it? In a way it's been a lesson in going back to the basics.

And if I'm ever in a position to be a prospective owner of a new course, which someday soon I truly hope to be, I will build it in the following manner;

- Large, gently undulating native soil greens
- Large native soil bentgrass tees... much larger than most modern courses...one tee for white and blue, another for red (small multiple tees are a real pain in the butt)
- Minimal earthmoving...and no severe mounds or outrageous features
- Maximum length of 6600 yds (blue), 6400 (white), and 6100 (red)
- Executive length nine built adjacent as soon as possible
- Practice facility will be very junior and new golfer friendly
- All staff people will be extremely friendly and service oriented... because public golfers will patronize a less expensive, less imposing golf venue with regularity
- Tree planting and landscaping on the course proper would have to wait until cash flow permitted
- Shop facility, course equipment, and course labor would not be

excessive...in fact, operations by necessity would be run extremely tight. Here at Nettle Creek, for example, our course labor amount is \$75,500 annually...not including my salary. That isn't a lot of money, but somehow the basics get accomplished, improvements are made, and golfers are very happy with the condition of our course!

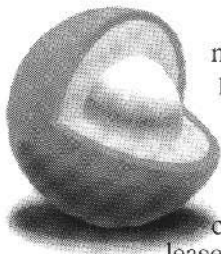
- Memberships and green fees structured on the moderate side to attract the average to good golfer...they spend a surprising amount of money if given a chance!

All of that, by the way, is how we do things here at our particular golf course.

We do not have the biggest or the best golf course, budget, or equipment...not by far. What we do have is a course that's cash flowing very nicely, funding its own improvements easily, and becoming very profitable in only our fourth year here. All of the ownership group, myself included, are quite happy with our situation!

So, as far as the basics go, it's a matter of the financial basics...and the agronomic basics. And basically speaking, that is the name of the game, isn't it?? 🍷

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