



At the Crossroads

By Pat Norton

Whether you're a superintendent, a sales rep, or anybody else in this industry . . . sooner or later you'll come to the crossroads. It doesn't matter your age, or your background, or your qualifications. The fact is that you'll come to the crossroads, and definitely more than once as your career progresses. Sometimes the intersection will be clearly marked . . . you'll have a clear sense of direction . . . and will breeze right on through.

At some point, though, we all come to a major crossroads in our careers. The road ahead will not be clearly marked . . . there may not even be a good road to follow at all! It will be a major intersection . . . and will require a major decision to get through successfully and be on your way. And there may be compelling, uncontrollable factors that push you towards that crossroads . . . possibly against your will.

In my case . . . at this golf course . . . 1998 has been a year in which our entire ownership group has been

propelling us toward the point of no return . . . which is forcing me to make a major, crossroads type of career decision!

This year has seen our group finish and begin operation of a new clubhouse and restaurant . . . and seen it all deteriorate to the point where . . . many or most of our partners agree that the time is now right to sell our beloved golf course!

If your golf course ownership group is poised to build a new clubhouse . . . and think that they've got the entire perspective . . . and are certain of their intentions . . . tell them to please stand back . . . ask their management for their opinions . . . and listen to the voice . . . any voice of reason and moderation.

In our case, we have a middle of the road, bentgrass fairway, public golf course . . . we are not the fanciest, not the most upscale . . . and have quite a few golfers who consider themselves to be common men, just as I

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consider myself to be a common superintendent.

Our strength has always been with the common, average golfer . . . who loved our common golf course . . . and its common green fee. They loved our common mobile trailers . . . and our common price for a bottle of beer and a sandwich! They loved our commonly priced annual membership, our uncommonly good service, and that great communal feeling between golfers and the management/ownership. We gave/give them a great deal . . . and they loved it!! They gave us . . . all of their patronage . . . which enabled us to prosper nicely!

So why did we overbuild on the clubhouse, saddle ourselves with too much additional debt, and scare off our golfers? Probably for the same ridiculous reasons as any other golf club . . . this clubhouse 'white elephant' thing is so common, it's almost funny! As a result of building this fancy clubhouse . . . with its fancy linen decor, and unspoken rules and regulations . . . we have, to a degree, scared off and certainly alienated many of our golfers!

As with any consumer oriented business . . . customers must be cultivated, understood, listened to, and never taken for granted! We made the mistake of assuming that this type of clubhouse/club operation was what

our clientele wanted and would support. And although everybody still loves the golf course/golf shop/events, etc., they've made it quite clear through their lack of support for the new bar and restaurant that we're definitely on the wrong track.

People used to flock into the old mobile clubhouse/trailers for sandwiches, drinks, and camaraderie . . . in '95, '96, and '97 . . . a full crowd every Saturday and Sunday! This year people actually approached the dining room/bar . . . and saw the empty, formal linen covered tables . . . and decided to have a quick one . . . or maybe divert off through the front doors and recongregate at some other watering hole!

The irony of this all is that our golf professional, John Keegan, and I know most of these golfers . . . and shortly after opening the new clubhouse . . . these golfers/members would tell us in one way or another that they didn't like what we were offering! Our corporate treasurer, who is 74 years old and has made tons of \$\$\$\$ in the bar/restaurant business, was hearing the same thing! And this was all incoming information as early as July . . . so we've wasted an entire golf season . . . letting things slide downhill . . . and not making the



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correct management decisions. The entire thing still doesn't make any sense!

Why would we all do such a thing, you may ask? In this case, it's . . . four senior owners who call the serious shots . . . and support each other . . . right or wrong . . . almost always. It's sort of like two lieutenants/captains in the military getting their orders after the four generals had concocted a faulty battle plan and then expect their subordinates to implement it.

This season I really did find myself cruising the golf course quoting Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade* . . . "into the valley of death charged the six hundred . . . ours is not to question why, ours is but to do and die!"

It's also about politics and egos . . . strong opinions by one owner and his wife . . . who were given management approval by the board . . . and obstinately insisted that they all of a sudden knew what our golfers wanted and needed . . . and even strongly felt that we shouldn't be relying on the golfing crowd to float our financial boat.

We needed, they said, to encourage and cultivate a fine dining philosophy here at our very public, very common, very rural golf course. It has been a formula and a

philosophy for mediocrity this entire season, has led to great frustration . . . and in fact, is precipitating the entire idea of selling the golf course!

Maybe we superintendent types are too used to being captains instead of generals . . . and are trained not to question too vigorously those that are higher up in the golf hierarchy. I fully understand and know that I am guilty of this shortcoming. I just wonder if I'd ever have what it takes to be my own general . . . which I'm sure is a common enough thought for any superintendent.

Selling the golf course would definitely have both its positives and its negatives. Negatively, nobody in their forties with involved children really looks forward to the possibility, however remote, of uprooting and relocating . . . even if it would probably be back to Wisconsin. Life here is pretty good . . . and getting better each year.

Positively, selling this place . . . or at least shaking up the ownership group . . . would be liberating in a way and force some of us to really look at all of the possibilities out there. I have been advised . . . and have continually been advising myself . . . that this superintendent thing is a young man's game. For every Oscar Miles or Monroe Miller out there . . . who are elder statesmen in this profession . . . there are about a hundred of us common types who will eventually run into a wall and want

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or need to do something else in our professional lives.

By the way, I heard Oscar Miles recently at the NCTE . . . and the thought struck me as I'm listening to his fine presentation . . . "this guy is Miller's older brother . . . they look somewhat alike!"

It is also pretty weird to think of my involvement here possibly coming to an end. I am not especially attached to this golf course . . . it's not nearly as good a golf course as Cedar Creek . . . where I muddled my way through before Scott Spier rescued the place. It's more of a sense of identification with the golf course and the club in general. This feeling is strong because this group took a very raw, unsuccessful golf course and transformed it in five seasons into a very successful, financially valuable entity. There is a certain amount of pride in being identified with it all.

And so in this almost off season which has seen golfers still out there in mid-December . . . which in itself is sort of weird . . . we all contemplate the possibilities. Chances are only about 50/50 that some form of our group will be here for next season . . . there is a possibility of staying on in 1999 . . . and I would have some anxiety in possibly working for a golf management company.

These crossroads decisions are never easy . . . and almost everybody in this business has to make them. It is just that I can feel that this one will be a big one . . . it's strange how you can feel it coming.

Contrary to assurances by some . . . that the selling contract will insist on their retaining key management people . . . there are certainly no guarantees of that. Nor would I want to be locked into anything . . . if it turned out to be a bad situation.

But hey, I consider myself to be extremely fortunate . . . all things considered. I can't imagine the feeling of being suddenly and permanently laid off from an executive or any other well paid position . . . as has been announced by more than a few companies recently.

So, hey, the crossroads is approaching . . . but I'm ready. I'm actually looking forward to it. I've seen other guys and their spouses negotiate it all in fine fashion . . . and guess what? They're doing just fine, I should think.

Like them, I'm quite sure that we'll make the right decisions and choose correctly when we do reach that upcoming crossroads intersection. It's not as scary as you think! ♣

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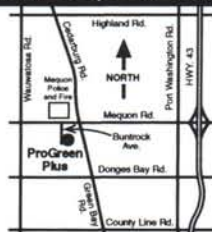
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