



A Changing of the Guard

By Pat Norton, Nettle Creek Country Club

Boy, oh boy, do I have an interesting story to tell this time! This one is basically a season long soap opera...which every golf course/golf club seems to go through from time to time. Isn't it right that some golf seasons fly by with only the usual happenings...disease outbreaks...hydraulic hoses bursting all over a green...or spectacular thunderstorms/subsequent flooding?? You know, the normal catastrophes associated with any golf course...which is pretty tame stuff compared to the problems humans cause for one another!

Every so often the situation develops in which a golf operation goes through the proverbial season from hell...and I'm not talking about problems on the golf course!

The 1998 season for us started with extremely high hopes. We had started our new clubhouse construction in late fall of '97... and been assured that the new building would be ready for the start of the next golf season...by our very seasoned architect/general contractor team.

These guys did have tons of experience overall...but no experience with designing or building golf clubhouses! We could have found somebody that knew how to design such buildings...or checked into the pre-built clubhouses advertised in GCM...which I advocated as a great idea!

However, my input throughout this whole thing was extremely minimal. We already had quite a few 'chiefs and armwavers' involved, you see...so I was unofficially given an 'Indian' sort of job description in this affair...which I soon morphed into an 'absent, uninvolved' sort of thing.

Besides...everybody else seemed to be real experts...and the golf

course did need some attention that spring...so I excused myself from the whole thing and watched the drama unfold.

Construction of our new clubhouse proceeded oh so slowly...don't they always? And in addition to the normal glitches that delay completion...it became apparent that the design and construction were a little more 'high end' than some of us had envisioned...lots of expensive false dormers, false windows, and steep roof pitches that make the building look spectacular...and definitely more expensive!

And what looked to be a very beautiful building from the exterior soon turned out to have a most tiny interior...and a theme in the restaurant of 19th hole/fine dining/ill-defined/late 20th century/rural Illinois elegance sort of thing...in which the ultimate style/atmosphere turned out to be fine dining with linen for lunch and dinner...gradually evolved...when it was originally intended to have a casual atmosphere for golfers and the general public!

Obviously...with our themes and operating philosophies so very well defined...it was just a matter of time

before this thing caught on... Oops, I almost forgot...spearheading the whole clubhouse design and operation thing from our ownership group was a husband/wife team whose elegant ideas, tastes, and styling...were precisely what we did not need!

This couple was the wrong two-some in the wrong place at precisely the wrong time...as far as I could see.

Unfortunately, their ideas and authority were given tacit approval from everybody else...especially after it became clear that our newly hired club manager couldn't work with them at all...and left our employ after only a few short weeks!! Hey, hey, we're really on our way to clubhouse success now...and best of all this whole messy wound was just starting to get infected!

That helpless feeling is one that I'm sure all veteran superintendents know well...having quite a bit of observational experience at different places over the years...we feel that we've seen what works and what doesn't, right??

Who hasn't seen some hare-brained, halfbaked, entirely wrong house idea, theme, or proposal gain approval from a board of directors...while solid ideas for improve-

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ment of the grounds or the golf course languish for far too long?

And who hasn't had that feeling of knowing that something is just entirely wrong...only to fully realize that you're in the distinct minority and in no real position to speak your mind? All of these things happen everyday...in the golf world...and the business world in general, I guess.

So as last summer progressed, it became increasingly clear that our fancy, linen bedecked clubhouse/restaurant was on entirely the wrong path. We were alienating our bread and butter golf patrons...that heretofore loved us in our double wide mobile trailers...serving up cheeseburgers...beer...great hospitality...and solid public golf! We were serving maybe 30 dinners on any given Saturday night...far from the numbers and dollars projectebly our supremely confident management duo.

It then became a very cynical, negative game of sorts to attend our monthly board meetings from about August through the end of the '98 season. John Keegan and I knew that we had problems...heck...everybody sitting around the board table knew that we had problems...big problems. The biggest problem of all was that nobody, but nobody in the ownership group was willing to take on the fight of getting things changed...of having to literally and completely fight it out with those two who advocated the status quo!

Business partners, I have learned, will go to extreme lengths to back each other up...to not step on toes...and to get along almost all costs. In this group at least... we had many situations crop up in the last five years... in which management (us) had to yield to the owners (them) in numerous different ways. This clubhouse thing was the supreme example of that operating philosophy.

The decision was made that, as a group, we should five this idea of fine clubhouse dining/stiff, formal

atmosphere until the end of calendar 1998 to succeed. So after limping through until the end of the season... and our older owners fully realizing that once the golf course closed...there was almost no other restaurant business to be had...we closed the damn thing for the winter! Point proven!

But what a moot point to say amongst ourselves that we were indeed correct...public golfers don't really want things too fancy or high priced! And they let us know what they wanted by not patronizing our fancy restaurant...we just didn't really ever get the message!

So we then...by December '98... had a losing restaurant proposition complete with terrible financial figures, suspicion of employee theft, horrible employee morale, charges of sexual harassment, an extremely unhappy golf professional/general manager who never really got to see his family, and an ownership group that was starting to get very anxious about our collective future...all in all a pretty successful first season with our new clubhouse, eh??

Really the most stable, depend-

able part of the entire operation was the good old golf course! Yours truly was never a part of any of the BS going on up there...and believe me my uninvolvement was entirely intentional! I had the easiest job of anybody there! I could just simply shake my head at the wasted money in there and head back outside...which I'm sure is also a common thing amongst superintendents. I was so uninvolved as to later be called naive when the truth began to surface concerning the variety and depth of our problems.

Much better though, to be naive than guilty...which is so easy to say as I sit here and reflect back on the season and its roilings...its boilings...and the cancer that seemed to eat away and destroy so much of the good progress that was made here over the years.

Our group now is inevitably going to break up...which leaves me with mixed feelings. My good friend John is leaving the club...wanting some freedom and a chance to make more money.

One of our existing owners is buying everybody out...which will be great for me in that he's my

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father's brother...is interested in owning/improving the course for the long run...and feels that having a stable, experienced superintendent is of paramount importance.

I did capitalize on the situation by regaining my independence of sorts. The initial idea was to have the superintendent report through the general manager to the new owners. I guess I balked enough at my prospective continued involvement...given my age and experience...as to convince them that if they wanted me to remain in my position...I would need to be able to report directly to the majority owners. Otherwise, I definitely told them that I would not be staying on and would return to Wisconsin and otherwise pursue other opportunities.

So I guess they blinked before I did...which was good. If they hadn't, I might be keyboarding my resume today instead of boring you all with the seamy details of this tawdry tale!

You know, the only difference between any superintendent reading this and myself...is that I have the benefit of writing for a removed audience of Wisconsinites. I am reasonably confident that any

greenkeeping veteran has equally interesting stories to tell...but cannot candidly do so because of his own proximity to his reading audience.

In other words...people that might be offended by these words will never read this...I would suppose.

I had a new friend from Wisconsin write to me concerning my previous column about being at a crossroads in my career...and I must say that it impressed me that he'd taken to heart some of my written words. Many of us have experiences very much in common...and lots of the same reaction and opinions...and it's much more interesting to read about this type of thing rather than the latest and greatest in the turf world proper!

And I do admit to the satisfaction of writing precisely what I feel...and having other superintendents identify with it...even if I didn't have the guts to say precisely what I felt about this past season here at Nettle Creek.

One last thought...within our new and reformed management group at the golf course...there's quite a bit of discussion about the relative need for a PGA Class A golf professional

this season. The mutual feeling is that we have the trained staff to cover the bases of the golf operation...although that idea may be somewhat shortsighted, I think.

Throughout the discussions, though, nobody ever talks about being able to operate without a trained, experienced golf course superintendent!

I think that the powers in this great game continue to realize that modern superintendents are vital to any golf course operation...but usually not to the point of equal compensatory consideration with our friends in the PGA.

I also believe that the more a guy can demonstrate his understanding and competence of the business side of golf...by starting with more collegiate and GCSAA sponsored business training...and continuing his business/computer education wherever possible...we'll be taken more seriously yet.

Then...whenever there's a changing of the guard...the superintendent will be considered equally with anybody else for that position.

Which is the way it really should be. ♻

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