



Three Simple Questions

By **Pat Norton**, Golf Course Superintendent, Nettle Creek Country Club

In my mind lately there are a few simple questions that keep bugging me. These questions are the nagging, recurring sort... as opposed to the life and death... or meaning of life type of unanswerable question. The life, death, and the meaning of it all type of questions are really not possible to answer. There are many different interpretations and opinions to the deep questions of life.

Rather, these three simple questions pertain to the world of golf. Golf is unique in that the philosophers among us can find the quiet and solitude needed to explore the human mind and answer a few questions... while playing or working... out on the golf course!

This ad libbed little essay will attempt to answer these questions... that nag at all of us golf course types from time to time.

The first question... has many subquestions... and is one of course management and the management team. The question is what constitutes a good team...

the superintendent, golf pro, and club manager all working harmoniously, I would suppose? How often does this truly happen... and for what duration? And why, when a good management team is developed over a period of time... do external circumstances always seem to screw things up?

Over the last five years, our little group at Nettle Creek worked very closely and harmoniously... to the mutual benefit of all. The main staff people were myself and our PGA professional. Our working relationship was just about as ideal as possible... largely due to the fact of both of us having ownership stock. We were also overseen... quite closely at times... by four other owners who always had a keen interest in everyday happenings and our mutual long term future.

Too many owners resulted in the end, though, in there being too many chiefs and too many strongly held, incorrect opinions. As the season progressed and finished up last fall, it became apparent that

COLUMBIA ParCar

of WISCONSIN

Call to see our new 1999 models!
And to learn of our special WI course offers at
no cost or obligation!



- Gas & Electric Golf Cars & Utility Vehicles
- New, Used and Reconditioned
- Full Sales and Service
- Additional Cars for Special Events
- Lease Financing Available



Eagle Sponsor
of the Golf
Course Owners
of Wisconsin.

SALES & SERVICE
350 N. Dewey Ave. • Reedsburg, WI
(608) 524-8888 • (800) 222-4653

Proudly Manufactured By
Wisconsin Craftsmen

changes were due and something monumental was in the wind.

Our group mutually agreed to sell the course to one of our existing owners who had the most interest by far in staying involved. In the course of the negotiations it also became apparent that our PGA professional... who had done so much for us in terms of sales, marketing, and promotion of the game of golf to our golfers... was not going to be retained!

So this guy... who is arguably the best PGA professional that I have ever worked with... who was a large part of our success from 1995 - 1998... was not going to be asked to join the new management group! Something was very fishy here... I thought!!

So the original first question of what constitutes a good management team... is answered in that it's always good people working together!

And we had it! Why didn't it last for a longer duration? The answer is so simple and always the same... people screw things up! The successful PGA guy let his ego get a bit out of hand... creates a few adversaries for himself. The adversaries overreact to the max... and make sure that the guy gets his

wings clipped.

Or the good superintendent is too concerned with the course itself... and forgets that in a public situation... lots and lots of people must play the course for it to succeed. Small problems become big ones... and people end up leaving for greener pastures.

This question is sort of like why any professional sports team has such a difficult time repeating for the championship... it's much easier getting there than it is staying on the top! But it does tick a guy off when external forces or 'powers that be' tinker with a good course management team and do nothing but make the situation so much worse!

The second question posed is simply this... does a golf course superintendent need to play golf in order to succeed in this business?

Obviously the answer must be... definitely not! Logic show us that there are plenty of very good, very successful superintendents that choose not to play this great game... yet their courses are clearly as good as any other! Does a successful baseball manager or basketball coach need a playing background in order to achieve success? Of course not!



Proudly Serving the Turf Industry in Wisconsin

Terra's full line of turf industry products includes:

- Herbicides
- Insecticides
- Fertilizer
- Grass Seed
- PGRs
- Fungicides
(Including Thalonil™ 90DF and 4L)
- Colorants
(Including Terramark™ SPI and Terramark Lake Colorant)

**For the products, services and advice you need,
Talk to Terra**



Terra International, Inc. • 3525 Terra Court • Sun Prairie, WI 53590
Conrad Stynchula CGCS • (800) 456-0948 (office) • (608) 235-4999 (mobile)

On the other hand... let me also say that it is all simply a matter of athletic limitation! Judging from a few of the non-playing superintendents that I personally know... I'd have to generally and truthfully say that those who have trouble swinging the golf club with grace and ease... probably also had trouble putting the basketball through the net... catching the football... running the big race... or asking the pretty girl for a rather harmless date!

In fact, a couple of old Madison area superintendents still amaze me... how did these klutzes... who couldn't hit a golf ball with a baseball bat... ever connect on another level and end up married with families? Women must have been less finicky back in the old days... I guess!

It's also a matter of perception. Members here know that I do play the game... and oftentimes give me credit where none is due! They perceive that I have a better understanding of the game than the average superintendent... which is blatantly false.

What they do not understand... no matter how much it's explained... is that when I'm golfing... I am concentrating on playing the game! I do notice things

out on the course... but it's an entirely different mentality when any superintendent is playing versus working... even on the same course. I am not out there taking notes... I am having fun playing the game! I am concentrating on hitting the ball... making a good swing... or canning a putt.

In my years of playing and working on golf courses... like any other superintendent... certain styles and themes evolve... especially in public golf situation. Greens/surrounds/bunkers are critical... as is the neatness and tidiness of the course. Fairways are important... but many is the Friday when I've left them unmown to relieve the overtime burden. Do golfers see this out on the course? I do not think so...

I have heard through the gristmill that the private club in our area... changes cups infrequently... and doesn't mow greens daily. Coincidentally, this superintendent is always under fire from his committee and his status is somewhat uncertain from one season to the next! Does it take a golfing superintendent to realize that this is a recipe for disaster? Not at all.

What it does take is a detail minded, flexible, listening superintendent who intuitively knows before his

ProGreen Plus
A WISCONSIN COMPANY



and

The Nutraceutical Company
nutramax
LABORATORIES, INC.

present **AMINO ACID BASED BIOFERTILIZATION**

MACRO-SORB®

foliar

Helps to regulate the opening of the stomata, increase water potential, regulate osmotic pressure, slow down photorespiration and increase net photosynthesis.

MACRO-SORB®

radicular

Activates physiological and natural defense mechanisms of the plant, enhances net photosynthesis, increases water and nutrient efficiency.

QUELANT-Ca®

Corrects calcium deficiency of turfgrass, increases turfgrass leaf turgidity and quality, improves photosynthesis, offers maximum protection from stress.

QUELANT-K®

Potassium and amino acids

Now Available

CALL...JORDAN SENSIBAR

GOLF COURSE SALES MANAGER

CAR... 414 750-7551 • PAGER... 414 318-4280

TOLL FREE... 1-888-PRO-GREEN

7 7 6 - 4 7 3 3

MEQUON

11020 Buntrock Ave.
242-9100
Fax: (414) 242-2117

NEW BERLIN

16680 W. Cleveland Ave.
789-9550
Fax: (414) 789-9509

members even ask... and provides playing conditions daily that meet or exceed their expectations.

And there are lots of non-playing superintendents who are able to accomplish this... in their non-graceful, non-athletic way...

Lastly... the question of complimentary golf and mutual professionalism is snorting me tons lately. As I mentioned earlier... we had an ownership change that resulted in some management team changes. Our new general manager is new to the golf business... but has lots of business experience that makes him the man to take responsibility for the bar, restaurant, and ostensibly, the golf operation. Fortunately, he and I are on a par with each other... which is as it should be.

Truthfully, though, he does lack the golf experience that shows up in lots of little ways. Our lack of marketing, advertising, and coordinated golf events really hurt us earlier this year... which used to be our specialty... thanks to our experienced and talented PGA professional! As I write this on August 9 I still do not see any coordinated advertising/marketing effort.

During a recent management meeting the wise old veteran (myself) very boldly stated that the best advertising and marketing effort that we could possibly ever come up with would be to operate without constantly 'shooting ourselves in the foot!'

We had an incident over the July 4th weekend where a scheduling foul-up resulted in no beverage cart/carts getting onto the course until after 11 AM... loudly complaining golfers brought it all into sharp focus for our new general manager (on the course golfing all morning) and our golf professional (reported for work at 9 AM)... needless to say they learned from their mistake.

Interestingly, I am the part of the management team with by far the most experience... so when I offer an opinion about the course or anything else... I do get some respect and an audience from our new owners - my aunt and uncle.

I have also offered my opinion on this idea of complimentary golf among staff people from different courses. The new rage here is for our general manager, or just about anybody else... starters, rangers, shop staff... to get 'comped' as some very nice courses in the area.

Seemingly every Wednesday 'that special group' heads out early in the AM to 'ooh and aah' over the latest new public course that hasn't yet gotten wise to their ruse! It's a reward... I'm told... for their dedicated work and service! They always learn something useful... they say... that we might be able to implement here! They might even start using a camera... they say... to give me some landscaping ideas! Hey, what a good idea!

I tell them... right to their faces... that I don't need

their photos... or their ideas... and also state that this whole Nettle Creek traveling road show is way inappropriate and way overdone! These other courses probably feel somewhat uncomfortable saying no to our discount seekers... but sooner or later they will refuse to participate in this sham!

The idea of complimentary golf for staff people, whoever they may be, is not the question. The problem is taking advantage of an honorable custom... and making our golf facility look like cheapskates in the process!

One of the host courses... I hear... offered our boys a six pack of Snickers bars for their complimentary breakfasts... which somehow fits the situation here!

The best questions in this world of golf are never those that deal with the agronomics... or the shop talk about mowers, grasses or chemicals. The pertinent questions are always about people, politics, happenings, and situation. I am totally bored and tune out when the conversation turns to the mundane.

Talk to us instead about people. They are what makes our profession so interesting... and diverse... and vibrant. They are what make us all tick. ♡

