



The Golf Stud

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

There is a moral to every story. There are underlying themes to almost any essay or short story...otherwise, why read it or write it in the first place? These essays or short stories are different from op-ed pieces in that the readers are challenged to interpret the writing...and then possibly express themselves using the written or spoken word.

It's especially fun to have a younger person...name-ly a 10 year old fifth grader or a 14 year old eighth grader...come to Mom or Dad with their questions concerning their English or Literature reading assignments. Challenging them to answer the questions correctly is usually pretty straightforward...but usually there is a final question asking them to really "Think"!! about the underlying meaning or reasoning of the author's writing.

With this story...the wisdom of every reader's accumulated experience in the world of

golf/business...should be enough to point the way toward the correct interpretation of the writing...

This whole situation started a few years ago...1994 to be exact...when nameless individuals formed a partnership group and purchased Stinging Creek Country Club...then a struggling golf course/real estate project yet in its infancy. Stinging Creek...like so many other such golf/real estate developments...was also available at an absolute bargain price!

The group wisely decided to purchase only the golf course...not wanting to touch all of those empty golf course home lots. The group also had the wisdom to bring in competent staff people and sweeten the pot by offering these key individuals stock ownership...albiet in a minority position.

Now, what superintendent or golf professional wouldn't jump at the chance to develop a new golf course and be compensated with salary, benefits, and stock ownership...in a situation where...the value of the golf course/corporation stock should rise dramatically over the years? Well, these two young gentlemen jumped at the chance to be involved and worked their butts off to make sure that Stinging Creek became a viable, well conditioned, reputable public golf club!

Along the way...they developed the motto that 'dedication to detail defines the difference' with an accompanying creed of delivering outstanding customer service and totally friendly service to the public golfer/member/outing guest...all at a value packed price!

And...beginning in '94 and stretching through the '98 golf season...this philosophy worked like a charm! It worked so well that Stinging Creek became a standout course in south ChicagoLand for its course conditioning...its value pricing...and especially its great customer service! Stinging Creek had five great seasons in a row...and the group thought that the gravy train would just keep on rolling indefinitely!

There were, however, some undercurrents of discord within the ownership group...mainly having to do with differences of opinion in the proposed new clubhouse that they were planning to build. The original GE Modular Space three wide trailer had served them well...but was seriously deteriorating...with a new lease needing to be signed...

So...in September of '97...everybody agreed that it was time to expand into a permanent clubhouse building...which is about the time that the troubles began for

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them all! There was never a unanimous agreement among them all as to the type of clubhouse to be constructed nor as to the type of clubhouse operation they would offer to their patrons! There were many disagreements during the construction and the first year of new clubhouse ops that led to some definite cases of hard feelings and serious management burnout!

By the end of the '98 golf season...the fabric of the group was beginning to not only fray a bit...it was beginning to seriously unravel. There was lots of talk about selling the course...and lots of rumors about certain partners buying others out...and partners wanting out...and ultimately...sticking to the original five year plan of developing the course and then selling it off at a huge profit!

It emerged through the winter of '98-'99 that there was one partner that wanted to stay involved...and indeed in the end...bought everybody else out and owned the course in its entirety.

Soon after acquiring Stinging Creek, this new owner formed a management team that...over the course of the '99 golf season...morphed itself into the "B squad." No longer did they have an "A squad"...of committed, serious, experienced managers. Like the B squad of any athletic team...our B squad looked and talked like the first stringers. But out on the golf court, they proved again and again that they simply did not know how to win at the business of golf!

By September of 1999...it was painfully obvious that further management changes would need to be made in the quest to regain the reputation that 'the Creek' had once enjoyed. The management staff was almost entirely dismissed just before the holidays of that year...which caused lots of hard feelings, finger pointing, and accusations.

Curiously though...there was precious little soul searching or self-examination by those involved. There's a saying by some that when these management dismissals happen...there's usually good reason...and that part of the exit interview should be a forced standing for 10 minutes in front of a full length mirror...

As the holidays of '99 receded into memory...it became time to try to rev up the dormant engine that Stinging Creek had become. We had a membership that was really wondering about the status and stability of a golf facility that they'd all come to love and patronize. As is usual with these situations...everything is blown out of proportion and lots of questions are asked...

Taking the bull by the horns...the ownership/management group that remained focused on rebuilding our golf staff through the hiring of a new golf professional. It was probably very interesting for their superintendent to be totally involved in the hiring of this new PGA guy...who very much resembled a golf stud.

A golf stud...according to many golf superintendents

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that I know...is that breed of animal who is totally into golf...and himself. He feels that he's got the name and the game...and all he needs is to do is be himself...a totally hot, totally tough, totally arrogant, totally defensive(when questioned), totally offensive(to fellow members/guests/golfers)...sort of guy!

He's a new age golfer who doesn't differentiate golf from any other sport he's ever competed in! The gentlemanly instinct was bred out of this animal a long time ago...which makes him an ideal golf stud! If I offend anybody out there at Stinging Creek...too damn bad!!! All of which is somewhat tolerable in a golfer/member...although it gets really old after awhile, eh??

It was a different sort of problem when the golf stud described above happened to be the very same PGA guy that was hired to revive and polish up the golf program at tradition laden Stinging Creek Country Club. Problem was...nobody understood his personality at the time...and everybody thought that this guy was the second coming of Christ!

For the veteran superintendent that had worked closely with some excellent PGA types over the years...the realization that the golf stud wasn't fitting in very well at Stinging Creek began shortly before the first of three letters of complaint from members or league chairman concerning the golf stud and his

newly imported staff.

It was probably a very sinking feeling for that same superintendent to understand long before the majority that things were a)not happening, b)not going to happen, and c)never would happen...properly...with the golf stud at the helm of the golf program.

Basically...the differences were...and are those of basic attitudes towards golf and the people who play it. If a golf manager has a hard core attitude towards public golfers...and doesn't understand or believe that catering to public golfers...is part of the job and...leads to lots more revenue for the club...a huge problem arises.

Halfway into the first year of the golf stud...huge problems did begin to arise. Ownership expectations were to have things revert back to the days here of special treatment for all golfers...especially the core members who had patronized them for those many years.

Over the next few months...ownership slowly began to realize that the golf stud was the stereotypical PGA golf stud of days gone by...who cared too little about all of the little details that make a public golf operation hum.

They were concerned that he seemed to be much more concerned with his own personal golf game...and the treatment of his special golfing buddies...instead of making sure that all was well with little old Stinging



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Creek. He seemed to be a throwback to those arrogant golf professional types that used to dominate the PGA ranks...but have been thinned out considerably in the last decade or so.

The ironic part of this story is that the golf stud did not see the problems that were arising as being at all serious. He was an individual who pretty much saw things as black and white...you're with him or against him...members who write letters of complaint are definitely against him...and fellow staff members who may have contributed to his ultimate downfall were definitely all part of the plot. Et tu, Brute???

There were definitely plenty of clues...plenty of inklings...and plenty of chances for the golf stud to modify his performance and become the type of golf professional that any public golf course definitely needs. There were also numerous instances of defiance, denial, and disagreement that further fed the initial differences of opinion...ultimately resulting in a sort of standoff...that resulted near the end with him operating things pretty much his way...and being unresponsive to any suggestion for change or improvement.

One problem that did erupt during the weeks of trial and tribulation was that there was no clear cut performance review given to the golf stud to clearly warn him that things weren't so good.

However...things do cut both ways. Should an established manager need such a review? Should this sort of review be required with an established, experienced manager...and would it do any good given his coarse, toughened attitude? People do get pretty set in their ways and become quite stubborn concerning change...

The golf stud knew quite clearly just what type of golf operation we were trying to operate...upscale, service oriented, friendly, and attentive to detail. The problem all along...was that he simply did not agree with that approach. The stud was a 'public golf guy' in the worst way...with somewhat of a 'screw them' attitude.

In the end...it was a matter of people just being on totally different wavelengths concerning the level of service and commitment to the membership, the club, and to their work in general. And it was a tough thing for all concerned to tell an established PGA golf professional that his services were no longer needed by Stinging Creek...

Maybe people should be more responsive to what others are trying to tell them...

Maybe they shouldn't wait for somebody to hit them directly over the head...

Maybe people should spend more time standing in front of that mirror...



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