



# New President Emphasizes the Importance of Communication

by Lori Ward Bocher

It probably won't surprise anyone, but the new president of the WGCSA enjoys the challenge of working with people more than working with turf. That ability to work with people should come in handy in his new role as president.

"What I think is most important in our job today is communication," says Pres. David Brandenburg, general manager at Rolling Meadows Golf Course in Fond du Lac. "It's very difficult to be successful at being a manager of anything – not just golf – if you don't like dealing with people.

"In our jobs we have to communicate with staff, we have to deal with management, and we have to communicate with the customers. That's three distinct groups of people," David continues. "If you can communicate, you're going to be successful."

David believes that he is a good communicator. "My weakness is probably turf management," he admits. "My strength is communicating and working with people. I'm honest. I'm not afraid to approach people and let them know what I'm thinking. I try to let people know what's going on."

## **Presidential goals...**

One of his goals as president is to improve communication between the board and membership. "I want to make sure that communication stays open and that all the people feel it's open," David says. "Sometimes I hear from people that the board just does what it wants to do – that it doesn't really care what the members are doing.

"But this is not an exclusive board," he emphasizes. "This is a volunteer organization. That's how I got on the board. A few years ago I just said that if they needed someone to work on a committee, I'd be glad to help. Here I am, 10 years later, serving as president. If you want to help and be involved, we'll find a way for you to be involved. I want to make sure the membership understands that. Feel free to offer your help and we'll make you a part of the organization."

David was elected to the WGCSA board of directors in 1994. He served on various committees, organizing summer golf events and educational programs. He was elected secretary, treasurer, and vice president before being elected president in November of 2001.

Another goal of the new president is to determine who will do the "busy work" of the association. "As individual members running golf courses, we don't have the time to do much of the busy work, like putting

together the directory, getting mailings out," David explains. "Right now we work very closely with the Wisconsin State Golf Association, and we have a great relationship with them. But we're to the point where we have to decide if we're going to ask them to take on more responsibility and pay them for that, or if we're going to hire somebody as a part-time employee."

## **More a business, less a game...**

In what direction does David think his profession is heading? "Golf is quickly becoming more of a business and less of a game. I think all superintendents are going to have to recognize that," he answers. "Some years you're going to be asked to make financial cuts in order to help the whole club, especially at the daily-fee clubs. In the past, private clubs may have been able to spend what they planned and then have the member-

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ship share the cost, but that is quickly changing. If the money isn't coming in, cuts have to be made and superintendents must be willing and able to do that.

"And we're seeing more management companies come into the mix. I think they're there for business reasons, not for the game of golf," David continues. "This change is not always for the better. It's important that employers keep a balance of, 'golf is a great game' and 'golf is a business.' If you no longer have a game that's fun to play, you're going to lose business. You're going to see participation go downhill as customers get frustrated."

And what does David believe are the greatest challenges affecting golf course superintendents? "I really see more restrictions on water and chemical usage," he answers, adding that this is not necessarily a bad thing, but a reality. "It's so expensive for the chemical companies to get products on the market for such a small industry like ours. So we're going to see fewer new products coming out."

"And right now a lot of existing products are undergoing review at the EPA," he adds. "A lot of them aren't going to be available to us after the review because it's just too expensive to do the testing that's required to keep those products on the market for golf courses. What's most helpful to us is when we can piggyback with a product that's good for the agricultural industry

which is working with huge amounts of acreage."

Restrictions on water haven't really hit Wisconsin yet; they're more of a reality it states like Arizona where there just isn't enough water. "Water's becoming more of a commodity, and fresh water for irrigating courses is going to be hard to come by in some states," David points out. "Some courses in the south are recycling water from waste water treatment plants and are irrigating with effluent water. This adds to new challenges for the superintendents because this water tends to have a higher concentration of salt and other deposits."

Although Wisconsin has not seen major water restrictions, David applauds ways to reduce water usage. "Many courses are adding areas of native plants that they're not watering or mowing. They're just letting it grow long if it's out of play," he points out. "There's no reason to have perfectly manicured turf from one edge of the course to another, especially in these out-of-play areas."

Courses are also putting in new irrigation systems, and David believes there's a need for golf courses to communicate to the public how these new systems will cut back on the amount of water used. "I think there's a misconception with the public that, if you put in a new irrigation system, you're going to use more water," he says. "But, really, with new systems that are correctly designed, you're going to put down less water. You can put down water where you need it the most and at lighter rates."

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**A county-owned course...**

David has been superintendent at Rolling Meadows – a 27-hole, county-owned course – since April of 1996. In 1997 he was also named general manager. “I do the budgeting. I do the advertising,” he explains. “Our golf professional operates the club house; he hires and manages the employees there. But his services are contracted out – he’s not a direct employee of the county. So I oversee his contract.”

For course maintenance, David has three full-time employees – a mechanic and two course assistants. In the spring and fall he hires six retired men. And in the summer he hires an additional five or six college or high school students, with the retired men cutting back their hours a bit.

“One of the things I try to do here is to hire one more guy than we need,” David explains. “That allows everyone to take off some time when they want to. For the students, it’s their summer vacation. They can work hard the days they’re here. But if they want to take a day off, it’s nice to be able to let them do that without facing any hardships in getting the work done.”

The course is owned by Fond du Lac County – the only golf course the county owns. “One of the challenges of my job is keeping the politics of county government from entering the golf arena,” he says. “Rolling Meadows is an enterprise fund, so we’re not tax supported. We have some leeway which other county departments don’t have. Our budget isn’t changed that often by the county board because the money we generate stays with the golf course. We also pay the county \$71,000 each year in lieu of property taxes. And any time a county department does some work for us, like the highway department paving a parking lot, we pay a pretty good price for that service.”

**Providing a public service...**

David knows that some people believe local governments shouldn’t be in the golf business. “All our competitors in the area probably wish we weren’t here,” he says. “But I believe one of the jobs of a county is to offer recreation to its residents. When Rolling Meadows was built in 1972, there was no other 18-hole public golf course in the area. The same was true when they expanded to 27 holes in 1996. So there’s a good reason the county did it. It’s a quality of life issue for a county to offer a golf course to its residents, just like it offers parks or recreation trails.

“Plus, as a golf course that supports itself, we are paying our own way. We’re not supported by tax payers. And our rates must reflect that,” he adds.

“One of the hardest things I do as general manager is setting golf rates,” David admits. “Municipal golfers want the lowest possible rate. But yet they also want

a good product. We have to balance those two. A lot of people feel like an increase in rates is a personal thing – they think we’re trying to discourage them from playing. But, as an enterprise fund, we need to match our revenue with our expenses. The way I come up with rates is pretty cut and dried. But increases are still hard to sell to our general customers. There’s a great need to talk to the people to get our ideas across.”

**His job history...**

Rolling Meadows is the fourth course at which David has worked. Born in 1966, he spent most of his childhood in Beaver Dam where his father sold building materials to the construction industry. His senior year in high school he got a job at Sunset Hills Golf Club in Beaver Dam. “I was the best dish washer in the club house, so they asked me to go outside for the summer and do maintenance work,” he remembers. “It was a pretty small operation. They had one greens mower and mowed greens every other day. They didn’t have a tee mower; they just mowed them with the fairway mower. We push-mowed around trees because they didn’t have a rotary mower. This was in the mid 1980’s, so it wasn’t that long ago.”



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After graduating from high school in 1984, David went to UW-Whitewater for two years where he majored in accounting. "But I decided I liked my summer job better," he recalls. "And I got an opportunity to be a superintendent – probably before I was ready – at Camelot Country Club in Lomira. So I dropped out of college.

"I like being outside," he says of his reasons for switching careers and taking the job at Camelot in 1988. "I like the independence of being out on my own on the course. I like the variety. Every day the weather is handing you something different."

In his first full-time golf job, the novice learned quite a bit from the club's owner, Don "Red" Roskopf. "He was a pretty involved owner," David points out. "At one time he did the superintendent job himself. It was just getting too much for him to do, so he hired me. I definitely wasn't ready to be a superintendent. I had only been a course employee in Beaver Dam. But he wanted somebody younger who would do the job his way. So I learned quite a bit from him."

He also attended the University of Massachusetts Winter Turf School from which he graduated in 1990.

**A difficult lesson...**

In May of 1992, David became the superintendent of Lake Windsor Country Club, a 27-hole course in Windsor. "That was a total disaster," David sadly recalls. "The owners at the time were in bankruptcy reorganization. They hired me with the idea of getting out of bankruptcy. But within a month I began to think they really wanted to be in bankruptcy. The way I saw it, they were just taking as much money out of the property as they could. Obviously, I didn't do a real good job of investigating the job before I took it. Otherwise I probably never would have gone there."

He left Windsor in November of 1993 and returned to Camelot where he stayed until the spring of 1996. "Camelot was for sale at the time," he explains. "With an ownership change, you never know what's going to happen, and I wasn't comfortable with that. Fond du Lac County was looking for a new superintendent for



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Rolling Meadows. They had just finished adding nine holes. I knew there was a lot more job security with a municipal course. I had an opportunity to become the general manager, not just the superintendent, within a year, so that was a step up. And this time I did a good job of investigating! I knew everything about the job before I took it."

Looking back on his golf career, David realizes that he probably learned the most at Lake Windsor. "It was education by fire," he says. "Because of the money problems, we had a very small staff and were trying to turn things around. It was cash and carry for everything, and we never knew when somebody might come and take back some equipment.

"And my second year there, in July of 1993, we had a flood which closed the course for 21 days," he continues. "We had some areas that were under water for 15 days. We had to recover quickly from that. We used busboys, dish washers and bar staff from the club house just to get back to order, to resod, and to prepare for fall play."

**Enjoys a job well done...**

For David, the biggest reward of being a golf course

superintendent is the satisfaction of knowing that you've done a job well. "We work independently a lot. Most superintendents are responsible for their property, however big or challenging it is," he explains. "At the end of the year, we can look back and know that we had many successes and made the improvements we wanted to make. I think that's the biggest reward."

When he's not working on the course, David spends most of his time with his family. His wife, Noelle, is an Early Childhood teacher for the Mayville school system. They have two children: Kayla, 10; and Andy, 8. "Our kids attend the Catholic School in Theresa, and I'm on the school board for that school," David points out. "That takes up more time than I thought it would.

"I enjoy reading," he adds. "A lot of times I'm just reading trade publications, but it's nice just to be able to sit down and read. I don't do a whole lot else besides work and following the kids around to their activities. There isn't a whole lot of spare time right now."

With his new role as president of the WGCSA, there will be even less spare time for David. But he'll be doing something he loves – working with and communicating with people who face the same challenges and rewards that he faces every day. ♣

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