



The Future of Golf and its Superintendents

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

So, where does the golf course superintendent go from here? After many years of progress, both personally and professionally, golf course superintendents everywhere should start asking themselves what the future might hold. Collectively and individually...what does the future have in store for us golf course agronomic types? Indeed...where does the great game of golf go from here? The golf industry, of which we are all a part, seems to be at a crossroads. Golf is not the hot sport that it was five or six years ago....rounds played at most public courses are flatlining, while private courses are finding it tough to fill the membership roster.

Worse yet, the golf headlines these days are just filled with negativity...courses going broke, being sold at a fraction of the initial investment. Hey!!! What a great time to jump in and buy a golf course!! Oops, almost forgot that nobody these days seems to want to offer financing to golf course investors. To look into the future, maybe we should review the past....

Those of us with some experience have seen and probably experienced firsthand the rise of golf over the last two decades. Those in my age group (mid-40's) broke into the superintendent ranks in the early 80's...as golf courses of all types were beginning to employ trained, professional superintendents.

Following the push to convert to the trained superintendent was the push to build golf courses anywhere and everywhere. This golf building boom paralleled the booming economy worldwide...and definitely led to lots of great employment opportunities for guys everywhere.

As we all now know...way too many golf courses were built during the 1990's...especially in the upscale public golf sector. This is news to absolutely nobody...but the deflation of the golf economy in the past three years has been hard news for many people.

Over the past twenty years, the value of the superintendent has continued to rise...as has his/her compensation. We all like to think that nowadays superintendents

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are as highly valued as our 'on property' colleagues of the PGA ranks. I think that some of that philosophy is simply window dressing.

Don't kid yourself, guys. Most PGA professionals still derive their income from various sources...which when totaled up blow right past a simple salary and benefits package. It's an economics term called diversification. This term can also be used to describe those savvy superintendents who copy their PGA buddies and in various ways diversify their incomes also!

What is the percentage of superintendents nationwide that outcompensate PGA professionals? Probably a very small number...maybe 20%. What is the percentage of PGA professionals that outcompensate their brothers in golf...the golf course superintendent? Probably about 80%...I'd guesstimate!

We can say that our profession has made enormous strides in twenty years...and we'd be stating the truth. But to think that the superintendent is considered the key man on the property is somewhat naive, I think. If we are so key, then we should be the guys pulling down six figure salaries and having the eight month contracts!

The art and science of being a golf course superintendent must expand its scope to include much more involvement in the business side of golf...especially these days. I am truly not sure of the details of the turfgrass curriculum at the U of I, UW-Madison, Penn State, or any of the other Big 10 schools...but I'll bet it's still pretty heavily weighted towards ag classes. Ferris State over in Michigan has a major called **Golf Course Management**...which on perception and promotion alone knocks the snot out of turfgrass graduates.

Who do you think is perceived to be more important in the eyes of golf course owners...a guy who has had lots of business training...which the PGA insists on before granting Class A status and knows how to make a golf operation profitable...or a guy who is really, really good at maintaining the course and keeping it beautiful and playable? The answer is definitely...in my twenty years of experience...the guy with all of that business training!

I really hope that today's turfgrass grads are getting a generous helping of business, accounting, and marketing classes tailored specifically towards the green industry. And I really applaud the GCSAA for starting down the road of having meaningful membership criteria through its PDI initiative. The day needs to arrive sooner rather than later when being a GCSAA Class A course manager carries the same weight or more than does the designation of PGA Class A golf professional.

And...by the way...each and every one of us is a golf course manager. We do not superintend...we manage...every day. Our national magazine is titled *Golf Course Management*...so obviously we should be Golf Course Managers...and part of the Golf Course

Managers Association of America.

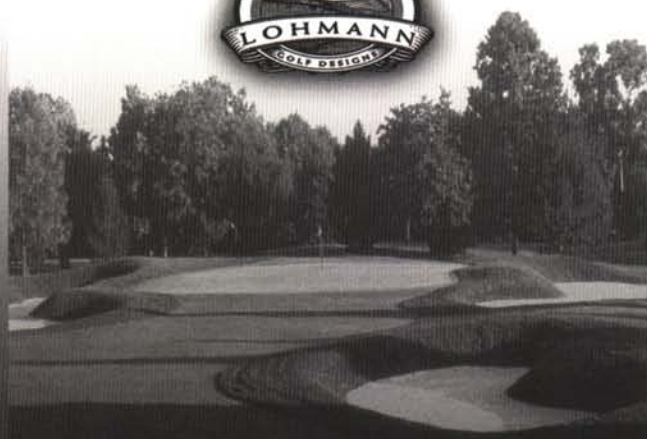
Golf is evolving and has been continually evolving over the years. Our involvement must evolve if we are to compete and take our proper place in the golf world. Maybe I am behind the times...but I think not. Superintendents are still perceived as **superintendents**...the very name itself evoking an image of the guy wearing a tool belt...in which there is certainly no shame.

And although our professional organizations...MAGCS, GCSAA, ITF, WGCSA, and the USGA Green Section all do a fantastic job helping us...each and every golf course superintendent must still prove his professionalism on a daily basis. Like the game itself, the future of the golf course superintendent is somewhat in question.

Although we are simple superintendents, and will most likely never be partaking in any expert panels at any 'golf summits'...can we not offer up a few simple observations on the future of the game/sport/business that provides not only our livelihood...but is our personal and professional link to this international sport that traverses the world?

Yes, we can...yes, we should...and yes, we must. ♻

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