



The Season of Minimal Inputs

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

The most difficult part of the season just concluding is that there's a realization that we must continue managing our golf courses just as tightly as possible...in order to survive and thrive in the world of public golf. We must continue to minimally input...in all management areas...and hold the line on all of the extras that make our daily golf course world so interesting.

Much of our past training and expertise to further and continually beautify our golf properties has to be tempered greatly because the funds to accomplish all of these projects may just not be there. The economic belt tightening seems to have affected all golf courses...which puts us all in the position of being a minimal input manager.

Actually, we have all been experiencing season after season of minimal inputs...it's an annual battle to produce a beautiful golf course with limited funds. Golf courses by their very nature do gobble up huge quantities of money. So we should all be somewhat

familiar with this idea of minimal inputs. It's just a little bit extreme these days...

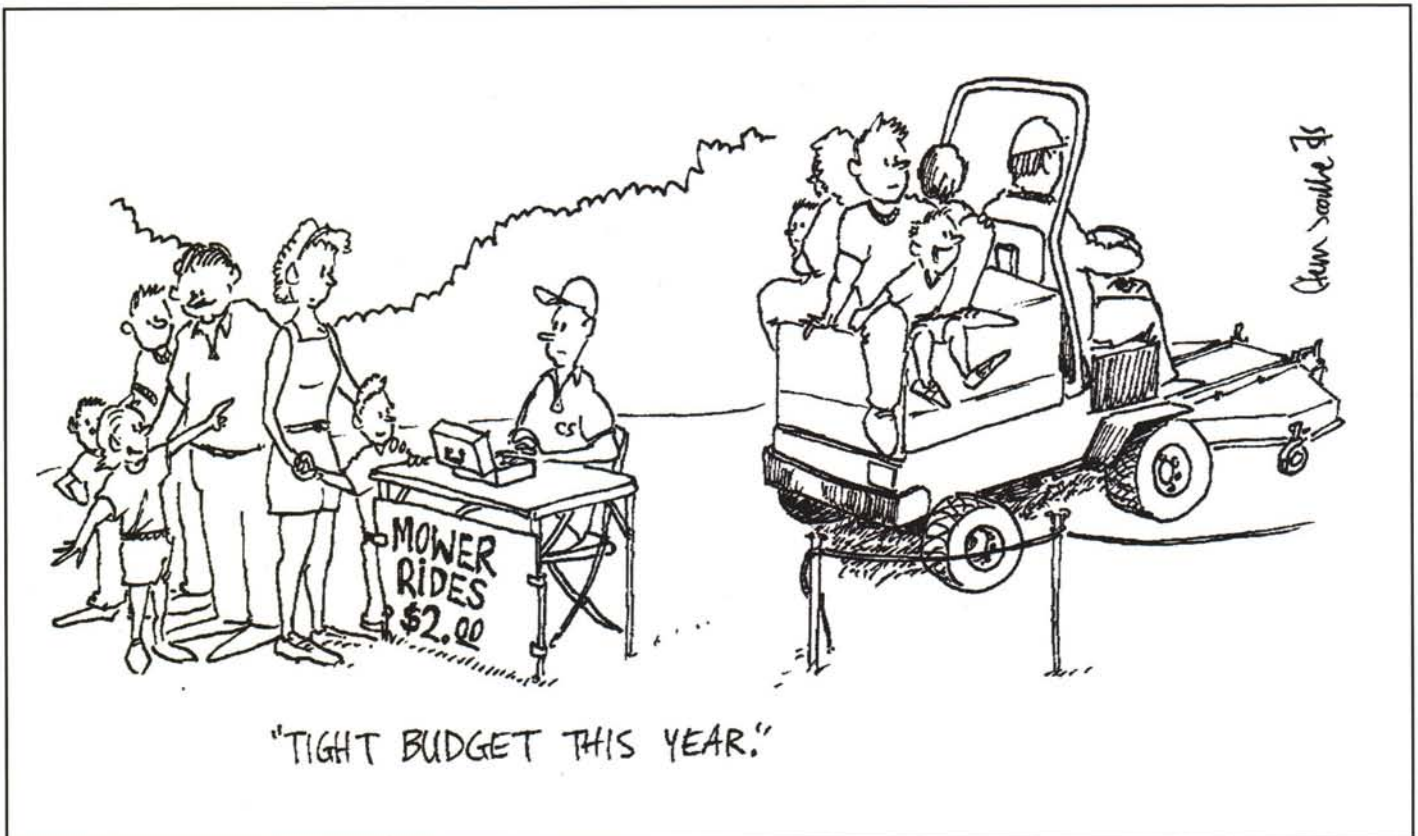
We fertilized our fairways just once in 2003...back in mid-May...and this fall they still look just great...

We sprayed fungicides on fairways five times this season (dollar spot)...three of which contained a single product...the other two containing a tank mix. In the past, almost always a tank mix.

We did spray for pythium twice on greens and tees only...never once even spot treating fairways...during a season so wet that our irrigation pumps were turned completely OFF for five straight weeks during late June through July. We only suffered a very minimal amount of fairway pythium damage which is long gone by now.

We have not given our golf course employees any raises whatsoever since the beginning of the 2001 season....

We did not apply a single ounce of insecticide to any part of this golf course...even though I know that



Aetenius and other species of white grubs love this place. Last two years...Merit on everything. This year...classic white grub damage in September and October on a few fairway and surrounds areas. Does anybody...besides me...even notice or care about the damage and question me about not spending the money? No mention...not one comment...not one peep! Had I sprayed and spent the \$3,500 on Merit and been at or over my Fert/Chem budget...then the grumbles would begin...loud and clear!

We have refused to spend budgeted \$\$\$ so many times this season that I get somewhat paranoid when we purchase anything for more than \$500...because there's always the certainty that our cash situation is pretty tight.

As an aside...I can now chuckle when I think back a few weeks and remember my anger upon reading an article...I believe in *Golfdom*...in which the topic was something like "How Savvy, Veteran Superintendents Save \$\$\$\$ in Tough Times". I paraphrase now as I quote one savvy dude who made the ultimate politically correct statement when he said... "I would never

cut back on anything that would directly affect the safety or the quality of the turf on my golf course."

Who's he kidding?! The above statement is pure crap...in my humble opinion! That sort of statement is simply good fluff that green chairmen, club presidents, and owners of golf courses want to hear...when the fact is that in order to make any significant golf course budget cuts...a lessening of fertilizer, chemical, or plant protectant inputs is certainly part of the belt tightening formula.

Any superintendent who actually cuts everything else...wages, course landscaping, course projects...without touching the \$\$\$ spent on fert and chem...is an idiot. Fertilizer and chemical purchases are among our biggest ticket items...and if this little course in north central Illinois is cutting back ...then so are tens of thousands of other golf courses nationwide.

Course officials everywhere need to know that by doing this...we all cut back on the margin of safety and skate a little bit closer to the thin ice of turf decline, decay or destruction that can cause a big lessening in playing conditions.



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Our saving grace is that usually problems arise somewhat slowly...can be dealt with...and the problem disappears. Our other saving grace is that we all have the talent to rescue our courses should the ice begin to break up underneath us...

Even though our little golf course has bounced back remarkably well in '03...and our total income is up over 11% as compared to a year ago...it's also remarkably clear that the name of the game for the next few years is to run a tight ship...do to the golf course only what's absolutely necessary...and further become a superintendent who is judged more and more on his ability to financially control the inputs.

The biggest pests that I control these days are those truly pesky, irritating rectangles of paper called invoices. We are, more than ever, willing to tolerate pests of the agronomic variety in the sometimes irrational quest to eradicate those pests of the financial variety!

We are concluding a season of minimal inputs...at this golf course...in which the focus is only minimally on golf course quality and almost totally on controlling inputs and costs.

The season just concluding saw such an emphasis on controlling purchases that we decided repeatedly to forego necessary and normal agronomic and horticultural expenditures which would have made a difference in the appearance and playability of this golf course. The difference in quality that results in higher expenditures has to be judged now, as the season of minimal inputs concludes.

As much as it's universally understood that high quality playing conditions attract golfers...it's clear that most public golfers won't notice reductions in spending...down to that certain invisible line. Beyond that, golfers will notice a drop off in playing conditions. Logically, if they do notice, they should take their public golf patronage to some other course. The trick is to always stay on the positive side of the line.

I do understand that in the short run...minimal inputs combined with some really good, benign weather over the past two seasons have permitted us to skate by. I also realize that strong forces, mainly summer weather, may force us to return to some of our past practices.

But, once budget cuts are made...just try and get them reinstated. If your golf course has survived and still looks pretty much identical to the one upon which you spent an additional \$25,000...say goodbye to the fert and chem funding. Maybe that \$\$\$ can reinvent itself as funding for course projects?? Didn't think so.

I look out over this golf course bathed in October sunshine and nocturnal moonlight...and realize that it looks absolutely great...and that we have spent considerably less on course maintenance than I think

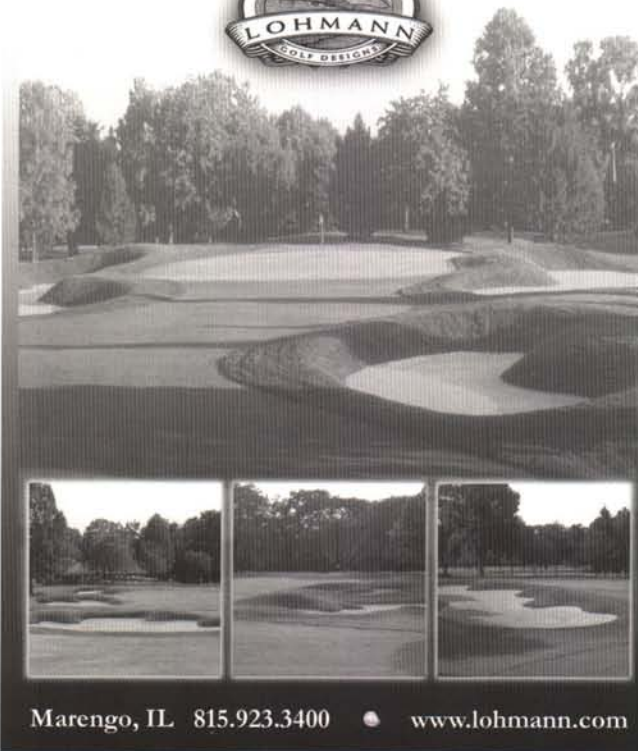
this golf course deserves. But, we spend what we can afford to spend...in all management areas. The fact that the funding reductions somewhat reduce the level of career challenge is really of no importance...and in fact, the challenge really is to still provide the playing conditions and improve the golf course over the next few years.

As this superintendent approaches budget time, the season of minimal inputs looms large in my mind. There are so many things that I want to continue to do here...but the reality just may be another season or two of only the basics. Sort of a sobering thought, actually. But not a depressing one. I'd be depressed without that big, old golf course out there west of town.

My mission still is to provide excellent playing conditions, further improve Nettle Creek, and maintain our reputation as the best damn golf course in Erienna Township! My other mission is to continue providing for my family and build a bit of wealth.

So...as my wife commented upon reading this... "Gee, sounds like your Nettle Creek saga continues!" How true. ♣

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