



The \$30.00 Golf Course

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

During the entire month of May...we are the \$30.00 golf course. Depending on the time of year, time of week, and even the time of day...our pricing drops slightly below \$30.00 and climbs up during the summer to as high as \$49.00. We are definitely not up in the big leagues charging \$75-\$100...nor do we want to be there.

We are in a location in which anything west of us (more rural) charges much less...and anything east/northeast of us (ChicagoLand) generally charges much more... Golfers from the suburbs of Chicago think that we're a real bargain and drive to get here...while lots of the locals think that we're too expensive and patronize us only once in awhile.

Generally speaking though, being a \$30 golf course definitely limits what we can do with this big, very spread out 190 acre golf property. Almost all privately owned public courses are in this same boat...we all provide a quality golf course playing experience...but only to a certain level. Beyond that...it's just too much money being spent for that last 20% of quality.

We can provide high quality playing surfaces...not terribly high quality sand bunkers...and let certain things slide that would certainly not be tolerated at a private club. I see lots of things daily that make their way onto a written 'to-do list'...but never get accomplished...or even attempted.

I've been cursing out the dandelions and the seeding *Poa* for two weeks now...with no real progress in addressing either situation. I've been wanting to renovate about 6-7 acres of old wildflower area/fine

fescue area...and convert to 'Nebraska' switchgrass for quite a few weeks now. Between these very windy spring conditions and the desire on my part to curtail myself a little bit...I'm hesitating!

My spring fever has us involved in lots of projects which need to get completed without killing my budget...after which possibly we can attempt a prairiegrass reclamation project. I'd really like to regrass these Penncross greens into one of the newer bents...but for our level of golfer these Penncross greens are probably just fine.

On the other hand...a good superintendent never has to wait for ownership or membership to suggest changes to the course...he/she has already thought it through and makes rec-

ommendations before the board or ownership even realizes that there is or was a problem!

Our maintenance staff of 8-9 guys gets stretched and pulled in all sorts of directions...putting out fires on a daily...even hourly basis. Our guys are already being limited to 7.5 hours/day and one weekend AM shift...giving them about 40-42 hours per week @ \$7-8 per hour...no health insurance, or retirement contribution, or raises in pay. Lots of people that work here really do live on the financial edge. We are a totally weather dependent, \$30.00 public golf course...watching our pennies as we go.

These guys work March 1-October 31...which gives them four months annually in which they really struggle. And so who



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do you think that they all come to for that small cash loan to help them survive another winter? Don Patricio...that's who! And...for the record...I really do not like being considered anybody's benefactor, or *patron*.

All of these interesting factors make up the \$30.00 golf course. In fact, this \$30.00 golf course operation is a good study in sociology. We are multi-cultural, have rich folks and poor folks interacting daily, have a strong, sometimes volatile mix of opposite sexes, have different age groups, and distinctly different education levels. It all makes for some interesting daily happenings.

The \$30.00 golf course does see lots of common folk...either working to survive or out chopping it up on the course. There are very

few really talented golfers out here...but lots of average Joes.

Average Joes think that this place is always in really good condition...which is exactly what every superintendent reading this hears on a daily basis. I usually reply that the golf course owner needs to hear those little bits of positive reinforcement...as if that will loosen those salary purse strings. Ha!!

And while we all appreciate the compliments...don't you really want to ask them why they continue to patronize those other goat ranches...when this place could really use all of that extra business?

The average \$30.00 golf course just keeps rolling along...trying to survive...and never really seeing profitability. In fact, I'd pay good money to somehow learn all of the

tricks towards being truly profitable. I'm half contemplating letting these fairways go to hell...let them dry down this summer...and thereby eliminate all fungicide/insecticide/fertilizer applications. "So there," I'll say... "here is the true path to profitability. Let your fairways turn to crap...and let the average Joes have at it."

The only problem with that philosophy is that we'd have to then drop down and become a \$20.00 golf course...which would present us with a whole different set of golf course sociological problems.

Even for me...dropping down to a lower golf course conditioning level would be tough...unless it would prove to be profitable...and I was the golf course owner...and not the superintendent. ♻



"I HAVE ALLERGIES."