



Keeping Pace

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

Keeping pace, as we normally understand it, refers to that very noble effort of a few years back in which busy public courses sought to teach public linksters a strong measure of golf etiquette...to teach them to play 'ready golf'...to teach them the concept of 'keeping pace'...with the preceding groups and with the four-hour clock.

Like many other public courses...we have a series of signs that we installed in those days, and still use along the route that golfers follow here that state 'Keep Pace Today!' Our other version

states 'Are You Keeping Pace? A Four-Hour Round Equals 13 Minutes Per Hole!'

So...for many seasons now I've been traveling this course letting these signs speak to me on an almost daily basis. Most days I let them ask me if I'm keeping pace on relatively simple matters like progress of the crew out ahead of the golfing horde...or keeping pace as far as progress of course conditioning versus the amount of work yet to be done this week!

In late May...after a particularly frustrating management group

meeting...in which the hot topic was upcoming summer golf pricing and lackluster golf revenues year-to-date...my signs spoke to me in a new and ironic way. The sign between the fifth and sixth holes innocently asked me 'Are You Keeping Pace?' In my agitated state...I blurted out... "Hell no, we're not keeping pace...and you damn well know it!"

Well...that was May and it's now August...and we're still not keeping pace with our budget and our finances in general. Not keeping pace. Much to my

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dismay...once again the actual revenues year-to-date at this golf course are not keeping pace with our budgeted amounts for 2004.

After all of the off season budget meetings, planning sessions, and optimistic talk about how 2004 would be different...and better...and yield more financial fruit...it is no better.

In fact...our financial situation...in the humble opinion of this simple, yet very veteran superintendent...is worse today than a year ago when the economy was supposedly worse than present day August 2004.

Our total income through August 9, 2004 is a very substantial chunk less than at the same point in 2003. Some of the shortage is in membership sales...lots of good golf course choices for the public out there. Some of the shortage is merchandise sales...and some is due to less food and beverage sales. But, the critical part of the shortage is due to a decline in green fees, cart fees, and outing revenues.

In our off season planning...our ownership expressed their view that green fee discounting is a dead end street and that we should be reestablishing a base greens fee price of around \$40 weekdays and \$50 weekends. All other special pricing (twilight/early bird) would be based on these standards...emphasizing little or no summer discounting!

As a result, our \$30 weekday May golf course became a full \$40 weekday June golf course...which equates to a full 33% price increase versus the month beforehand. And when comparing to the summer of '03...we went up again a full one third. Last summer...by the way...we were packing them in at \$30 weekdays/\$25 for seniors.

So...understanding that Golf Retailing 101 says that raising weekday greens fees by 33% isn't the most intelligent way to attract

the basic public golfer...what's up with all of this stupidity?

During the meeting referred to at the beginning of this story...I expressed my views and opinions, albeit a bit belatedly. The initial company response to my heated outburst was that I should have expressed these views in February during planning time...while it was further stated that we needed to give this new pricing strategy some time. My strong feeling is that yes we did decide on stronger pricing over the winter...but that it became quite evident during May that such a huge increase in weekday summer pricing was not wise. Our weekend pricing went up only modestly for '04...but it did reach the magic \$50 mark for prime time weekend AM tee times. That was only a \$1.00 increase versus '03...but drew notice for being so expensive also.

After suffering through a rainy May...and a quiet June and July...it's becoming quite clear that our full price strategy has resulted in golf income that is far behind budget and way behind last year. What a huge and total surprise. I think I'll go crow

hunting to provide some nourishment for our overconfident young golf professional and our stubborn owner. They should both be quite hungry these days... Then...knowing that we've all 'shot ourselves in the foot'...my next stop would be WalMart to buy ourselves some bandages and clean socks!

I actually heard this statement of total ignorance and denial during our heated session..."Where else are they going to play?"...as if we have some sort of monopoly on public golf out here in corn country USA! Pointing out vehemently that there are approximately 10-12 new public courses within a 75 mile radius fell on deaf ears also.

Needless to say...it's been hard to understand, hard to accept, and a bit tough to see such a quiet, placid, empty golf course. This veteran superintendent always watches the first tee, checks the computer tee sheet, senses easily just how much golfers are/are not pushing us along during AM course prep, and knows full well how many \$\$\$ equals a poor, good, or great day...and definitely knows



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how to read an income statement and yes...the full monthly financial statement. He/she knows what must be done to keep pace.

It is as easy for me to see why we are behind financially and to somewhat second guess the situation...as it is difficult for the other decision makers to admit and promptly correct their mistake.

Before each and every other golf season that I've been involved with down here...we would decide on very moderate, palatable price increases...about two-three dollars...or maybe no increase at all. We would decide on green fees, member fees, food and especially beer/beverage pricing...at all times thoroughly discussing and agonizing over proposed increases.

Why do we then...in '04... suddenly feel that we are so justified in asking them to pay so much more for the privilege of playing our 'so expensive to operate golf course?' Do we not understand that the public golfer doesn't know...doesn't understand...and doesn't care about our operating costs? Did we forget that 80% of our clientele have to drive a considerable distance to get out here and that gasoline in early summer '04 was \$2.00/gallon and expected to go much higher? Do we really believe that the average weekday public golfer doesn't golf on a budget? Don't we all know that a quite high percentage of these golfers look for golfing value? Doesn't the term value refer to at least partially to the concept of price?

And...in a twist that hasn't been lost on this veteran observer...'superior customer service' was all but guaranteed at the onset of the season...as a sort of justification for increasing prices. During winter discussions...service and providing the NCCC golf experience became a reason for increasing prices...which by early August has waned to a sort of struggle to hold it all together for our golf staff. The service and dedication have declined over the

summer...but the increased price still remains.

Our past golf professionals also promised superior customer service...and to a point and for a time...they provided it. Then...at about this time of year...the burnout begins and everything suffers.

So...as our higher prices keep us falling further and further off the pace that our budget demands...how do we adjust? We watch expenses closely...and try to convince others that September 1 would be a great time to institute Fall '04 Special Pricing...and thereby salvage part of our income season.

During these tough times is when real leaders...in any golf endeavor...begin to grind it out. Veteran superintendents and golf professionals know how to keep

things on track and focus on the business...on the golf course...and not let personal difficulties get in the way. They know that overcoming these obstacles makes them stronger...and smarter...and tougher.

The neophytes must learn quite rapidly that there is nowhere to run and hide...and there is no giving up. If they want to build a reputation...a resume...a career...and a family...whether in golf or any other line of work...they must stand and fight. They need to learn how to lead...as all of us learned during our formative years. They need to learn how to finish the task for this current year.

Then next year...if they still want to be in this business...they'll have a little bit of experience in keeping pace. ♣

