

Stress and the Golf Course Superintendent/Basic Survival

by William Smart, IBM Country Club, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

There seems to be two general types of stress and anyone involved in golf course management will have experienced them sometime in his career. In fact, one is rather common and is more or less present every season.

I'll call the first type **Seasonal Stress**. It usually happens mid-season and gets progressively worse as the days get hotter and the play gets heavier. It can be described as a general uneasiness, being uptight and tense. As one of my friends puts it, "You're not having any fun." "There is no specific problem, in fact everyone is complimenting you on the condition of the course. What is the problem here? Why do you feel so down when all around are giving you strokes? I can sum it up in one word - Attitude. You think like a Golf Course Superintendent while the feedback you get is from people who think like (of course) a golfer.

Put on a pair of golf shoes and walk up to the first tee... as a typical golfer. You have been looking forward to this for days... a day with some friends away from your responsibilities. Everything looks soft, fresh, green and beautiful. You don't notice that the hedge around the first tee needs trimming, the crabgrass on the tee is in the two-leaf stage, the divot marks, or the infestation of clover. You look down the fairway and mentally pick out a landing area for your first shot as you take a few divots with your practice swings. The drive is not too great, but it is on the fairway and sitting pretty. You never notice that the fairway head hasn't been working properly and that the turf is brownish, and that straw-colored pock marks indicate the presence of some disease or other. Your thoughts are on the green, the traps and the location of the pin. Your shot is short and in the sand and as you blast up and out, you couldn't care less that the trap needs edging and the once white beach sand is the color of topsoil. The ball is on the collar, should you chip or putt, is the break to the right, left, is it downhill, up, fast or slow, do it hard or easy? With all this running through your thoughts, you have little time or desire to check out the maintenance of the area... and as a layman, you don't notice that the mow lines are curved instead of straight, one unit on the greens mower is not

adjusted properly, and the operator has nicked the collar for the third straight day. Your foursome putt out and walk off the green, leaving behind two unfixed ball marks.

Why do you suppose that so many ball marks are not fixed? Or divots replaced? It is because the golfer is thinking about the game of golf, not the golf course. He is thinking about the next shot, what club to use, why did the last drive fade. It always mystified me that I saw so many divots laying around when in fact, most golfers I saw did replace them. I finally realized that it was my presence that prompted their action.

The whole thrust of this is that your attitude about the course will be markedly different than that of the average golfer. I can recall the local district attorney saying to me, "Bill, the course is in great shape." He never noticed that the green we were standing on was wilting badly in the ninety-plus heat and in fact I was hand watering it to save its life.

The general overall playability of a course is important to a golfer. He does not notice the technical turf problems that scream out to the superintendent day in, day out. We tend to get so caught up with the bad stuff, we overlook the acres of good stuff. A buddy of mine said, "If I could only cut out the junk and put it in one corner, no one would ever notice it." The truth is

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that no one was paying any attention anyway. Did you ever hear that old saying, "When in trouble and in doubt, run in circles, scream and shout."? Well, it doesn't work, everybody else is so busy running and shouting in their own circles, that you can't get their attention.

I remember my Pro going on and on about the condition of a particular course... it was just fantastic. I had to go check it out for myself because on its best day it had never impressed me. It was just as I remembered it... hard and brown. It was difficult to tell the fairways from the rough. I realized that for a Pro, it probably played well, and he scored well. That is one of the key points to the Pro/Supt relationship which is not always the greatest. You feel very personally about your golf course, he feels personally about golf. It is not the same.

It is certainly your job to know your course warts and all. However, there never was the perfect golf course and there never will be; it is just the nature of the beast. There are too many things over which you have no control. A desire for the perfect golf course could be termed a mild form of insanity.

One strong defense against stress is to enlist the help of the golfer with a good Public Relations program. How do you do this? It has been talked about and written about for years. None of what I heard or read was my style. I do not give talks to the garden club, wear a three-piece suit, attend all the club functions, or greet everyone on the first tee on Saturday or Sunday. They have all been suggested and might help, if you are so inclined. There is an easier and more rewarding way. It is to talk to the golfer. Many turf men treat the golfer as the good and the bad, the old and the young, the men and the women, and anyone in between. My PR time (I ran away before I knew better) with the members is the most productive part of my day. I can state from experience that ninety percent of all the feedback you get will be positive and give you a great feeling. With all that good stuff, you should be able to handle the ten percent negative. I can also say that if your attitude is positive

and light, you will win over most of the negative people.

A positive attitude will be reflected back from the person you are dealing with. Don't deal with negativism. I can remember being haunted for years because I refused to accept a compliment and let it go at that. A lady golfer was lavish in her praise and I thanked her and replied that I thought we were progressing nicely, but that I was concerned about the increasing clover in the fairways. She looked at me in amazement, "Clover? It's nice, I have a lot in my lawn." I told her that golf courses consider it a weed and it did not provide a good lie for the ball. She said, "I never knew that; it does make the fairways look blotchy, and the ball does not settle down in it." That one person spread the word. I think she must have talked to every golfer in the club. Within one week the membership were all very concerned with the clover "problem." It ended up being the biggest complaint of the season, after cup placement. The moral of the story is don't provide ammunition for your stress factor. Along the same line, an officer in the Navy told me something I have never forgotten, "Never knock yourself; there are always plenty of others who are willing to do it for you."

About eighty percent of the golfers are not adamant about the condition of the course; they will usually accept conditions as they find them without too much fuss. They will respond well to your PR attempts. Ten percent will accept any conditions and just don't care enough to even think about it. They, too, will respond to a friendly "Hi" and a few pleasant words. The ten percent that are left you will really have to work on. This is the group that sometimes make you wish you had a nine-to-five job in an office. They are usually very verbal, fair-to-good golfers and communicate pretty well within the club and among themselves. It is not easy to convert chronic bitches, but it well worth the effort and everyone should keep working at it. Select the loudest and strongest and project your public relation to him - or her, as is sometimes the case. I won one over by the simple expedient of sitting down and having lunch with him. I ruined my lunch and my digestion, but with that start, he is now one of my biggest boosters. Seems his biggest complaint was that no one listened to him—meaning me, the Pro, or officials of the club. That was easy, I can listen like crazy. Of course I have to put up with a five-minute discussion every time I see him, but that is a small price to pay for his good will. He has also done my PR work for me within the chronic bitching group. One really needs the support of this group when we encounter the other type of stress.

For want of any other name, I will call it **Disaster Stress**. This happens when your mistake is very obvious and right out there for all to see, and can't be passed off as a natural event - such as weather or disease.

I had one happen to me in mid-season, the worst time. Early on, there is a good chance that active growth will get you out of trouble. Late in the season, the cool nights, warm days and fall rains are very forgiving. Then too, you are doing renovation work anyway.

Before the current pesticide regulations, we used some pretty potent chemicals. I used sodium arsenate as a total kill on weeds in the sand traps. It was cheap, killed in a few hours, and also soaked through my sneakers and inflamed the skin under my toenails. My casual attitude about this has changed along with our chemicals. After one of these sprays, I sent one of my summer college students to rinse out the tank. In view of what happened, it is ironic that he was a chemistry major. My instructions were to spray the small amount of material in the tank into the brushy edge of the woods on the way to the pumphouse, rinse the tank out, then refill with water for the next use. A day or two later, I added fungicide to the tank and sent two men to apply it to the greens. The chemistry major had not rinsed the tank, merely filled it. The residue chemical in the tank was enough to brown out the first nine greens spayed, which happened to be the back nine. Upon refilling, the dilution rate was so high, the rest of the greens were not harmed. The damage was evident the next day, and it was not hard to figure out what had happened. I called the Greens Chairman at once. He voiced his primary concern in the first question. "Does it

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affect the putting?" (Again, notice the golfer's interest in playability). I replied, "No, but they look like hell." He asked when they would recover. With a knot in my stomach and a lie in my teeth, I said a week or two. He said not to worry, easy for him to say.

I was worried at the reaction of the club in general. Much of it was similar to that expressed by the Chariman and quite a few voiced their concern about my feeling badly about the damage to "your beautiful greens." I received one hundred percent support from the club. I don't like to think what might have happened if my relations with the club had been poor. Factually, I have seen many more jobs lost due to poor interpersonal relations than due to poor work performance. To put it in very basic terms, If They Love You, You Can Get Away With Just About Anything.

Due to the nature of our work, our personal stress period usually coincides with the stress period for turf. Roughly the one hundred days from June first to September. It happens to be September 8 this year. The work load and the golf are at their peak, and you have the heat and the summer help to contend with. However, it is a fairly short period of time compared to many jobs that have no seasonal limitations. One can reduce the margin for error effectively in the one hundred days by limiting the activity to the absolute basic grooming necessary for the grooming of the course. You can determine what is basic by asking one question - Will it benefit my golfer in the short term? Raking traps will, edging traps will not, moving greens will, aerifying will not, mowing rough will, applying weed killer will not. That is not to say that all these long term projects are not desirable, they are... but in their proper time, not in the Hot One Hundred. Most golf courses are geared for maintenance and that in my opinion is what we should do - maintain. Do the projects in the spring and fall, get down to basics in the summer, and lower your stress factor by at least half.

I lost the center of the tenth green when I was playing at carpenter - I didn't check the course and see the puddle that the

night water man left for the July sun. Incidentally, night watering should be a thing of the past... dawn is much more efficient, if dealing with a manual system. Watering is certainly basic and the key to summer survival; yet try to find any written material on it.

A good friend was not paying attention to basics when he almost lost his job spending three days putting in a blacktop parking lot for his club. It was his idea and he saved the club two thousand dollars. The course was very shabby that weekend and the Greens Chairman had to put up with a lot of irate golfers. Do you know what he told my buddy? "I don't give a damn how much money you saved the club; your responsibility is maintaining the golf course, not building parking lots" - and he was right.

A good assistant can go a long way toward keeping the stress factor low. I find that the interchange during a discussion helps me sort out my own thinking. It is not necessary that the partner be an "expert." Experts tend to be locked into conventional solutions and answers. Some lucky people can bounce ideas off their best friend or their mate. Some very lucky people have this one person. I talk a lot to my assistant. Sometimes I am amazed at what I say, and I think, I didn't know that I knew that! Not all my ideas are winners, either.

The hectic pace of our lives contributes to stress—so breaking the stride might help. If you have been working seven to thirty, work down to noon for a week or so. My crew likes early—we beat the traffic (IBM traffic is like the L.A. Freeway, only on two lane blacktops) and the major part of our work is done before we see a golfer. We head them off at the pass, as big Duke Wayne would say.

One of the best stress easers is to call ahead and have lunch with a fellow Superintendent - then tour his spread. If you are having a problem in a special area, see how he is coping with it. If he is coping, find out how, pick his brain. If he is not having any success in that area, and as often happens, he is worse off

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ASSOCIATES' CORNER

Reed's Sales and Service

The image of a bearded man, trekking across the prairie with a gray whetstone carried on his back, comes to mind as Harvey Reed describes the way his father started in business 30 years ago.

"He was sort of a modern version of the guy who went around sharpening knives," Reed said. "But instead of carrying the sharpening stone on his back, my dad had his tools in the back of a truck."

Lloyd Reed was a dedicated worker, traveling door-to-door in his truck offering to repair broken engines or equipment, always ready to put a keen edge on any blade, from a pen knife to a lawn mower.

As his business outgrew the truck and garage, Reed moved into a little shop in 1956 and then people started bringing their lawn mowers to him. In the next five to six years the repair business grew steadily and Reed added an additional 225 sq. ft. of space to his shop and put an employee or two on the payroll. In 1961 son Harvey joined the business, followed the next year by the other son, Dan. In another year Reed was able to add a major manufacturer's line to the business, and with the addition of Lawn-Boy mowers on the floor, the once door-to-door traveling repairman became known as Reed's Sales and Service.

The growth has steadily continued, making the total space today exceeding the size of the original shop by a thousand square feet. The business Lloyd Reed began nearly three decades ago is now owned and operated by sons Harvey and Dan. The employees number 13 and the business still operates with its founding principles: provide quality service and fill the needs of customers in Minnesota.

Dale Walesheck is the new on the road in store salesman. Dale calls on golf courses, cemeteries, cities and parks and corporations. Dale sells R&R products, Lawn-Boys String Trimmers, Kaye Corporation Products...almost everything under the sun to keep you going. Dale believes in fast and dependable service. Charles Brooks is the

heart of the company, working in engine parts. Charlie handles Briggs and Stratton, Kohler, Tecumseh and various other lines, providing quality service to accounts. Keeping everything together is of course our secretary Merance Peiffer who has been with Reed's for 13 years.

Reed, who began his career with the business by repairing lawn mowers back in the early 60's, is a firm believer in the service schools that manufacturers have set up. It is there that Reed employees get some of the most valuable training they ever receive in repair and servicing.

While lawn mowers account for a big share of Reed's profits, he readily admits that, "We couldn't make it just selling and repairing only lawn mowers." Another aspect of the business, managed by brother Dan, centers around industrial and automotive tool distribution.

Still, Reed's Sales and Service had its beginnings with lawn mower sharpening and repair, and that continues to be its mainstay.

"After being in business as long as we have, we've built up a good reputation in the community," Reed said. "A lot of our customers knew my dad 20 years ago and they keep coming back. The people who know us tell others and we keep getting customers coming in from farther and farther away."

than you, it is only human that this will make you feel just a little bit better. There are no secrets in the art of Greenkeeping - but it is an art, not an exact science, with each turf manager operating just a bit differently than the guy down the road. So your neighbor's routine might be a revelation to you. No one man knows it all, but collectively, all the answers are there if you keep looking.

If planning and thinking are giving you the yips... try going to the course - alone - just before dusk. The turf always looks better at sundown, the golfers are gone or going, and there is no one to say, "Phone for you," or, "What do you want me to do now?". Put a clipboard on the seat of a golf car and ride the course the way a golfer would play. Write down whatever comes to mind - put your brain in neutral and let it think freely. I did this once, picked up the pad and wrote, "This course SUCKS." It gave me a chuckle the next day. You can take this ride at dawn too, but it is not the same, the day is ahead of you, and you will eventually be frustrated by the daily routine and the golfers.

I have written of stress as I know it. Most of it is mental and certainly a lot of it is self-induced. If you think there is a problem, then it is a problem. You always have the option of deciding you will do your best and it is not a problem - then it won't be one.

The stress of a major tournament must be overwhelming, yet I had one of the top men in the country tell me he hated it while it was going on and sort of missed the commotion after it was over. The experts in the field of human emotions say that a certain amount of stress is good for you. Personally, I don't need it, and can live very well without it, thank you.