

Golf Course Superintendents' 10 Deadly Problems

Inability to communicate is the major sin committed by those involved in golf course maintenance, according to United States Golf Association agronomists.

Agronomist James Connolly of Wilimantic, Conn., gave a talk entitled The Top 10 Sins of Golf Course Maintenance during the recent Maine Golf Turfgrass Conference and Show in Portland.

The Top 10 list resulted from a survey of USGA agronomists conducted last year at the request of a group of golf course owners. Twelve of the 14 USGA Green Section agronomists responded. Architectural comments were eliminated from the survey. But Connolly conceded architectural shortcomings—both outright architectural errors and outdated features like too small greens or tees—were among the major problems superintendents face daily. Architectural errors would have ranked somewhere in the middle if they had been included.

The responses were regional. Western agronomists sometimes saw problems where their Eastern counterparts said none existed and vice-versa.

Just three of the top 10 sins were agronomic. Of the remaining seven, some are within the superintendent's control and others are not.

Following are the Top 10 sins with the number of votes each received in parentheses.

1. Communications and public relations (10). "Poor communications is probably the No. 1 fault in every industry," Connolly said.

For the superintendent it involves daily communication with staff, newsletters, playing golf with members, personal image, keeping informed on issues, handling the media and attending meetings.

It also involves communication by others, for instance club officials who may have trouble communicating their wishes to the superintendent.

"You have to listen," Connolly said, "Too often we're thinking about what we're going to ask next rather than listening to the other person."

2. Overwatering (9). Overwatering can result from a poor irrigation system, insufficient drainage, lack of knowledge, outdated equipment and pressure problems.

Compaction, impeded root growth, moss and algae, oxygen reductions, disease, erosion, maintenance changes, lost revenue, green speed and course closures are among the problems that can result.

"When you pump and you have that diesel engine fired up, you want to put out as much water as you can. So I can understand some of the problems in the past, but not today," said Connolly, adding that new systems help eliminate the water-while-you-can philosophy.

3. Fast green speeds (8). "Some of you probably immediately think USGA, USGA, Stimpmeter," Connolly said "You're right. The USGA did promote use of the Stimpmeter. Whether or not it was used properly depended on whose hands it fell into.

"The philosophy behind the Stimpmeter is sound. But we all know we all got a little crazy trying to deliver 10½- or 11-foot green speeds because of the perception that all courses had to be like those we saw on television. I can tell you that we (USGA) are more interested in environmental issues and maintaining healthy turfgrass than maintaining fast green speeds."

With environmental issues and the problems of maintaining healthy turfgrass looming, "that means only one thing, higher cutter heights," Connolly said.

The Stimpmeter was invented to check green speeds and keep them consistent throughout a course, the USGA agronomist said. The USGA recommends it be used only by the superintendent. Green chairmen shouldn't be allowed to use one without the superintendent's supervision, he said.

When the Stimpmeter was first invented in 1976, the fastest green speeds were 7½ feet, with an average range of 6 to 7½. Competition among courses and conditions at major tournament sites have fueled the engine for faster green speeds.

New equipment allows cutting heights of 1/8-inch and lower for faster green speeds. Lower fertilizer rates also lend added zip to putts.

Cutting heights are coming back up to 5/32 and even 3/16 of an inch, Connolly

said. USGA agronomists don't recommend mowing heights below 5/32-of-an-inch.

"Here's my recommendation. We change to metric and just confuse the hell out of everyone," Connolly cracked.

4. Pesticide use (7). A regional response. Eastern agronomists didn't see it as a problem. Westerners and Midwesterners did.

"That's a great example of how superintendents on the East Coast are more aware of the pesticide issue," Connolly said. "They take more precautions when applying pesticides and are more educated in the application of these products."

Misidentifying a disease and then applying pesticides on a panic basis was one of the concerns mentioned. Also listed were haphazard and broad-spectrum application without regard for integrated pest management as well as overmanaging with too much product to achieve superior conditions.

"I know several guys who left their jobs because they disagreed with applying pesticides at seven-day intervals regardless of what was out there. I commend those superintendents for taking a stand like that. And they've gone on to other excellent jobs," Connolly said.

5. Continuity of club officials (6). This included everything from being ignorant of maintenance techniques to being a constant headache.

"I know of a course where an official visited the superintendent every morning at 6 a.m. He would even come to the superintendent's house and sit there while his family was eating dinner," Connolly said.

He recommended officials spend at least three straight years on the board. Three years can be a long time with a difficult board member, the agronomist conceded. But perhaps he or she can be educated.

"It's an advantage in the long run to have people involved with what you're doing for more than one season. It's chaotic and self-destructive to have a quick change-over in these people," he said.

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10 Deadly Problems

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Only one agronomist said all club departments should be controlled by a general manager.

"There are very few qualified general managers who know your business and view their job as the monitoring of expenses. There are some clubs where the general manager is excellent. The Country Club of Brookline (Mass.) is an excellent example," Connolly said.

6. Pesticide storage and maintenance bunking (5). "Improper storage facilities are a big problem," Connolly said. "I've visited courses that have had pesticides stored in a wooden building by a stream. I said to the superintendent, 'You've got to do something about this.' He told me club officials told him to just wait until we get caught and then we'll do something."

"The mentality is just ridiculous. If you don't do something, you could be facing a stiff fine, and besides, it's just good stewardship."

7. Tree management (5). "Not cutting down enough trees is one of my main complaints," Connolly said.

Proper thinning, air movement and

keeping roots from competing with the turfgrass for space, nutrients and water were also noted.

All five tree management votes came from Eastern agronomists. It wasn't listed at all by those in the Midwest or West.

"They don't have as many (trees), I guess," Connolly said. "Although in the Northwest I know they have a tremendous amount."

Trees left in the wrong place, memorial trees planted here and there and trees located in the middle of a fairway affecting maintenance and playability were also mentioned.

8. Amount of play (5). This primarily involved too much play. Tee times from dawn to dusk simply leaves too little time for maintenance, Connolly said.

Other complaints included play beginning too early in the day, continuing during inclement weather, or lasting too late into the season. Holding too many outings for the course to handle was another concern.

9. Labor (4). Labor problems included too little help, lack of quality workers and management decisions to spend money elsewhere, even when the money for labor was available.

"A couple of years ago in the New York-New Jersey area you just couldn't get labor. First, we weren't offering enough money, and second, you couldn't find people who wanted to work on the golf course," Connolly remembered.

10. Equipment (4). This is frequently out of the superintendent's control. Some said they saw courses without enough equipment. At others the equipment was outdated. Still others had insufficient capital budgets for new equipment and lack of knowledge regarding the use or availability of new equipment.

"Of all the industries out there, golf course maintenance has to have some of the most innovative people for making do with what they have. Some of these guys take the junkiest piece of equipment and make it work. It's a compliment to the industry," Connolly said.

Sins coming up just short of the votes needed to make the Top 10 list included superintendents not spending enough time on activities other than course maintenance; inability to read soil tests; poor record keeping; inappropriately timed maintenance, and taking advice from the wrong people. —Peter Blais,

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Cut Off Office Complainers

We've all worked—or perhaps still do—with people who are constantly negative about their work and their life in general. They're the employees who always see the worst side of things, who complain about how badly things are going.

They're the official pessimists, and their unhappiness can, unfortunately, spread. When it does, morale gets murdered, productivity is undermined and the ranks will start to grumble.

One way to prevent the pessimists from doing too much damage is to give them as little to work with as possible. Don't allow griping sessions to get too long, or to happen too regularly (but don't stifle them completely, either).

If you're the one being griped about, double-check to be sure you're not at fault.

And, if you're irritated about the complainers, take a quick inventory to make sure you're not leading the way.

1991 MGCSA Monthly Meeting Sites

| Date | Location | Sponsor |
|-------------------------|---|------------------|
| Aug. 19 | New Richmond, Wis. MGCSA Championship (dinner) | Polfus Implement |
| Sept. 16 | Golden Valley/Oak Ridge Research Tournament (Dinner at Oak Ridge) | |
| Oct. 7 | Hastings (lunch) | R & W Golf Cars |
| November (first wk.) | Weather permitting, golf at Mankato | |
| November 20-21-22 | Annual Conference Northland Inn | |