



In Bounds

By Jack MacKenzie, CGCS
North Oaks Golf Club

Sorry I blew up! I get a charge out of players approaching me and confiding that I have had a very easy season to manage my turf. Of course I smile and give the usual responses about having a great crew, a wonderful architectural design to work with and reasonable temperatures in the months of June and July. But inside my anger boils, for these golfers have such very short memories.

They have forgotten the impromptu meeting I was invited to attend with the membership early in May to defend my "limited" agronomic skills and explain why the grass died upon the golf course over the winter. "Nobody else suffered as much as we did!" And, "Our greens are the worst in the state, not to mention the fairways. Do you know what you are doing Jack?" were the typical rumblings last spring. Well, I dodged that bullet by promising that soon the course would be back to normal, as soon as the soil temperatures warmed up that was.

Low and behold by mid-June my track was looking as great as everyone else's. Soil temperatures had become optimum for seed germination and recovery. I was suddenly regarded by some as a genius for my masterful skills in turf management. But then again, others also told me that the recent warmer weather pattern was THE big factor in the recovery. Of course it had nothing to do with the additional seed, labor and proper water management.

Speaking of water management, I don't recall a year when the chastisements have flown so freely regarding my irrigation practices. Again I am apparently a dunce for irrigating too soon in the evening, sometimes even when it is raining or, heaven forbid, when the weather forecasters are promising precipitation. Upon deaf ears I explain the deficiencies in the irrigation system, the predominant turf species maintained, *Poa annua*, and the fact that sometimes the weather predictions are wrong.

And what about this weather! Can you say **DROUGHT?** Seems to me that Mother Nature hasn't been too generous since the middle of August 2002 when it comes to precipitation. Forcing a player to understand the dynamics of meteorology just isn't in my bag of tricks. Of course I am reminded by the very lowest of the handicappers that North Oaks has a state of the art irrigation system installed just 13 years ago and, when it comes to watering, my job is easy. They fail to comprehend that double row, square spaced, block technology, undersized pipe, a 45-year-old pump

station and the many corners cut during installation in an effort to "save the budget" (for new wallpaper in the ladies locker room no doubt!) all play into the water management challenges I have to meet.

Alas, in hindsight I suppose my easy job could have been made more difficult through the shattering of many lines when firing up in April, the loss of a foot valve on my 50 horse hard start pump, the contamination and plugging of many heads with rocks when said pump was fired up again and the City of St. Paul's Water Department draw down of my wet well causing one of my pumps to cavitate and malfunction during the warmest and windiest night of the year. Who am I kidding, these events did happen and many more. But how does a superintendent convince a membership of their heartaches and heartbreaks when it has been "such an easy summer"?

And I love the in house architects who contend that I have to do something because the course is too easy. It is as if I am to blame for the removal of hundreds of God-awful pine trees that used to line the fairways and hence the recovery of a classically-designed Stan Thompson golf course. But heaven forbid that I toughen up the course by mowing the rough a bit longer. Perhaps the game has become easier through the improvements in technology.

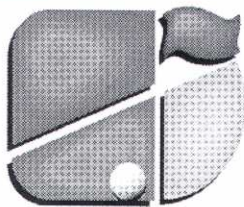
According to the USGA the average drive has only improved 15 yards in recent years due to the changes in club and ball design. Not much you say? Well combine this with an additional ten yard gain on all iron shots and you can calculate a much, much shorter golf course overall, roughly 400 yards shorter. I think somebody should address this technology issue and level the playing field for those of us who manage classical, and typically shorter, golf courses.

Sorry I am blowing up! Sooner or later my response to the often-made comment that the bunkers at North Oaks suck will be, "No, you just suck at bunker shots!" I tire of the complaining player who decries the sand hazards as too inconsistent, too soft, too firm, too dry and too wet. Yet they only own one sand wedge and never take a lesson from a golf professional or, get this, practice. And perhaps my all time favorite is the comment that having a Hispanic staff has made my job a cakewalk. Don't get me wrong, I love my amigos, but a multicultural staff has its challenges. Communication can be an issue, particularly if one's crew suddenly can no longer comprehend directions they followed to a "t" the day before. Pay day also possess' problems as the lads sometimes tune up that evening. And due to the fact that most travel together, when the one car is down, my staff is gone for the day. And guess who picks up the load? But then again I am my own worst enemy.

As a critic no one is harder on me than me. For I am a typical Golf Course Superintendent, a retentive, professional, perfectionist, micro and macro manager, scientist, politician, accountant and psychologist. I am adept at doing more with less and my hours are as long as it takes. I embrace the challenges each day present, both physical and mental. And I prepare for when the next shoe will fall... the next irrigation crisis, budget cut, weather anomaly, staff challenge or pathogen attack. Every year has it's own set of problems.

In the mean time I'll smile and keep my mouth shut and nod when I am told, "The course looks great Jack, it has been an easy summer for you to grow grass."

Thanks for allowing me the opportunity to blow up! I feel oh so much better. - JM



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