

Strictly Business

Bob Costa

One of the frequent criticisms of Golf Course Superintendents is their failure to fully understand the business aspects of golf course operations. Superintendents have gained a reputation as spenders, and as a result, their requests for new equipment, capital improvements, and additional labor have often been met with scrutiny. Conversely, it's not uncommon to hear a superintendent grumble, "they want better playing conditions, but they never seem to want to pay for it."

Having been exposed to public golf for nearly twelve years, the last several as a manager of superintendents, I have had the opportunity to view this long standing controversy from both perspectives.

When I was actively superintending, I was as guilty as anyone of showing up to work each day with blinders on. My first priority was the condition of the golf course, I just assumed the business was profitable.

Over the last several years I began to realize that the way you pay for labor, new equipment and capital projects such as, irrigation systems, cart paths and new greens, is with the

money generated from profit. An argument could, and often is made by those involved in golf course maintenance that a courses ability to be profitable is directly related to the quality of the product, "let me spend more so we can make more," they say.

As a result, the "I need to spend more, why can't you spend less?" battle rages on. The fact of the matter is, there lies wisdom in both approaches to generating profit. In this highly competitive marketplace to attract and retain customers you have to provide a product that provides both quality and value. If you don't your customers will go elsewhere, where they're sure to find it. The challenge is to continuously improve product quality, while generating sufficient profit to pay for additional labor and capital improvements.

Superintendents, particularly those at public facilities, need to periodically remind themselves that although your responsibilities lie primarily in providing the finest playing conditions possible, the bottom line, as in any business for profit, is what counts.

Occasionally, you may have
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that the goal should always be to do things correctly the first time so that funds will not have to be spent later correcting mistakes. If funds are lacking, he suggests finishing the greens and tees first, because bunkers and fairway irrigation can be installed later. Meanwhile, the golf course can still be used. He points out that it costs more money to correct a poorly designed and built course than it would have cost to have properly constructed it in the first place. Each of us has often used the old cliché, "there is never enough time or money to do things right the first time, but there is always enough time and money to do things over." Finality is a word that should become a part of all of our vocabularies.

Mackenzie felt strong that "specialists" should be hired to engineer irrigation and drainage systems and sent as far as to say "this is an age of specialists". He felt if the architect did not devote all his energies to the design of the course and attempted to design the irrigation and drainage systems, it would be a disservice to the course owners. Mackenzie also saw value in hiring outside consultants for soil analysis and plant selection advice. He understood that local knowledge was key to the success of his projects. Many committees questioned his decision to hire these consultants, he said, citing their hesitations to pay for "trained minds and mental labor."

Regarding greenkeeping, he said that good greenkeepers keep a careful watch on their turf, and have

sleepless nights until they overcome everything that may be the matter with it. He compares turf maintenance to medicine when he said, "the best physicians are those who prescribe poisonous drugs only after most careful consideration." No treatment was required if nature could provide the cure, he felt. He also made the point that there was a lot to learn regarding turfgrass maintenance practices and that more money needed to be dedicated to research. One can hardly argue with any of these statements.

Concerning the game, Dr. Mackenzie thought that the best way to learn and understand the golf swing would be to study the exact sequence of movements each joint within the body makes in the process. Interestingly enough, the USGA is currently conducting biomechanics research and gathering data similar to what Mackenzie suggested. Most importantly he reminds us that "golf is a game and should be played for fun" and "the only reason for the existence of the game is to promote the health, pleasure and even the prosperity of the community." This is something I feel too many people have forgotten.

I think one would agree that each of the cited examples still applies today in some way to our modern golf business. These selected topics only scratch the surface of the many observations and points Mackenzie makes throughout the book. If you have not had the chance to read the *Spirit of St. Andrews*, I highly recommend that you do so. You may even want to recommend it to your committee members. They may not only find it interesting, but educational. It seems true, that some things never do change. ♦

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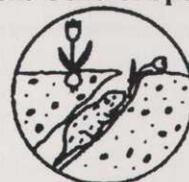
to make sacrifices like allowing carts on the course under wet conditions, sending employees home on rainy days, reducing your staff size during the slower times of the year, performing some maintenance activities without closing a portion of the course, or maybe just increasing the overall efficiency of your operation.

Don't be disappointed if, in your effort to become more sensitive to the financial health of the business, or after altering your maintenance program to increase profit, you find that you still have to campaign just as aggressively for funds to improve your facility. What you likely to gain, aside from a new piece of equipment, or additional labor, is recognition from your manager or owner, that your skills as a Golf Course Superintendent are multidimensional, thereby, increasing your value as a key member of the Management Team. ♦

GCSAA Joins The Web

When you're in Orlando next week, don't forget to stop in at the GCSAA member services booth to check out the GCSAA Home Page on the Web. This is a prototype of the service that is expected to go on-line by July 1, 1996. Staff members David Bishop and Nancee Torkelson will be demonstrating the use of this system and all the member benefits that will be only a few keystrokes away. **Check it out!**

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