

Seeing Is Believing

By Bob Costa, CGCS

One would be hard pressed to argue, that the one factor which has had more influence on the changing face of professional sports is television. The influx of television revenue in the last ten years has resulted in the pay out of multi-million dollar player contracts, which indirectly have led to new stadiums, luxury boxes, rising ticket prices, psl's, franchise movement, ownership changes and corporate involvement. Whether this has been good or bad for sports is a matter of opinion.

The sport of golf has not escaped TV's influence either. Skyrocketing television revenues have resulted in record purses and yearly money winners that now top the two million dollar mark. The increased public exposure has been a boon to the industry, Indirectly, every facet of the golf business has benefitted.

Surprisingly, one of the areas that has been most heavily influenced by televised golf is the golf course maintenance profession. How can this be you might ask? What relationship could television and golf course maintenance possibly share? The answer is quite simple, and can be summarized in two words, perception and expectations.

Let's face it. Nothing has a more powerful influence on an individual's attitude, perception and opinion than the visual media. Golfers are certainly no exception. What they see each weekend when they view professional golf ultimately forms their perception and expectations for course conditioning.

Just what exactly do they see each weekend? Most often they see a "perfect

golf course". A course that is lush and green, meticulously manicured, with lakes that are pristine and blue, lots of stripes, white sand, fast greens, beautiful and challenging in its design. What they don't see are; the year, or sometimes longer, required to prepare a course to those standards, the increased maintenance and capital budgets to support that level of conditioning, maintenance staffs that swell to 30 or more, and the use of specialized equipment for course preparation.

What they also don't see, after the dust has settled and the last of the TV trucks has pulled away, is that within several weeks those tournament courses that appeared so perfect over the weekend, begin to take on a more normal look. What they can't see are superintendents, maintenance workers and course officials who have seen more of their golf course than their families for the last several weeks.

That courses can be maintained at such a level of conditioning and playability is remarkable and a tribute to those superintendents and their staffs who make it happen week in and week out. We have many of those talented individuals right here in Northern California. As I stated previously, the TV exposure is good for the game, and the profession of golf course management has benefitted immensely. A closer look however, suggests that not all of this exposure has been beneficial. In part, the reason golf courses are so openly challenged by the environmental community is a result of what they see each week, when another image of a pristine golf course flashes across their TV screen. Only because of a diligent educational campaign have their negative attitudes and perceptions of golf courses begun to change.

Additionally, due to the perception and expectations for course maintenance televised golf creates in the minds of golfers, golf course operators find themselves forced to continually find ways to increase the level of conditioning and maintenance. By and large golfers expect perfection and in many cases demand it. Those increased expectations aren't without consequence. Public facilities are being constructed and maintained to standards, that were in the past, reserved for private or resort courses. Green fee's have escalated to help offset construction and maintenance costs. Maintenance budgets are steadily on the rise as superintendents attempt to keep pace with the new standards for acceptable maintenance. Golf course architecture has reached new levels, with a trend towards more elaborate design, including extensive bunkering, water features and mounds, all of which require more intense management. Expectations for greens conditioning, and turf quality in fairways and roughs border on unrealistic, yet superintendents are asked to deliver these conditions year around.

Fortunately, as a result of technological advancements, improved products and services and better educated and skilled superintendents most golf maintenance operations have been able to keep pace with golfers expectations for playing quality. The reality is, however, that the face of the American game, has and will continue to change, moving further and further from its Scottish roots where brown is acceptable and you simply play it as it lies.

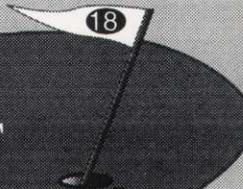
If you need a point of reference as to where course maintenance has come, an episode of Shell's Wonderful World of Golf usually works for me. /

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