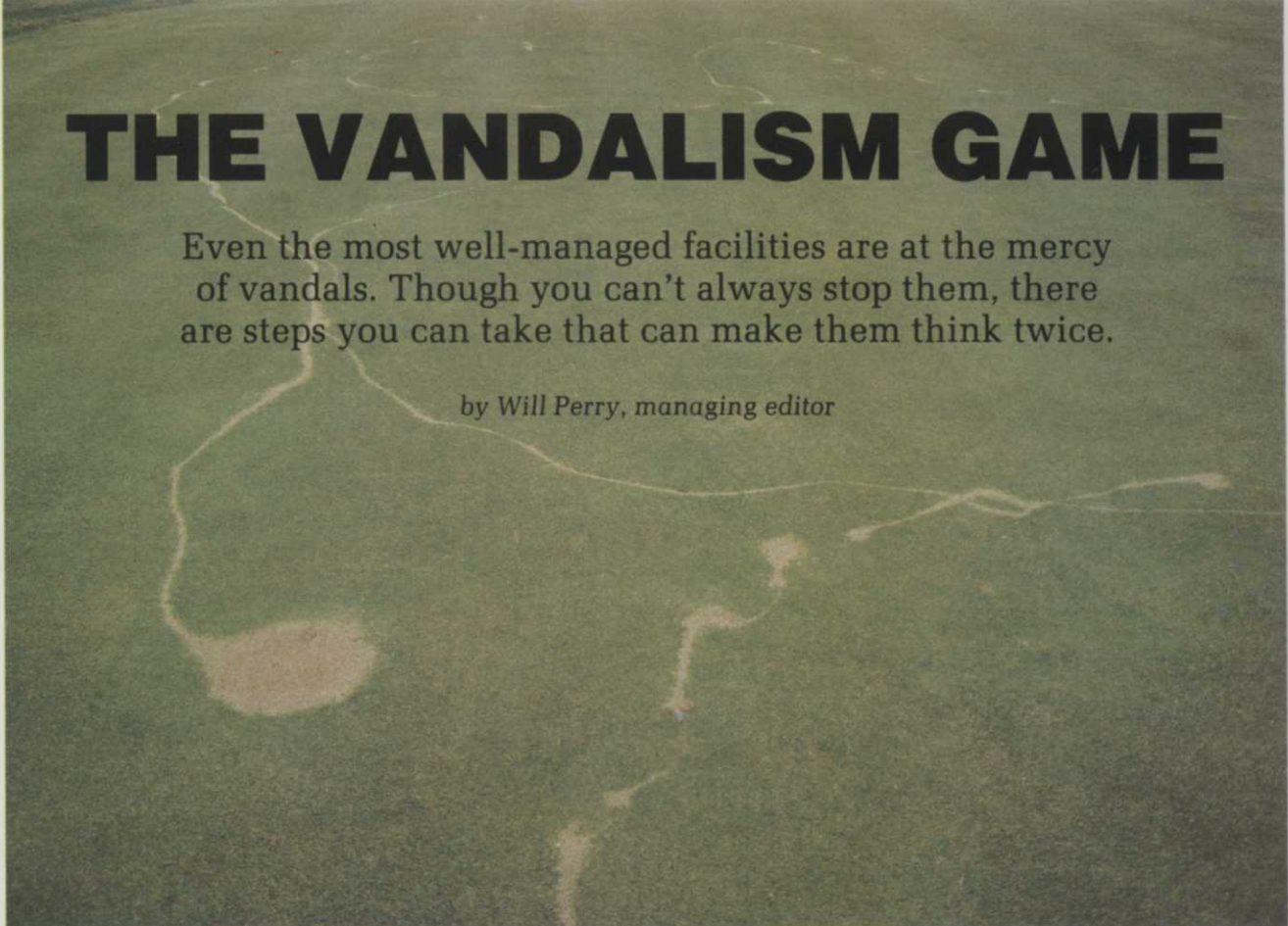


THE VANDALISM GAME

Even the most well-managed facilities are at the mercy of vandals. Though you can't always stop them, there are steps you can take that can make them think twice.

by Will Perry, managing editor



"A good vandal can really do a number on you," says superintendent Ed Wojtkiewicz. This green had oil spilled on it, which is especially damaging because it doesn't evaporate.

Did you hear the one about the kid, the jeep, and the golf course?

It goes like this: The kid was out partying and decided it would be fun to "turf" Princess Anne Country Club in Virginia Beach, Va. (The club, by the way, had just undergone a 16-month, \$2 million renovation.) The kid was arrested and originally sentenced to two years in jail and fined \$2,000. Eventually all but 10 days of his sentence were suspended on the condition that he put in 100 hours of community service, pay \$1,050 in fines and court costs and pay the club \$6,792.80 in damages.

The story sounds familiar to many superintendents and park managers, who know there's nothing funny about it. They also know that it's a one-in-a-thousand chance that the kid who "turfed" their course will ever have to pay for it.

It's sad but true that one individual with an attitude problem is capable of wreaking such havoc, easily ruining an entire season's work with the turn of a shovel or an opened oil can. The most frustrating aspect of this phenomenon is that there is so little you can do to stop it. The most effective deterrents to vandalism—fencing and lighting—are often too expensive for

all but the most prosperous clubs. Still, there are steps the landscape manager can take to at least reduce the problem.

Enough is enough

After four incidents of golfers being robbed by gunpoint at Chickasaw Country Club in Memphis, Tenn., superintendent Jim Harris said "enough."

He changed the color of his full time and temporary employee's shirts from blue to red to increase their visibility. Caddies were given bright orange safety vests, which are numbered and tracked to make sure they don't fall into the wrong hands for the wrong reason. He also created a stencil of the course logo and had it painted on all apparel.

"The most effective thing we've done to reduce the crime here is to have everyone stay on the lookout for people who seem to be out of place," says Harris.

On any given day as many as seven Chickasaw employees are connected via high frequency FM radios. "We're not trying to apprehend anybody," says Harris, "We're just practicing prevention."

Harris added barbed wire to the fence that surrounded the course, in-

cluding the "razor-ribbon" variety at a pregnable position beneath a railroad viaduct. Six months ago it claimed its first victim, an intruder who actually had to be cut free before going to the hospital to receive his 165 stitches.

The course had to sacrifice some of its privacy by clearing hedges from critical areas. "Many of the members complained, but we simply explained to them that it was either privacy or security. We chose security."

These efforts complement the work of full-time security guards who were put on line four years ago. For approximately \$6 an hour (\$50,000 a year), the course is privy to an unarmed guard who roves the entire course at least six times in a six-hour shift. He has a radio and a gas-powered cart equipped with flashing yellow lights.

"Since we added this additional security there has been a big drop in the number of incidents," says Harris. "If I were to recommend any measures, it would be that you get a security guard or an employee to roam the place at night. Equip a cart with flashing lights and a radio. That's usually enough to scare them off."

Many superintendents interviewed stressed that "scaring off" un-

wanted visitors instead of apprehending them is the best way to approach the problem.

"We've tried a few times to press charges against vandals but always found that it was too difficult to pursue," says Ken Debusscher, of Wabeek Country Club, a private, 18-hole course in Bloomfield, Mich., about 25 miles north of Detroit. Debusscher has caught kids riding mopeds on the course but says that "my hands are tied" as far as what action he can take.

"We've found that if you tick them off they'll come back and do some real damage," he says. "I try to be as nice as I can so they have no reason to return. Granted: it's a fine line where you can be a real jerk about it, but I try to straddle it."

Debusscher repairs moped tire track damage on greens by replacing the turf with bentgrass sod purchased from a local nursery. If none is available, a swath is taken from an obscure spot on a nearby practice chipping green.

Three years ago Ed Wojtkiewicz, superintendent at Cleveland Metro-parks' Manakiki Golf Course, had an incident where gas and peroxide were poured all over a green. He made a

strong effort to find out who was responsible, having park rangers go door to door at surrounding residences asking for information.

"We never did find out who was

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responsible," says Wojtkiewicz, "but we did see a drop in the number of incidents after that. We're pretty sure whoever did it got the message that we weren't going to tolerate stuff like that."

To repair gasoline or peroxide damage, Wojtkiewicz recommends cutting the turf low, top dressing, re-seeding it and waiting for it to grow out. "Oil-based damage is the real

problem," he says. "There's nothing you can do about it until it leaches out. Eventually gasoline will evaporate, but oil will sit there all year."

Never-ending war

If you think you have problems, talk to a superintendent of a course within a major metropolitan area, such as Brooklyn, N.Y. Only "Russian border guards armed with machine guns" could stem the tide of vandalism there, says a superintendent requesting anonymity.

"This is the Vietnam of golf," he exclaims. His 18-hole public course has more than 6,000 families, football and baseball fields as neighbors and hosts some 80,000 rounds of golf annually.

"There is so much vandalism here that for all intent and purposes it's impossible to fight against it. They knock down fences quicker than we can put them back up."

To repair motorcycle tire damage to greens, his most common problem, he brushes away the debris, top-dresses and reseeds. Sod may be used during the growing season, but otherwise is rarely considered because "if the kids see something they can just pull right up they'll destroy it."

The course employees and patrolling park rangers constitute security personnel, though neither have the power to arrest. "The police here are pretty well jammed up trying to deal with the more serious crime. Chasing kids on motorcycles isn't a high priority," he says. It was decided not to light the course because it is too expensive and "they would just shoot them out with BB guns anyway."

The most serious incident occurred two years ago when a stolen car was abandoned and burned on a green, causing \$8,000 damage. Tees and ball washers also take a beating. The superintendent at this course keeps many ball washers on hand particularly around the Independence Day holiday, when they have a tendency to explode.

"A lot of them get blown up that weekend," he says. "I try to put out the older ones at that time." At \$200 apiece, he says he easily goes through \$1,000 worth a summer. "We try to buy ones that don't explode so easily," he adds.

Interestingly, the superintendent says golfers complain more about having to use a temporary green than they do about a vandalized one.

"Our philosophy is that nothing of value can be left out overnight. Not a flag, a chain, nothing," he says. "We could easily spend \$2 million a year repairing things, but then we wouldn't be in business." **LM**

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