

Using financials to sell yourself

by JERRY ROCHE / Editor-in-Chief

Stop selling yourself short. You, as a golf course superintendent, are not just a grower of grass. You're a maker of money—and you'd better make sure that your employer knows it.

"In my 16 years as a professional golf course superintendent, the only figures I ever heard about were the expenses," says Tommy Witt of Wynstone Golf Club, North Barrington, Ill. "Then I realized that every negative side of the accounting equation has an opposite side. And when I tried to start selling myself to my employers, who had the financials, they could never understand that I wasn't just spending their money."

Witt, lounging—for a change—in the comfortable confines of a breakroom on a rainy September afternoon, can recite Wynstone's financials without ever opening a ledger. And the rapidity of his verbal calculations leaves no doubt that he's committed them to memory.

"Last year, we had about 25 new members. They paid \$60,000 to \$70,000 each to become members—there's \$1.5 million. We have 275 members paying \$475 a month, times 12 months a year—there's another \$1.5 million. We'll do \$300,000 in guest fees, \$150,000 in cart rentals...it goes on and on and on.

"As a businessman, would you trade my maintenance budget of \$800,000 for \$4 million profits? I would. Other club professionals use profits as a selling tool to improve their compensation packages and their value as employees. But superintendents, typically, don't."

He's asked if the superintendent really makes an impact on how much the club rakes in.

"Look at any golf course in Chicago last year. A lot of them were trashed because of the weather. Compare their 1994 income with last year's income. That doesn't answer your question, but there is a correlation.

"In Minneapolis, normal building sites go for \$25,000 to \$30,000 an acre. Put a golf course in, and the property goes way up. So what does that golf superintendent mean to that developer? There's prob-

ably no one person more important to a piece of property than an experienced, qualified golf course superintendent."

The bottom line is that people become members of country clubs largely to play golf. Research says so, and Witt says so.

"I don't need the research: I know why people join Wynstone," Witt says. "A resident member pays \$60,000 to join. A social member pays \$3,000. Do they come to buy a golf shirt? I don't think so.

"In 1994, our revenues increased by \$500,000. Was it because they started serving a different kind of hamburger? No. Because the pro was offering shirts in the golf shop for \$90 apiece? I think not. It was because of the golf course. If it's maintained to its maximum quality, people come to play golf."

Experience counts

Anybody can shoot a round of golf. But not everybody can shoot 72. Likewise, not every superintendent can maintain a course to optimize profits.

"There's no question that a more experienced super will get more for the dollar," Witt emphasizes, "whether the budget is \$300,000 or \$1 million."

Practically in mid-sentence, he coyly checks the reactions of the dozen-or-so college turfgrass students who are sitting in on the interview as part of Witt's on-going public relations duties. He hopes they are learning something.

"The best superintendent in the world is not necessarily the guy with the highest budgeted golf course, it's the guy who can make what he's got go the farthest. There are some tremendously talented people who do a whole lot with a little bit."

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Tommy Witt has made financial ledgers part of his daily routine.



The best superintendents are the ones who can do the most with the money they're given to work with, says Tommy Witt. And then, he proves it.



'There's probably no one person more important to a piece of [golf development] property than an experienced, qualified golf course superintendent,' says Witt.

Commitment to quality—and, thus, profits—does not come without its own price. It takes a willingness to work up to 80 hours a week, and a competent staff with the same commitment to quality.

"I've got the most wonderful family in the world, and they like to see me, too, but eight hours a day is unheard-of. It just doesn't happen," Witt says. "My time ranges from 60 to 80 hours a week for nine months of the year to 50 to 60 hours the other three months—and that includes delegating a lot of work to my assistants.

"I've got an excellent staff. I try to hire the best people on the continent. But I delegate so much that some of my assistants end up not being able to handle it. When I get squeezed for perfection from the people I work for, I've got to pass that down to my assistants. And they'll tell you that what is acceptable in Dallas, Texas, or Lex-

ington, Kentucky, is not necessarily even close to being acceptable here in Chicago."

The pleasures

The dreary weather, the long afternoon and his third media interview of the week have taken something from Witt. As the sun sets through the window behind him, he says he still values the opportunities he's been given.

"If I could be somewhat biased, gee, I think we're very lucky," he says. "And I thank the good Lord every night for the job I have and the product that's delivered.

"The real pleasure is when you go out at the end of the day and look back at the property, and you know that you and your staff may be the only people who really understand what it's taken to achieve that product. Certainly, 99.9 percent of the golfing public has little or no idea what the golf course superintendent does." □

QUOTABLE QUOTES

from TOMMY WITT

Wynstone Golf Club
North Barrington, Ill.

► More on profits:

"There are very few country club settings where food and beverage is a profit center. I have a friend in Georgia who was budgeted to lose \$1.2 million in food and beverage."

► On great golf courses:

"Great golf courses don't happen by accident. It's a tri-fold effort. One, a qualified staff to manage it. Two, a governing body that's willing to fund the effort. Three, a membership that is proud and willing to take care of it."

► On job interviews:

"The only reason I moved to Wynstone was because all 10 of the people who interviewed me said that they wanted Wynstone to move into the top 50 courses in the United States, and they would make that commitment at all costs. The members must care about the course."

► On ambience:

"When you talk about the Medinahs, the Bobolinks, Atlanta Golf Club, you're talking about upper echelon golf courses with not only the design but the ambience of a club. When you walk onto that course, you know it's special, that people take care of it."

► On satisfaction:

"I started playing golf when I was five, so it's a big part of my life. Plus, it's a challenge that very, very few professions have to offer. You're trying to derive personal satisfaction under extremely difficult circumstances. That's why a vast majority of our people are 28 to 35 years old and the average tenure for a superintendent on a course is just four years." □