

The Value of Objective Maintenance Standards

How written maintenance standards can satisfy frequent golfer questions and subjective complaints.

By **MACDONALD NIVEN**

Spend any amount of time at a golf facility and before long you are sure to hear golfers expressing their opinion about something. The following is an example of an all-too-common conversation between a frustrated golfer and general manager.

Golfer: "These greens are awful. Really terrible. Can't you do something about them?"

GM: "Awful greens? That's not good. What's the problem?"

Golfer: "I told you, they're awful."

GM: "That's certainly not what we like to hear. Anything specific?"

Golfer: "Yeah, they're really slow. It's like putting on shag carpet."

GM: "Well, that's never any good. Hey, do you have a minute? Let's take a ride out and look at a green or two. Which one was particularly slow?"

Golfer: "Oh, well, okay, how about number 18? It was terrible."

The general manager and disgruntled golfer take a ride to the 18th green, where they meet the superintendent to use a Stimpmeter to check the speed of the green.

GM: "You know, according to the Stimpmeter reading, it looks like the greens are rolling about 9 feet 4 inches. Our standard is 9 to 10 feet. We're at the low end, but still within our range."

Golfer: "Well, yeah, I guess so. I suppose that's right."

Golfers like the one in this example occasionally offer subjective critiques about many aspects of the facility. What the general manager accomplished in this scenario was to take the subjective golf course critique and reframe it objectively. Sure, golfers can still argue over the objective, but it is much easier to defend the fact that 9 feet 4 inches is within the set standard of 9 to 10 feet



Subjective criticism that greens are too slow is best addressed by having objective maintenance standards that allow various components of course quality to be measured and quantified.



Comments that the rough is too tall may be legitimate, but only if it can be measured and compared to an objective maintenance standard established by the green committee (or other course officials), superintendent, and general manager.



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than debate the opinion that the greens are “awful.” In the end, a rational person will understand that it likely was something other than the playing surfaces to blame for one’s putting struggles.

In this example, the general manager had confidence in the superintendent’s skill and consistency of the course conditions. However, even if the Stimp-meter reading was less than the established standard, the general manager could have easily acknowledged the greens were below standard on this particular day and assured the golfer that it would be corrected. Or perhaps there was a justifiable reason for reduced green speed, such as in the days following aeration, during prolonged wet weather, or because mowing heights had been raised to help the greens survive summer heat stress. Either way, there will be added confi-

dence in the program for everyone involved. The golfer, knowing that his critique was taken seriously, would spread the word that he was right about the greens being slow and that he got the attention of key staff members to correct the issue. If the greens were up to speed, it is likely that the conversation would have ended right there. The golfer would realize that the standard was being met and, in the future, is likely to support the staff should conversations within his group drift to course maintenance or playing conditions.

The development of objective maintenance standards is an age-old procedure, and the process is successful for many reasons. Consistency, be it speed of greens, height of fairway cut, bunker sand depth, or any measurable areas of the course, is very impor-

tant to the success by which a course is measured. By quantifying standards, the subjective becomes objective, which is then more easily explained, justified, understood, and, if necessary, corrected. In fact, once the standards are known and publicized, very few issues tend to arise in a questioning manner.

Although the example given is from the perspective of a private club, all golf facilities have just as much to gain by developing a set of written maintenance standards. Key benefits include:

- Organizing and analyzing priorities for golf course maintenance.
- Developing an accurate budget to support desired standards.
- The maintenance standards document becomes an effective communi-

cation tool to share with golfers, decision makers, and the community.

- Written maintenance standards eliminate emotion and subjectivity when evaluating the effectiveness of the maintenance department.

Many superintendents have produced their own maintenance standards and operating procedures. The process of quantifying the procedures is an exceptional experience for people who are invited to participate. Asking golfers to help establish standards makes the final product far more valuable and useful to the facility. Those who participate in deciding on standards will become wonderful advocates for the facility and will be highly loyal when questions arise from others. Of course, the superintendent has to be able to

maintain the standards, so ensuring that the final product is reasonable, attainable, and agronomically sound is important.

The USGA is the source for research, ideas, information, and assistance in developing customized written maintenance standards. The following articles will get you started. Next, look to the Green Section as an independent resource to customize and refine the maintenance standards for your facility. You will find that the experience of developing a written maintenance standards document is rewarding, productive, and enlightening.

Helpful resources for developing written maintenance standards:

[Setting Standards – Creating Effective Written Maintenance Standards is Easier Than You Think](#)

[When In Doubt – Spec It Out](#)

[Unreasonable Expectations](#)

[Pacific Standard Time – A Simple Method to Create Continuity for Your Maintenance Operations](#)

[A Labor of Love or a Love of Labor?](#)

[The Good, Bad and Ugly – The Green Committee Unveiled](#)

[Building and Maintaining the Truly Affordable Golf Course](#)



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