

# THE STRIKE *at the San Francisco Municipal Golf Courses*

by **WM. H. BENGUEYFIELD**

Western Director & Green Section Publications Editor

**"T**his is the 34th day that the San Francisco Municipal Golf Courses have been without water, mowing or maintenance of any kind. While there are probably more hurtful effects of the City worker's strike which began March 31, 1976—for a turfgrass manager, the effect on the golf courses has been like being at the bedside of a dying friend."

So wrote John Grant, the extraordinary Director of Golf Courses for the City of San Francisco. The question of man's cruelty toward man has never been in doubt. This tragic event seems only to emphasize how closely it may come to self-destruction. Certainly man's world of recreation is no longer apart.

The strike began when city plumbers, electricians, machinists, carpenters, and laborers (including the gardeners who maintain the golf courses) and the negotiator for the Board of Supervisors could not agree on a new pay formula. The old formula, which set wages in accordance with whatever the same crafts were paid by private industry, was repudiated by the voters in November, 1975.

Two facts magnified the damage and shortened the life of the golf courses: the strike committee refused to allow emergency watering; the city, trying to show a minimal effect of the strike, insisted on keeping the courses open. Sensing free lunch, the less-knowing golfers continued to use the courses in spite of golf management's requests that they stay off. The predictable results of no water, no maintenance and continued play are pictured in this article.





The more responsible golfers, fearing long term damage, not only stayed off the courses and encouraged others to do the same, but formed volunteer bucket brigades to attempt to at least save the greens. It will be months before the full damage of the strike will be known but substantial repair and rebuilding needs are obvious.

One lesson learned is the advantage of an on-site-controlled automatic irrigation system. Two of the 9-hole courses have automatic systems. At one of these, multiple line breaks mysteriously occurred during the strike and, in the end, it went 45 days without water. On the other automatic irrigation course, minimal damage from a lack of water occurred.

The three remaining 18-hole courses plus another 9-hole course were dependent on irrigation pumps controlled by stationary engineers observing picket lines and on antiquated hose and quick-coupler systems controlled by strikers. An obvious conclusion here is that, in the future, authority be given to those responsible for turfgrass management to develop an irrigation system which can be professionally or administratively controlled. Golf course irrigation systems must be designed and the installation supervised by a professional in the field with follow-up responsibility. It seems a mistake to have this essential turf management tool in the hands of engineers in a Public Parks Department.

An even more obvious lesson came out of the San Francisco Municipal Works strike: When city services to citizens and golf courses get caught in a power struggle, citizens and turfgrass lose.

The strikers agreed to return to work pending the results of a fact finding committee on Monday, May 10, 1976. After 40 days without watering or mowing or maintenance or fertilization or anything—the care of the golf courses began again. It was at this point they were finally and officially closed for repair. Harding Park, one of the most beautiful municipal golf courses in the country, suffered most from use, vandalism and neglect. Nevertheless, because of its most favorable soils and climate, it was the first to return to color and playable condition. On Monday, May 24, 1976, two weeks after maintenance was resumed, five of the six city courses opened for play.

It is difficult to comprehend the senseless, wasteful and willful loss of a public recreational facility. To those who love the beauty of outdoors and the enjoyment of golf in a crowded metropolitan area, it will always be a hard memory. John Grant says it best:

"Golf courses are living things—don't strike them. If a strike becomes inevitable and maintenance unavailable, lengthen the remaining course life by closing it. But perhaps most important of all, don't allow golf turf to become a pawn in a political power struggle."

There are really no winners; we are all losers.