



A typical first tee at a municipal golf course.

The Public Parks Golfer Deserves Something More Than Mediocre Golfing Turf!

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FOR THE MILLIONS of America's public parks golfers, playing the local municipal course this year once again will be fraught with frustration, disillusionment, and in some cases, right onto entrapment. Television has shown us the magnificent green and well-groomed courses of the U.S. Open, the Masters, and the PGA Championship. Magazines have enticed us with full-color spreads of golf equipment and clothing. And so the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker — the public parks golfer of America — heads for his own municipal golf course this summer with head held high and equal hopes.

What does he find? More often than not, dusty tees, rock-hard fairways, bone-dry creeks, boulder-infested bunkers, disease-plagued greens and weeds galore! He deserves something better. Indeed, it is a tribute to the public golfer and the haunting, beckoning qualities of the game itself that public golf continues to grow in these days of fierce competition for recreational attention.

The public parks golfer deserves more than mediocre golfing turf. Today's golf course super-

intendent can produce exceptionally high-quality turf if he is given the proper support. The problem is not one of turfgrass science (although the course superintendent is the first to be blamed for poor conditions). The problem is not one of heavy, continuous play (there are too many topnotch resort courses playing over 200 rounds of golf a day, seven days a week that still remain in excellent condition). The problem is not even one of economics (just look at some municipal golf course maintenance budgets).

The problem is one of golf course administration!

NOT ECONOMICS?

How can that be? Many municipal golf course maintenance budgets today are equal to or in excess of those at most private golf clubs in the same geographical area, yet there is no comparing the turfgrass quality or playing conditions. Further, if a metropolitan 18-hole municipal course plays 30,000 to 40,000 rounds of golf a year (a fairly conservative figure), and if the green fee averages

\$5 a round (not unreasonable by today's standards), the course generates an income of \$150,000 to \$200,000 a year. This seems quite adequate for the production of good golfing turf over 18 holes. It seems especially adequate if property and other taxes (as well as water rates) are minimal. If there is an outstanding indebtedness, higher green fees may be justified. Certainly the clubhouse, pro shop, cart rentals, etc. should be self-sustaining if not actually adding to the total income of the golf course operation.

But how can a golf maintenance budget of \$200,000 a year be adequate when equipment, operating costs and municipal worker benefits push the actual operating figure to \$250,000 or more a year? In plain and simple terms, IT CAN-NOT. The best management in the world cannot overcome unreasonable and everescalating costs imposed by civil service or other type municipal unions. The City of San Francisco proved this two years ago (see "The Strike at the San Francisco Municipal Golf Courses," September, 1976, *USGA Green Section Record*). The union demanded and went on strike to gain wages of over \$17,000 a year, plus other benefits, for each golf course laborer. Inevitably, the house of cards had to collapse and it did. The municipal golf courses in San Francisco suffered unbelievable damage in a senseless, wasteful loss of a public recreational facility. There were no winners.

POLITICAL JUGGLING

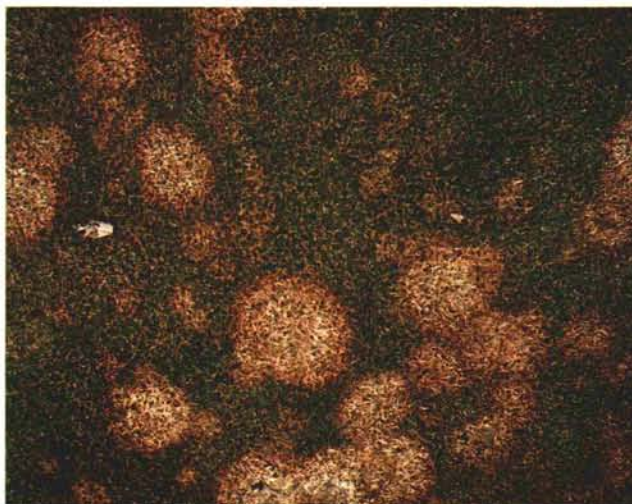
A few years ago, another major western city faced similar civil service demands. Since the treasury was already bare and the taxpayers near revolt, the City Council found a solution, at least from their point of view. Although they could not meet the monetary demand, they could offer an additional 15 days "sick leave" to the employee's benefit schedule. Thus the annual "paid non-work days" added up as follows:

- 21 Paid days vacation (5 years service)
- 12 Paid holidays
- 10 Paid days sick leave
- 15 Paid days additional sick leave
- 58 Paid non-working days

It is virtually impossible to operate any golf course, let alone those with an already minimal crew, under such circumstances. Of course, the 58 paid non-work days were in addition to medical and retirement benefits already in place.

These are problems of golf course administration, not those of turfgrass culture or science. They are self-inflicted political problems and therefore receive political solutions. The difficulty for the golfer and the course superintendent is that golf courses do not respond to political solutions. Sound turfgrass management principles cannot overcome unsound political judgment. The result: mediocre turf!

Most municipal golf courses come under the jurisdiction of city park and/or recreation depart-



Must the municipal golfer endure disease-plagued greens?

ments. For golf, this may not always be the best arrangement. Granted, there are many examples of good municipal courses organized in this manner. However, it appears to depend largely on the philosophy and orientation of the director of the department. For example, if the director is dedicated to zoological gardens, it seems unlikely to expect much improvement in golf facilities.

Universities are turning out more and more park and recreation graduates with a new and different orientation from past years. Their mission is toward mass participation, the so-called broader aspects of public recreation; i.e., bike trails (frequently along the right side of very busy highways), lighted ball fields, jogging trails, outdoor basketball and volleyball courts, picnic areas, etc. These facilities are justly deserved. Nevertheless, they do not produce a revenue. Golf is not only a revenue producer, but it also continues to grow (up 5 percent nationwide in 1977) in popularity. Unfortunately for municipal golf, golf revenue is frequently lost in the General Fund.

"OVERADMINISTRATION"

Overadministration is another malady of municipal operations. It may be the result of the modern business school syndrome. The theory is that middle management will be more efficient, costs will be reduced and everything will come up roses if everyone is cross-trained in his or her department. This administrative concept was put to its full test recently in another major city. The city golf courses, a few years earlier, had been transferred to the Department of Public Works. Believing in progress, efficiency and business school techniques, the Department Head decreed all foremen will be "cross-trained." This called for the golf course foreman to spend six months in charge of a street repair crew while his counterpart moved over to the golf course! Knowing nothing of grasses,

diseases, pesticides or golf (and caring less), one can imagine how well he performed and how the golf course fared that summer.

Overadministration has also come into play through elected officials or new City Managers. In one actual incident, a new City Manager determined the golf course would no longer buy potable water for irrigation but use instead effluent water from the City treatment plant. Furthermore, the golf course would continue to pay the same price for the effluent water. Great idea! Buying the effluent would reduce the sewerage department's operating cost and the golf course would lose nothing. It would be a feather in a hat of city management. Right? — Wrong! Just a little research or a willingness to listen to the protests of the golf

superintendent would have shown otherwise. The same idea had been tried several years earlier and the golf course nearly went out of business. It seems the effluent water from this treatment plant has extremely high salts and is totally unsatisfactory for golf course use. Nevertheless, the new City Manager prevailed and the effluent was used. The loser, once again, was the golf course and the public parks golfer.

**"THERE AIN'T NO SUCH THING
AS FREE GOLF"**

Surprisingly, some share of responsibility for golf course red ink must be placed with the golfer himself. The philosophy of the Depression still exists at too many courses. "Giveaway golf" has not lost

A new municipal golf course and a poor irrigation system.



its appeal. Special rates remain in effect for certain age groups, time of the day or week. Monthly and seasonal tickets are available at tremendous savings. In some cities it is possible to buy a season ticket and play 18 holes of golf every day for 75¢ or less a round! Try to raise or eliminate the special rates and you will soon incur the wrath of the same people demanding a better golf course.

Does it seem unreasonable, in this age, for municipal golf courses to charge a fair green fee for a course in good condition? Privately owned but public fee courses must do so to survive. Junior

and senior citizen rates may still be offered, but these rates should be available only during slow periods of the week. If the public golfer is to have better municipal courses, he must be willing to pay something more than 75¢ a round. There is no such thing as a cheap palace.

PREREQUISITES FOR PROGRESS

What, then, can be done if better turfgrass conditions are to come to our city golf courses? Is contract maintenance the answer? What are the alternatives?



A neglected bunker or a grass bunker?





A thundering herd played a wet golf course.

Number One: Municipal golf course administration must be improved. It must be removed from politics and placed in the hands of those who understand the requirements and business of golf. The investment in the facility is too great today to turn its administration over to anyone else.

One sound approach may be through appointment of a totally independent and dedicated long-range board of golf commissioners or a similar structure — in effect, a non-paid board of directors for public golf. Their numbers should be few. Ultimately, they become responsible (to the city fathers) for the entire golf course operation. If not completely separate from the Parks and Recreation Department, golf operations should at least be a distinct entity within that department. Golf is a business and, to be successful, must be managed as a business. This type of structure would also lend itself to contract maintenance arrangements.

CONTRACT MAINTENANCE

Contract maintenance (i.e., the maintenance and/or operation of the course by private enterprise under contract to the city) surely has distinct advantages. It has been talked about for years and gradually the bugs are being worked out of the idea. The city is relieved of increasing operational costs and political pressures. Private enterprise can do the job better if given a fair, open chance,

and the golfer and the general public are the final benefactors.

For contract maintenance to be successful, however, the contractor must be totally reputable, knowledgeable and experienced in golf. He must also be local. Long-distance contracting removes the personal touch and daily involvement so essential to success in any turf management operation. It is the sense of permanence, dedication and stability — i.e., the personal involvement — that adds up to better turf for golf. Low bidder will rarely succeed in this business. Indeed, the entire concept of contract maintenance pivots solely on the integrity of the contractor. Without it, the concept is doomed.

IS THIS A DREAM?

Can a plan actually be devised whereby a majority of our municipal golf courses actually provide good golf turf? Can dusty tees, rock-hard fairways and disease-plagued greens be eliminated? We do not need more turfgrass research to move the public golfer onto green fairways. The tools and knowledge are already at hand. We need more common sense; we need better administration of the millions of dollars municipalities now pour annually into their mediocre golf courses. With better administration, the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker will enjoy golf more.