

# Ay, there's the rub

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“**T**HOSE WHO DO NOT remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” George Santayana said this — or something like it — but he left out one vital element. He didn't mention responsibility! Only as we feel personally responsible are we moved to at least attempt to direct events which become history. In any successful venture, plenty of people are willing to take credit — at the end — for whatever may have been achieved. How many of them, though, had their necks stuck out from the beginning when the outcome was still in question?

The history of any enterprise, whether it fails or succeeds, may sometimes even turn on luck. A golf course, for example, may be blessed with particularly favorable weather that greatly moderates or erases the effects of some serious mistakes. So pin a medal on the weatherman! The astute golf course superintendent knows wherein the determining bit of credit lies.

What we are all interested in achieving, however, is such consistency in conditioning that the course will hold together even in a season with adverse weather. Probably every good golf course superintendent realizes how

thoroughly nature can stack the deck, and not a one of them would willingly gamble that next year will bring about such happy circumstances that the golf course under his care will thrive in spite of deficiencies in the resources for providing that care. Yet club officials, owners, and administrators consistently seem to misread the situation.

Almost always the superintendent is held to be ultimately responsible for everything bad that happens on or to his golf course. Without meaning to take away at all from the superintendent's rightful degree of accountability for his golf course, club officials must

*There's always someone who just knows it can be done.*





*Just cooling it off, Boss.*

recognize and assume their own share of responsibility — before the fact — for the events to come in the history of their golf courses. They are the policymakers; it is they who set the limitations of resource and authority. Often it is front office actions either taken, postponed, or overlooked that have, in the end, forced an unhappy decision to make a change. Only a college football coach seems to have chosen a more precarious career than a golf course superintendent.

For a simplified example, consider a golf course hiring a new superintendent early in fall to maintain greens, tees, collars and fairways that were predominantly annual bluegrass. That winter the course suffered extensive winter turf damage. Very early in the spring, when the time was right for overseeding damaged greens and such, it was also discovered that the irrigation system required some \$30,000 worth of work to make it effectively operational. That expenditure was not authorized until June, well past

the time of critical need. The course subsequently experienced a most disappointing season. The superintendent was fired. The policymakers had succeeded once again in failing to take the responsibility to act when the time was appropriate. They succeeded once again to misplace the blame for the consequences of their mistakes.

Something roughly equivalent to this sad scenario is played out at many golf courses each year, and it will very likely be repeated at most of them through several cycles until new leadership arrives with a proper perception of how things function in any undertaking that involves a chain-of-command. The field general is granted a certain amount of authority, and he must assume an equivalent amount of responsibility. However, to at least the extent that the front office places restrictions (financial and otherwise) upon the field general, it retains ultimate responsibility (acknowledged or not) for the outcome as well. The field general may or may not be guilty of failing to make the most effective

use of those powers and resources which are given to him, but to hold him solely responsible is a mistake that is all too easily made by those at the top.

Other than pointing to additional obvious instances where front office mistakes significantly contributed to disastrous golf course conditions, which were then made to reflect only upon the golf course superintendent, is there any evidence that this sort of misunderstanding of organizational responsibilities is widespread in the management of golf courses? Yes, if certain inferences be granted, some compelling statistics support a contention that top management must "get its act together" and accept its rightful responsibility for golf course conditions if it expects consistency from its field generals.

Would it be reasonable to assume that, as a group, the top 100 golf courses, as ranked in the November, 1979, *Golf Digest*, represent excellence in conditioning as well as in challenging design? Certainly. What is interesting to know in this context is that a club from



*One might forgive the first set of ruts — but the rest . . . ?*

this group is over six times more likely to avail itself of the consultative assistance of the USGA Green Section's Turf Advisory Service than a course selected at random from among all the nation's golf facilities.

There may be a number of factors involved in explaining these data, but coincidence has nothing to do with it. It would even seem a not-unwarranted conclusion to find in this a more enlightened concern with course conditioning among the nation's premier golf facilities. Why else pay even so modest a fee as \$200 for an annual tour of the course and a follow-up written report by an agency whose only mission is precisely to foster more consistently fine playing conditions? The management of these facilities is not afraid, in other words, of what an impartial but critical eye may see. They prefer to be made aware of such existing or potential problems as may be found in time for corrective action to be taken, rather than to remain blissfully ignorant of troublesome situations that may be developing and which, if not addressed early, will very likely become costly to deal with once the effects have become com-

pounded to the point where deteriorating golf conditions are unmistakable even to the casual observer.

There is a further point that begs to be cleared up. Club officials occasionally seem to be surprised that some of the very same points raised by the Green Section have already been presented to them by their superintendent. A degree of skepticism in the face of problematic news is to be anticipated, but it should also be comforting to find such instances of confirmation. Remember that both the golf course superintendent and the green section agronomist have expertise in the same field and are dedicated to achieving the same ends. It is true that they each bring a different perspective to the situation — because of the differing nature of their jobs and of their professional backgrounds — but it is by far the more desirable situation to have these orientations mesh smoothly and for this relationship to be harnessed by the responsible top management, forming a kind of triumvirate with respect to setting a course for the future.

The photographs illustrate one of the problems which seems to be getting more out-of-hand: the employment

each year of a high percentage of inexperienced people on golf course crews and the resultant increase in mistakes. Although this is generally perceived as a funding problem, it is more likely a question of policy and the allocation of funds. Given a fair chance, no superintendent in his right mind would want a preponderance of new workers every year, particularly if his permitted workforce was also smaller than in the past. But this is being forced upon him at an alarming number of courses. We know of at least two instances last season when not only was the entire crew new, but also it was the superintendent's first year as a superintendent. Anyone who fails to appreciate the difficulties inherent in this sort of situation is simply out of touch with reality.

The point which would be well taken from this argument is simple: it is necessary for a golf facility to employ a good golf course superintendent, but that alone is not sufficient to ensure a good long-term result. There needs also to be a top management that is aware of problems and responds to the fundamentally important requirements of the golf course.