



A low degree of maintenance is placed on difficult to mow, out of the way places. The 15th hole, Brandermill Country Club, Virginia.

The Economy and Course Playing Quality

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THE PINCH OF inflation and the talk of recession always have an adverse effect on golf clubs. The budget and course economy then become of more concern to members and to the people who earn their living with golf, such as the golf course superintendent, the golf professional, and the club manager. Because of member demands, those who are employed by golf clubs must be involved in decisions concerning budget tightening. These decisions are not easily made, but each department head can certainly find areas that can be streamlined to effect savings in the overall budget. Changes may be minor

because saving a little in several areas may be more palatable to the membership than trying to make a sizeable saving in one specific area.

Cutbacks are painful. Members grow accustomed to certain standards and expect those standards to be maintained. Although inflation has affected the member's home life, it seems inconceivable to him that "the club" could suffer in the same way. If "the club" needs more money or needs to cut back, surely it is because it is mismanaged, and not because of an inflation rate of 18 percent.

Food quality, service, and attractive interior furnishings are the main attrac-

tions of the clubhouse. The old furnishings, carpeting, and china can be kept attractive and clean without having to be replaced whenever some influential house committee member decides it should be replaced. A somewhat similar situation occurs in the golf course maintenance operation. Machines break down, parts become worn and need repair. That is a job for a specialist, a trained mechanic who can repair a broken item. A person who calls himself a mechanic will simply replace the broken item. He is a parts changer, not a mechanic, and the cost differential is substantial. Clubhouse repairs usually work the same way. A good mechanic



Contour mowing of fairways can reduce acreage requiring frequent mowing while adding character to the hole. The first hole, Mountain Ridge Country Club, New Jersey.

or repairman is essential to club economy.

When club cutbacks are dictated, the golf course maintenance budget is the first to be examined. This is puzzling if one takes the time to note that the golf course maintenance budget comprises 10 to 15 percent of the entire club operation. The golf course, at the majority of the clubs, is the prime attraction for the members. People can join dinner and social clubs for dining and socializing, they can join any number of swim or racquet clubs if they want to swim or play tennis, but there are only a few places they can join to play golf. How many situations do you know of where the dining facilities were built before the golf course? How many swim or tennis clubs do you know of that have added a golf course to their facilities because of membership demands? I would guess very few, if any. The point is, plenty of areas in a club's operation can be streamlined before cuts are made on the golf course. The course maintenance budget should be the last to be examined — not the first.

Although the golf course operation requires a significant amount of money to maintain a good playing surface, some clubs could definitely economize if they would place more emphasis on maintaining a quality playing surface as opposed to a vast expanse of manicured acreage that is better to look at than to play over.

TO PUT GOLF course maintenance in proper perspective, one need not look very thoroughly into records of the past 60 years to realize that maintenance of the playing surface has greatly intensified. Imagine playing today on areas maintained with a sickle bar mower, equipment drawn by horses, and playing on courses without the improved strains of grasses. Going even further back, in July, 1776, when each club wrote its own Rules, Rule 12 at the Royal Burgess Golfing Society, in Edinburgh, Scotland, reads as follows: "When your ball comes within four or five club lengths from the hole to which you are playing, you must not mark, or cause to be marked, the direction of the

hole, nor must any person whatever stand at the hole to point it out or to do any other thing to assist you in playing." If you couldn't see the hole when you were within five club-lengths of it, playing conditions must have been tough!

Golf course management, with the help of the USGA Green Section agronomists and the USGA's sponsorship of golf course oriented research projects, has made tremendous strides in improving technical knowledge of the playing surface. These efforts must be continued, and more effort needs to be made on *conditioning* a golf playing surface rather than *manicuring* an area loosely defined as a golf course. Money can be saved when this distinction is drawn.

Maintaining a quality playing surface requires a substantial expenditure. Certain procedures must be followed. The greens, tees, fairways and roughs have to be mowed frequently. Basic maintenance procedures have to be followed. Greens, tees, and fairways should be aerated each year, some areas

more frequently than others. Equipment must be maintained and repaired, for the golf course cannot be maintained in even the crudest form without equipment. There are no shortcuts!

THE MOST CRITICAL of all the playing areas is the putting surface. No matter how much the economic situation dictates cutbacks or control, the putting surfaces are not the places to save money. In a regulation round, the putting surfaces will provide the area for about half of a player's strokes. The putting surface actually participates more since it is the target area for approach shots and therefore comes into play for approximately 75 percent of the strokes played in a regulation round of golf. Therefore, since approximately 50 percent of the strokes are used for putting and approximately 25 percent of the shots are approach shots, it is essential that the green be conditioned as a putting surface, not merely as a landing area for approach shots.

Putting surfaces generally occupy two to four acres of area on an 18-hole golf course. When they are well conditioned to provide a quality playing surface, greens can be largely respon-

sible for the reputation of any course. A putting surface that is firm and provides a keen, close-cropped sward of grass and a free, true ball roll can justify a reasonable amount of money being spent.

To achieve quality putting surfaces, some of the procedures are:

1. **A close height of cut.** To ensure a close height of cut, championship or thin bedknives are necessary on greens mowers. These bedknives do not last as long as the thicker, regular bedknives. Because more frequent replacement is necessary, the use of thin bedknives is costlier than regular bedknives.
2. **Frequent mowing is necessary.** Fortunately, because of the relatively small area involved, mowing is not expensive. Roughly three gallons of fuel and six man-hours are involved with each mowing. This time varies with the use of single or triplex mowing units. Daily mowing will provide the best playing surfaces. Although more expensive, alternating between walking single units and triplex units can be done. Many times walkers are used on weekdays while triplex mowers are used on

weekends and, especially, in spring and fall when labor is in short supply.

3. **Vertical mowing** is essential in controlling grain and thatch accumulation on the putting surfaces. Light, frequent vertical mowings are advised. The triplex greens mower is an example of a multi-purpose machine when it is converted to a vertical mower. It reduces substantially the time required to vertical mow. Most courses can verti-cut greens in approximately the same time the greens can be mowed. If the triplex machine is used exclusively to mow the greens, then the light vertical mowing should be done at least biweekly.
4. **Topdressing** costs money! Buying the material or mixing your own and stockpiling it to age, or using a sand material with no topsoil or organic matter additive is expensive. The availability and cost of these materials will vary with location, supply and demand, and shipping costs.

Topdressing is a critical operation in making a quality putting surface. A program of light, frequent topdressings can improve an already good putting surface. Many course superintendents use a program of applying a light dusting of material on greens every three weeks during the spring and fall, with great success. Some extend the program well into the summer, if weather permits.

This program is not expensive, because the same amount of material can be used lightly five to six times or twice a year applied more heavily. The real expense comes in labor — having the proper equipment to apply the material, buying extra bedknives which wear rather quickly when frequent topdressings are applied, and the time spent by the mechanic in backlapping the mowing units to keep them sharp. A program of this nature can only be carried out if the topdressing material can be kept dry. This may require a new shelter for storing the topdressing material. The shed need not be extravagant; just good enough to protect the material from the weather.

5. **Aeration.** The main expense in aeration is time and labor. This is a necessary expenditure. The only time aeration becomes extremely expensive is when it is *not* done. By neglecting to aerate on certain soils, conditions could deteriorate to the

Mowing and spraying greens simultaneously. Regular spray equipment used with extra-long hose. Pine Needles Country Club, North Carolina.



point where it is impossible to grow a healthy plant. When plants are not healthy and strong, more chemicals and more labor are required to maintain the grasses.

6. **Chemicals are necessary** for healthy plant grass growth, but their overuse can be expensive and detrimental to a good playing surface. In my opinion, many golf courses depend too much on chemicals. Some turf managers have begun to believe in them as cure-alls for their problems, and they overlook the basic operations listed above. Preemergent crabgrass control programs are a case in point. People become so concerned with the potential problem that they forget that the main objective is to provide a quality playing surface. Because they fear crabgrass, they neglect aeration. Long before preemergent weed controls were available, turfgrass specialists knew that the best approach to weed control is to grow healthy turf.

The preemergent dilemma has become worse because some of these materials also control *Poa annua*. Therefore, when late summer pre-emergence applications are made to stop *Poa annua* germination in the fall, the fall aeration and overseeding is cancelled and two more important basic operations are omitted. The overuse of chemicals is wasteful and costly. Pre-emergence herbicides reportedly shorten the root system of permanent grasses, thereby making the area more susceptible to weed invasion. Pre-emergence weed control chemicals may cost clubs more than the prices indicate.

Fungicides are necessary on putting surfaces, and the cost of a sound, efficient fungicide program is well worth the investment. This item should not be cut to the point where only a curative program can be followed.

7. **Fertilizer and water.** These items have been placed together for a very important reason. They are both essential to planned plant growth. For a quality putting surface, apply only enough fertilizer to provide a growth rate of the grass to keep apace of the traffic imposed upon it. Only enough water is necessary to keep the grass alive — any more is a waste of money.

Improper use of water and fertilizer is mostly responsible for the decline of playing surfaces in the past 20 years. Clubs that believe in the

philosophies that “dark green is good” or “the greens must be soft enough to hold a shot upon impact” are the clubs that could quite possibly realize a substantial saving in greens maintenance by reevaluating their priorities. Should greens be beautiful in color but mediocre in playing quality or merely good-looking and of very good playing quality? If cut-backs are necessary, costs can be cut on portions of the golf course other than the putting surface. The areas “through the green” and “hazards,” as the Rules of Golf define them, bear close examination. The area of the course that is second to the putting surface on the priority list would be the fairway. Fairway grasses should be closely mowed, lightly fed, and sparingly watered.

SOME CLUBS, in an economy move, are greatly reducing the fungicide program on fairways. They apply curative rather than preventive fungicides, the rationale being that it is less expensive in the long run to overseed severely damaged areas in the fall than to treat regularly with fungicides during the year. One club dropped a \$25,000 fungicide program in favor of a \$6,000 seed bill. This, however, is not recommended. Studied fungicide applications are necessary in a well-rounded management program.

Mowing large expanses of fairways can be very costly over a season. It is possible that savings can be made by checking with widths of your fairways. In my view, a landing area over 40 yards wide is generous, but there is little reason for the entire fairway to be this wide. The landing areas for the high-handicap players could be this wide, but fairways in the 225- to 275-yard range could be narrowed so the low-handicap golfers have to work to better control their shots. Fairways may also be narrowed at the greens, and the rough can be brought in tighter around the greens. By eliminating areas presently mowed as fairway, savings can be realized in fuel, labor, seed, fertilizer, irrigation, and equipment. The fairway acreage reduction can be significant and the mowing requirement reduced when areas are mowed as rough once a week or less as opposed to being mowed three to five times a week, if they are maintained as fairways.

In some cases, roughs can be maintained at a slightly higher height of cut and mowed as needed. Several clubs report savings when out-of-play areas

and areas that rarely come into play have been completely removed from the maintenance schedule.

TEES ARE THE next priority item. They should be firm, level, and closely mowed. Other than that, they can be treated much the same as fairways. The frequency of mowing and height of cut will be the most noticed items on the teeing area. Fungicides and herbicides are good programs if budget is adequate, but overseeding and moderate amounts of fertilizer and water should be budgeted annually.

Bunker manicuring is a tremendous expense at some courses. This is a development in the last two decades that came along at the same time as the “grass must be a dark, lush green to be good” philosophy. Many man-hours have reportedly been saved on bunker management by allowing the grass around the bunker to grow to rough height, by creating and maintaining a lip as a result of moving sand down and away from the bunker edge as opposed to frequent mechanical edging. Reducing the raking schedule of bunkers to once a week can help save money. Consider placing the burden of maintaining the bunkers on the players. By reducing required maintenance in bunkers, savings could be significant. Complaints about not having a perfect lie in the sand should not carry much weight if the club is pressed into cutting maintenance costs.

Off the playing surface, a tremendous saving can be realized by purchasing good, reliable, multi-purpose equipment that can save labor. Good equipment requires good care. A well-paid, well-trained mechanic who operates with a good repair parts inventory can help save money for the maintenance budget.

GOLF COURSES are notorious for using part-time or seasonal help. This is false economy because the golf course superintendent is forced to hire and retrain new workers annually. It takes several months to train a worker. Worker pride can save the club a considerable amount of money. Pride stems from permanent employment.

The economy no doubt has had its effect on golf course budgets. All phases of the club's operations are being scrutinized very carefully. For the sake of the game of golf, we can only hope that the flowers and extra manicuring will go before the playing conditions are sacrificed.