

Who Sets the Standards for Play on Your Golf Course?

by **ROBERT W. OSTERMAN**

CGCS, President GCSAA, Connecticut Golf Course, Connecticut

WHO SETS the standards for your golf course is a subject that evokes the attention, interest, or ire of every golf course superintendent who has been on a job for longer than a week. It causes conflict within the organizations of clubs and daily-fee courses alike. It threatens the future of the game. It is a basic business question of responsibility, authority, and power.

Ben Hogan was once asked by a member of the press what he felt was the most important aspect of his game. He pondered a moment and then responded simply, "The most important part of my game is control." Hogan's analysis is directly applicable to the effective management of a golf course. For, like Hogan's control of his game, the question of setting and maintaining the standards for play on your golf course becomes a question of control.

For the most aggressive amongst us, the question is irrelevant. There is no question about who is in control of the standards of play on our golf courses. Far too many of us loudly respond, "I AM!" But are you really? And if you are, is it really wise to project so obviously that you have this power? Perhaps the most successful superintendents among us go about maintaining the standards of play on their golf courses in a quiet and unassuming manner.

For the weaker golf course manager, the question is irrelevant, because this type of manager long ago gave up control.

Who influences the standards of play on your golf course? The answer is simple if you are the only owner, the only golfer, and the only employee. The more realistic answer is probably that a lot of people do. And because a lot of people become involved in influencing standards of play, the professional golf course manager must call upon all his knowledge, expertise, and people skills to control the standards of play and maintain the integrity of the golf course. Those successful at controlling the stan-

dards serve the game, the golf course, and themselves.

Before we proceed, let us brush up on our management knowledge and clarify our understanding of the three concepts mentioned earlier — responsibility, authority, and power. Are these three concepts synonymous? Clearly they are not, for as a manager, you can hold any one and not necessarily the other two.

Responsibility

You can be held responsible for something even though you have neither the authority nor the power. I'm sure every golf course superintendent can relate to this situation!

A major club tournament is about to take place. The course has been beautifully manicured and prepared. Two days before the tournament begins, the humidity rises sharply, along with the temperature. Then, late that night a hot rain falls.

Suddenly *Pythium* erupts and scars the greens before the superintendent has a chance to take action. Who's responsible? The golf course superintendent! Who had the authority and power to control this? Only God.

Robert W. Osterman, President, GCSAA.



To further amplify this concept of responsibility, let me tell you of another true story. A superintendent was playing the course with his pastor, Father O'Malley. As they played, the good father constantly remarked at what a beautiful day it was, what a lovely and tranquil scene God had provided them that day, the lovely rainfall God had sprinkled the course with the night before, and what vibrant green grass God had created on the golf course. As they finished putting out on the 18th green, the priest was overwhelmed by it all and, as he began to walk up to the clubhouse, he turned to the superintendent and exclaimed how blessed they both were that God had given them such a beautiful course. The superintendent smiled and, as he turned to the golf car, replied, "Beautiful it is, Father, but you should have seen it when God managed it by himself."

Authority

Yes, you can hold the authority for something but not be held responsible or have the power to enforce your authority. Many times this situation applies to a club official. The official is sometimes granted the authority to control the standards of a golf course, yet has no power to implement the standards (after all, the golf course superintendent controls the staff), nor the responsibility if the standards are not implemented (and the superintendent is the most likely one who will be replaced — not the club official).

Power

You all know people who have neither responsibility nor authority — but they hold *total* power. If you don't believe me — think about the power of the boss's secretary, or your wife. Try to get a telephone call through to the boss if his secretary doesn't want the call to go through.

Many people believe that knowledge is power. However, knowledge is only an important and necessary part of gaining power. Knowledge helps one



The playing standards found on a country course in the Scottish Highlands (above) . . . differ from those of a golf course on the Oregon coast (below).





If you love the game and care about the course . . .

gain control over the situation. In the case of maintaining the standards of play on a golf course, control is power. It is the golf course superintendent who properly educates himself and understands the intricacies of all the standards of golf play; it is he who is in the best position to assert that control.

What has all of this to do with the question of who sets the standards? It has everything to do with the problem.

All too often, mowing patterns become the product of lazy convenience because mower operators prefer ovals and circles to artful contours that require more work. Who is responsible for this? Who has the authority to change it and who holds the power here?

On some courses, greens become thatchy, slow, and full of grain. Who has the responsibility, authority, and power to change them?

Cup and tee placements become a boring routine for the golfer. What about responsibility, authority, and power here?

When bunkers are not properly raked and out-of-bounds markers are frequently neglected, who holds the responsibility, the authority, and the power?

Who has the responsibility, authority, and power to close the golf course to play or put the golf cars on the paths only?

To all these questions I would like to be able to assure you that the answer is the golf course superintendent. That would be easy and is probably what you were hoping I would say. But easy is not always the way things are in life, nor the way things ought to be.

How do we answer our original question about who sets the standards for play on the golf course? Let's begin by answering, "It is the person who cares." If you don't care, then move your ego aside and let someone else set the standards.

If you love the game and care about the course upon which it is played, the

rest will fall in place. You'll *assume* the responsibility and not wait for it!

The authority to set the standards would be nice. Ideally, the superintendent should have the authority, provided he cares enough to know what is needed.

Knowing what is needed goes beyond a simplistic ability to grow and maintain grass. Knowledge of the kind of golfers you have, their likes and dislikes, their abilities and skill levels is necessary. You also must know something of the Rules of Golf, an understanding of the game, as well as an understanding of golf course design concepts. Most importantly, you must know that you don't know everything — that others can contribute.

Although you may not always have the authority to set standards, you can develop the power to influence the standards: become better educated and more knowledgeable, improve yourself and your abilities, do studies and reports on the standards at your club, and you certainly have the power to lobby the chief authority at your club — the members. Do these things and you will gain greater control and power.

Too often golf courses allow their standards of play to slip. It is then that the golf course superintendent should assert himself. When is the last time you inspected the golf course for proper staking of out-of-bounds and hazards? This is an area of the standards of play that is frequently neglected. Improper marking, or the lack of marking, can lead to problems in playing the game by the Rules. In many cases the golf course superintendent has control of golf course marking.

Another area in setting standards is the location of pin and tee marker positions. Why does it seem that courses are so often set up to be punishingly difficult? Golf is not a game of punishment! It is a game to be enjoyed by people of all ages and abilities. I believe it was Alister MacKenzie who said, "Golf

is a game of pleasurable excitement." MacKenzie, and all the master architects, did not design golf courses to punish people or discourage them from playing. The great courses are designed to provide recreation and challenge. Please, let us give greater consideration and thought to how we regulate the daily setup of our golf courses. And clearly, it is the golf course superintendent who has control and power here.

Simple maintenance practices greatly affect the way a course will play. The golf course superintendent should research, study, and understand what the golf course architect intended. He should be familiar with the philosophies of the architect, because the superintendent can bring out the best of what the golf course architect designed.

Maintenance items as simple as pruning trees can affect the design of the course. For example, trees must be regularly and properly pruned to maintain their shape and impact on the course. The lack of a pruning program can allow the course to become overgrown and play differently. We've all seen examples of courses that have grown away from the design! It is the simple things that count and affect standards of play.

We must not overlook the effect our efforts have on the official rating of the golf course. Over a period of years, simple maintenance practices can make tremendous changes in the overall golf course. This will, of course, cause a change in the rating, and course rating is the key to everyone's handicap.

I feel one must play the game to be able to properly set and maintain the standards of the golf course. Although we may not all be scratch golfers, we must have the perspective of the golfer in mind at all times.

Once proper standards for play are set, only one person has the power to put them in place, the power to maintain the integrity of the golf course, and ultimately the integrity of the game itself. That person is the golf course superintendent. Let us hope that every golf course superintendent will come to recognize this responsibility.

The golf course is never finished! The architect began it and the golf course superintendent dynamically and perpetually carries on the process. It is this continuing process that determines the standards of play. The rewards are personal and the challenges are omnipresent. It is an endless and necessary task.