

Some Qualities of Great Golf Course Superintendents

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I'M NO EXPERT in the field of golf course maintenance or in course preparation for championships, but I've been around for some time. I have served as chairman of my club's green committee for ten years and have had two two-year terms as club president. My work with the United States Golf Association began nine years ago, and I have been chairman of the championship committee for six years. You'll agree, I'm sure, I'm in a rut!

From this rut, however, I have had an unusual opportunity to observe some of the qualities most evident in the best golf course superintendents. As I visited around the country on behalf of the USGA and in my own district, I can say that golf course superintendents are a marvelous group of men. Seldom have I ever run into a group that demonstrates more dedication to their jobs and to their business. In preparing for these remarks, I asked myself, "What is the pattern and what are the qualities seen in the men who maintain the courses at championship sites which identify them for their special jobs?"

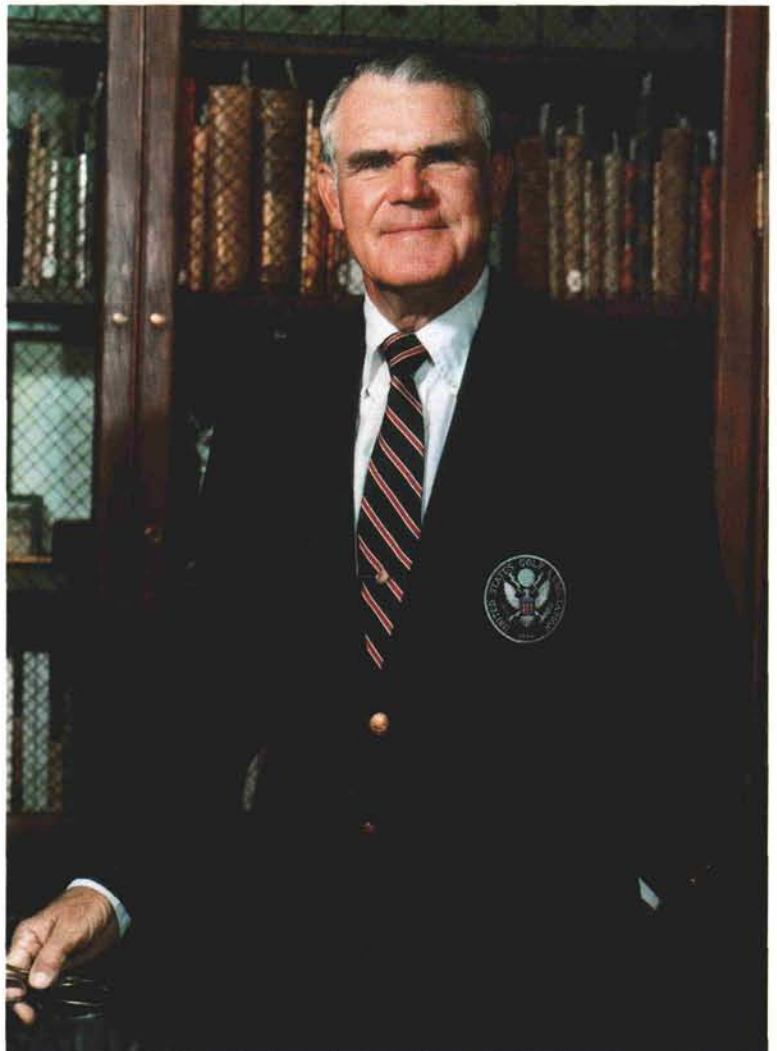
When selecting sites for championships, the USGA does not base the selection on who is in charge of maintaining that golf course. However, a number of other factors are involved in the selection. First, we have to have an invitation. Once invited, the total facilities of a club are considered and should be adequate for the championship. The membership should be eager to take on the task and prepared to do it in first-class fashion. Naturally, the course must present an appropriate test. It is in this requirement that the light of the superintendent often shines through. Assuming a basically sound and superior design, the difference from one golf course to another is frequently in the dedication of the superintendent to standards of excellence in maintenance. Of course, this is backed by a supportive membership with adequate operating and capital budgets.

I have noticed that most, but unfortunately not all, championship courses are maintained regularly, year in and year out, as championship courses. I suspect that this high state of excellence is no accident. Rather, it is the by-product of the standards set for himself by the superior superintendent and supported by his membership. These qualities, I've come to realize, are similar

to those needed for success in most professions. There is an additional factor, however, for the superintendent. He must also develop very special skills to cope with his unusual situation. He is the man in the middle, and that's not always an easy position from which to launch a successful career.

But what are some of the qualities that stand out in championship super-

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The Green Section Booth at the GCSAA Conference, Las Vegas, Nevada. Left to right: James T. Snow, Northeastern Director; Steve M. Batten, Southeastern Agronomist; and Larry W. Gilhuly, Western Director, USGA Green Section.

intendents? I hasten to add that not all possess all of these qualities to the same degree. You wouldn't expect it to be otherwise.

THE FIRST observation: the best superintendents are organized. Their work habits, and those they supervise, are organized and precise. Plans for work and program schedules are written and formalized. The work areas are clean and neat. Equipment is well-maintained with complete maintenance schedules and records. Supervisors reflect the same organizational style. Emergencies do occur in championships — rain and thunder storms, extensive heat, vandalism, etc. Knowing how to meet these emergencies is the norm for the well-organized superintendent.

I have found the effective superintendent to be a warm and friendly person, usually blunt, often a bit shy, one who wants to be appreciated, even praised, but at a minimum, to be understood. How have I seen this quality? I've seen it in the respect and appreciation of

fellow superintendents expressed toward him. They often come to his aid by sharing equipment, materials, and experiences. I see it in the effective and supportive relationship he has with the club manager and other club department heads. I see it in the support of his green committee chairman, with whom he has a close, friendly, and respectful working relationship. This means he and the chairman have completely agreed upon goals and standards for the course. Conversely, when such a relationship with the green committee chairman does not exist, I have detected a dissatisfaction on the part of the superintendent with his budget, oftentimes with his salary, a suspicion that he isn't appreciated and, even annoyance that his daily routine has been interrupted for a national championship. This is rare, but it does happen.

And then, I've noted dedication. The most frequent quality I see is his selfless dedication to the championship, to his club and to his golf course! Few people, certainly not club members,

have any idea of the length of the superintendent's day during the golf season.

Another quality I found, almost without exception, is that the championship superintendent is very knowledgeable about his job. This means to me that he has been educated, either by formal training or from experience on the job working with others. Usually, he is a combination of all these learning environments. I've become acutely aware of his knowledge of chemistry and botany and other related sciences and how to use them effectively in the practical application of presenting a golf course that can be played at a higher level because of its preparation. I've come away with another impression, too, unlike any in the business world. It is his willingness to share his experience and knowledge with his fellow superintendents.

FROM THIS sharing has developed a collective wisdom for the benefit of all. The Turf Advisory Service of the USGA Green Section is also the recipient

of this unselfish sharing of superintendents. May this sharing continue for the benefit of all. We at the USGA do not think of our agronomists as super superintendents. Qualified they are, but their task is simply as a consultant, to help the superintendent by passing on to him ideas and suggestions that will help him do a more effective job. We want to improve the superintendent's image at his club, elevate his professional status and thereby his economic status. When you stop to think about it, the success of our Green Section agronomists depends entirely on the success achieved by the golf course superintendent.

Another quality that's important and which I believe needs more attention from the superintendent himself is the need to communicate more effectively with his clients — club members, committee people, his own staff, etc. I realize the most effective among you have given attention to this in recent years in many ways, but I suspect that you'd agree you can do a lot more. The benefits to you are very real. Those of you who have sought the opportunity to report regularly to your membership on your programs, your problems, your successes and failures know that doing so has created a lot more understanding and even support when you need it. It really works!

ANOTHER AID to your job isn't necessarily a quality. It is my belief that every superintendent should spend some time playing the game. By so doing, and preferably walking the course, you can get a feel for what the player experiences on that field on which you work so hard. Only by playing can you truly experience the game. As you play, you'll notice things you'd not have seen otherwise: an overhanging limb that didn't seem to be there yesterday, a settling on a tee, a subtle change in the size of a green because of haphazard mowing — so many things. And there's no need for you to be a scratch golfer. However, by regularly playing your own course, you will have a better feel for how you are doing the job and how your course is shaping up. You may even see firsthand how you can do a better job.

While on the subject of playing the game, you might be interested in my views regarding the Stimpmeter. I consider it a very useful tool, but only a tool. It should be used but not worshiped! I consider it a device to aid the superintendent in producing consistent speeds on greens as well as a measurement for

(Opposite page, top) Coping with conditions is a quality of great golf course superintendents.

(Opposite page, bottom) A golf course always in championship condition. The 15th at Cypress Point Club, Pebble Beach, California.

(Below) Eb Steiniger, former Superintendent of Pine Valley, and Stanley J. Zontek, North-Central Director, USGA Green Section, at the GCSAA Conference and Show, Las Vegas, Nevada.



determining the approximate roll appropriate for the contours, the quality of the players, and the type of turf under consideration. I believe that most greens can be safely maintained somewhat faster than is generally available at most courses. However, I decry the recent tendency of some club memberships to persist in trying to attain speeds ill suited to the green contours, the ability of the players, or to the conditioning of the grass. It's a mistake, in my judgement, for the average club to try to attain Stimpmeter readings suitable only for championship play. Having said that, I still believe most superintendents should strive to make their greens play a bit faster than many of those I see. Remember, the game is played — not just looked at.

And finally, if there is one quality that every great superintendent has, it is the ability to look at a new and unexpected

problem and say, when asked if it can be handled, "No problem. We'll handle it." A few special memories come back to me as examples of this ability to cope — without getting flustered:

Remember the tree at Inverness Club, in Toledo, Ohio, during the 1979 U.S. Open? There we had an unusual and unexpected problem. From the tee of the newly designed eighth hole, players found they could shorten the hole, a dogleg par-5, by hitting through an opening in the trees to another fairway. Doing this during play was not only dangerous to players and spectators, but also slowed play tremendously. We considered moving the tee markers forward. The idea was abandoned. When we wondered how we could block the opening, the superintendent advised us he had a very large pine tree he could plant before play the following morning. And at sun-up (and before play), it was done.



Then at Merion, a thin, muddy back tee in the woods became unplayable from rain. Overnight the superintendent resodded it, tied in the sod strips with pegs, and with a little luck, we managed. The superintendent knew how to cope!

Last year at Oakmont when bunkers were flooded from a thunderstorm, rather than delay play and not be able to finish a round, the maintenance staff suggested we dig up sand and build a temporary sand elevation at the rear of the bunker where a ball could be

dropped, within the bunker, without penalty, under the casual-water Rule. They did — and we coped!

An outstanding job of improvising was done at the 1983 British Open, at Royal Birkdale, in Southport, England. Sometime after midnight, vandals caused very great damage to a green, carving messages in the turf with a shovel. When the security forces discovered it, the grounds staff worked through the rest of the night. They were able to establish one hole location adequate for the ground-under-repair Rule. A great job

was done in a short time and play went on as scheduled.

And so, my hat is off to these men who have a wonderful mix of qualities that makes them stand out. They are organized; they know how to get along; they are dedicated, knowledgeable and know how to communicate; they know how to play the game; and, finally, without being flustered, they know how to improvise and cope. Some may say this sounds like a litany of the saints. In the world of golf, it may very well be so!

