



"Why are they always irrigating on the day I play?"

THE MEMBER AND SUPERINTENDENT RELATIONSHIP

Complainin' and Explainin'

by LARRY W. GILHULY

Director, Western Region, USGA Green Section

"THE WAY we generally strive for rights is by getting our fighting blood up; and I venture to say that that is the long way and not the short way. If you came at me with your fists doubled, I think I can promise you that mine will double as fast as yours, but if you come at me and say, 'let us sit down and take counsel together, and, if we differ from one another, understand why it is that we differ from one another, just what the points at issue are,' we will presently find that we are not so far apart after all, that the points on which we differ are few, and the points on which we agree are many, and that if we only have the patience and the candor and the desire to get together, we will get together."

Woodrow Wilson

IT'S A CLOUDY spring morning with a very light mist. A club member is driving past the course on his way to work. He notices the irrigation system is on and wonders why a currently wet golf course is being watered. Doesn't the superintendent know what he is doing?

This Wednesday an important client is in town and you've invited him to a round of golf. The course was in extraordinary condition last Saturday. You have lunch and tee off at 1 p.m. You reach the first green and find it (and all others) aerified and topdressed since last Monday! Why do they always have to tear up and ruin the greens just when they're perfect?

The preceding are just two examples of questions the golf course superintendent must answer daily. If he is approached with an inquisitive attitude and a desire for honest information, the superintendent can usually explain the situation. He can give good reasons that, hopefully, will not be perceived as excuses. The

superintendent, on the other hand, must strive to avoid as many controversies as possible. When he sets his programs, he must attempt to disturb the fewest number of playing members.

The subject of communication has been discussed and written about by experts, so I will not attempt to discuss how to communicate; rather, I will try to explain several often-repeated complaints of golf course maintenance practices and some practical methods to reduce or eliminate these concerns.

Why do the sprinklers always seem to be on?

Perhaps the most difficult area of communication between the member and superintendent concerns irrigation practices. In the past, overwatering was a nationwide golf course affliction. However, decreasing water supplies, soaring electrical and water costs, and a more understanding attitude from golfers (green doesn't always equate to good playing conditions) has begun to change

that. In spite of the need to reduce watering, many times the superintendent is confronted by understandably disturbed members who question his irrigation practices. To those who want wall-to-wall green, it is important to realize that most golf courses are not as easily maintained as home lawns. There will probably be occasional brown areas; this is much more desirable than wet spots.

As described earlier, a member may be on the way to work or dropping by the club for lunch and drive by the course. One can imagine the reaction when it is raining and the irrigation system is in operation! It is natural to wonder (sometimes aloud) what in the world is happening! In most cases there is a very logical explanation. Many times the irrigation specialist cannot check the system while there is play on the course. Therefore, bad weather brings an opportunity for making sure sprinkler heads are turning, checking valves, nozzles, etc. Another common problem occurs when a hot fertilizer is applied. A light rain may be falling, but it may not provide enough moisture to dissolve the fertilizer particles. On many occasions the superintendent is simply making sure the fertilizer does not produce an undesirable burn. In this situation, it may be best to fertilize early in the evening to reduce potential problems.

Why are maintenance personnel allowed to drive on the golf course while members must stay on the cart paths?

This problem can become particularly troublesome during the winter, during rainy periods, or during times of heat stress. All it takes is one employee using bad judgement and the repercussions can last for weeks.

Obviously, the maintenance of the golf course must be completed within a certain period. The employee tends to keep this constantly in mind, and this causes mistakes. It is the responsibility of the superintendent to set strict guidelines to define where employees can and cannot operate maintenance equipment. Whenever possible, the employee should be instructed to remain on cart paths or in rough areas and be especially careful around putting greens and landing zones. However, there are conditions where speed must also be considered, for example, a fast application of a fungicide during Pythium weather, fast syringing during heat stress periods, and setting pin placements in front of early morning play.

Employees, therefore, should not be allowed to roam freely with maintenance vehicles except in emergencies, or else when it substantially saves time and labor.

Why are the greens always aerified on Mondays, and why are they always aerified just when they are beginning to play well? Can't we reduce or eliminate aerification altogether?

As a rule, most clubs have specific days for different groups of players. For example, Tuesday is often ladies day, Wednesday is men's day, Thursday may also be men's day, and Friday is mixed play day. Weekends, of course, are usually the busiest time of all. This leaves basically one day a week — Monday — when significant maintenance can be accomplished without disturbing a large amount of play. Many times the women members express justifiable concern about these Monday maintenance practices that greatly affect playing qualities on Tuesday. One of the best methods to handle this particular situation is to provide as much information as possible. A meeting once a year to describe how and why maintenance practices are accomplished can reduce problems. This meeting is best conducted by the superintendent and green committee chairman, in conjunction with a regular ladies club meeting.

The aerification of greens should be accomplished as fast as possible. While some clubs have the ability to complete the aerification program in one day, many others cannot and will aerify nine greens on successive Mondays. Others aerify nine greens on Monday and finish the operation by completing three or four greens per day on Tuesday through Thursday doing the work in early morning, before play begins. Some clubs do not close their courses, use no temporary greens, and take one to two weeks to complete the aerification. This method is the most difficult for both the maintenance crew and the golfer.

The superintendent faces the problem of timing the aerification program with various club functions. Often, he is asked to aerify earlier or later than normal rather than change the date of a tournament. Providing the membership understands the consequences of switching aerification timing, there should be little problem. Unfortunately, information is not always received or understood, and the superintendent is held

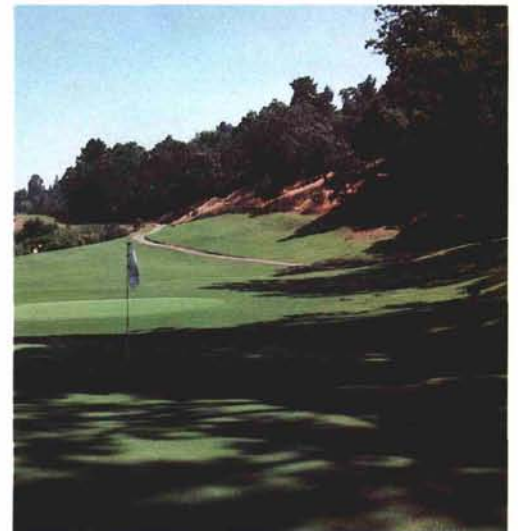
responsible for less than optimum playing conditions because of improper communications.

One method to aid in the aerification problem is suggested. Provided adequate equipment and manpower are available, complete nine holes on Monday by closing down one nine. To achieve more efficiency, aerify three or four of the greens late Sunday afternoon, when play in minimal. Then, close down the other nine on Tuesday and conduct a special "Aerification Tournament" for the regular players on Tuesday. If done properly, this can not only effectively complete the aerification operation quickly, but bring the course back into normal playing conditions in less time.

Why are there wet areas around greens?

Since golf course soils and terrain usually are not consistent, one can expect the biggest problems with irrigation where the largest variations exist. This area, needless to say, is the area surrounding the putting greens.

The modern putting green is constructed of predominately sandy material to allow for faster water drainage and to



(Above) Complaints about shade-covered greens and poor turf: Attention tree committee.

(Opposite page, top) A notice on the first tee.

(Opposite page, bottom) "But I didn't have time to use the path."

withstand compaction. Even many older greens built of less permeable material have been modified with topdressing material to improve rooting depth, aid in drainage, and resist compaction. Most maintenance practices performed on the actual putting surface are either reduced or not done at all around the green. Many times, because it is cheaper, the area surrounding a green is not made of the same material. Usually native soil is used to create the mounds and dips that add interest and character to a particular green. When excessive foot and vehicular compaction, shade from trees, and reduced maintenance practices (aerification, topdressing, etc.) occur on a native soil that is irrigated with the same system that irrigates a putting green, built on a base of sand, irrigation and drainage problems will occur.

There are many alternatives (some very expensive, other moderately priced) to aid in this dilemma:

1. Excessively wet areas should be drained by tile or a catch basin.

2. If equipment and manpower are available, a more intensive maintenance program should be undertaken. Aerification and topdressing twice per year will aid these areas greatly.

3. Reduce watering for the surrounding area — not the green. This, of course, will increase hand watering on the putting surfaces.

4. Several options are available within the irrigation system itself. Sprinkler heads and nozzles with lower precipitation rates, a separate, very low volume system, and separate partial turn heads for the surroundings only are some of the alternatives.

Why can't the greens be slower, fairways longer and roughs shorter? Or, why can't the greens be faster, fairways shorter and roughs higher?

These are very frequent questions asked by high and low handicap players. Often, high handicap players ask the former question while the low handicap player asks the latter. The important question for club officials to ask is, "What type of golf course does the membership want?"



As a general guideline, putting green speed for normal membership play in the 7-foot to 8-foot range (depending on green contours) should provide adequate pace. If a special tournament or club championship requires slightly faster greens, this can be achieved easily on the short term. Excessive speed on the long term is becoming an increasingly difficult problem. The player must understand the agronomic factors involved in excessively fast or slow greens, while the superintendent must provide the best putting surfaces for his membership.

For fairway playing conditions, a height of 1/2-inch (bentgrass, bermudagrass, zoysiagrass) to 3/4-inch (bluegrass) is desirable in most cases. A number of golfers want to know why fairways are cut so short. Raise the mowers and the ball will sit up higher, right? Wrong. Players should understand that a higher height of cut actually makes the ball sit down in the grass and results in more flyer lies. It becomes unfortunate when the height of fairway cut is raised and complaints suddenly begin about hard greens. We must all remember it is the responsibility of the player to put enough backspin on a ball to cause it to stop; it is not the responsibility of the green to hold any shot.

In regard to rough height, it depends primarily on the type of grass within the rough areas. A 2½-inch bentgrass, ber-



"Why must they always aerify on the day I play?"

mudagrass or kikuyugrass rough will play with much greater difficulty than a 2½-inch perennial ryegrass or Kentucky bluegrass rough. Again, the membership must be taken into account. Rough mowed at the 2- to 2½-inch level for normal membership play will provide improved fairway framing and an adequate challenge. As with green speed, additional rough height for special tournaments can be achieved for short periods.

To summarize, putting green speed from seven feet to eight feet, fairways mowed from 1/2- to 3/4-inch, and roughs mowed 2- to 2½-inches may provide the least amount of controversy from the golfing membership.

Why are some of the tee blocks consistently out of alignment?

This problem is often caused by one of two factors — improper tee alignment-mowing patterns, or employee error. We have all seen tees that aim the player either left or right of the intended landing zone. Add improper tee block placement to this, and many players will align themselves incorrectly.

One method of correction is to rebuild the tee. This can sometimes be quite costly and unnecessary. A less costly approach is to make changes in mowing patterns on the tee. While some teeing area may be lost, it is the simplest answer to this surprisingly frequent problem.

To reduce or eliminate employee error, construct a T-square out of 1- to 2-inch PVC irrigation pipe using a T coupling. When the longest axis is placed in the intended line of flight, the tee blocks are then placed in a direct line of either side of the shorter axis. This tool would be used by whoever changes the cup in the morning and the tee mower operator later in the day.

I just played Perfection Country Club last week. Why can't our course be as good?

Of all complaints, this is the most difficult to answer. In many cases the best answer is no answer at all. Those golfers who insist on comparisons should obtain as much information as possible before they draw conclusions. As more information is delivered, the clearer the picture becomes. Comparing golf courses is like comparing snowflakes — no two are the same.

The second green sits so beautifully under the surrounding trees. Can't we improve the grass on this green?

Trees and turfgrass. If ever there was a match not made in heaven, these two would be candidates. As Frank Hanigan, Senior Executive Director of the USGA, states, "We've become victims of the arboretum syndrome. There are too many trees on golf courses and too many trees in the wrong places.

"By wrong places, I mean approximate to targets. There is something very wrong in suffering an unplayable lie under a blue spruce when you miss the green on a 440-yard par-4 hole by 30 feet.

"Green Committees over the years have treated courses like organic crossword puzzles by filling in all the blank spaces with trees. So I hope we'll be a little more careful about trees in the future."

This is especially critical around putting greens. None of us likes to see trees — large or small — removed, but trees could be the reason why a green may not perform properly. Accepting the trees means accepting the existing playing conditions. All complaints about poor turf conditions on shade covered greens should be directed to the tree committee.

The continual little problems. Why are the benches wet? Why is there no water in the ball washers? Why are the ball washer towels always dirty? Why is there no sand in the bunkers? Why don't the employees turn off their equipment while I'm putting? Etc.

While many of these questions may seem petty, they actually are small indicators of how the maintenance staff views the golfers and their course. Instilling pride in the maintenance staff can eliminate many of these problems. So often we take the little things for granted, and these small problems can become rather large. It is important to remind every crew member that he is working for the golfers and providing a service. Even the smallest complaint must be listened to attentively as it is important to that particular person.

While the preceding questions are some of the more frequently heard, they are by no means the only questions a superintendent must handle. The predictable and unpredictable problems that arise must be handled with tact and sincerity.

The effective turf manager knows many of the questions in advance, and he has carefully prepared the proper answers. He also takes advantage of every opportunity to pass on information about the golf course and the maintenance programs that affect play.

SEVERAL METHODS of information dispersal are available to the superintendent and green committee chairman. The more explanations about the course operations given to the mem-

bership, the more they are given an opportunity to understand the peculiar problems in a golf course maintenance operation. These methods include:

1. Club newsletter — Every month, the superintendent should have a short article describing his planned operations or covering questions that are continually asked.

2. Monthly bill — When club dues notices are sent out, a short paragraph or two about course operations can reach many people who otherwise may not read the newsletter or notice articles posted throughout the club.

3. Announcement boards — While a bulletin board can be effective, many times it becomes cluttered. The superintendent's memos (aerification dates, topdressing dates, fertilizer dates) can become lost or forgotten. An erasable announcement board for the golf course only, displayed in a prominent location, is more noticeable. Daily, weekly or monthly programs can be shown to forewarn players of maintenance practices. While many maintenance practices can mildly upset golfers, they can become

very upset if these practices are a surprise and done without prior notice.

4. Special meetings — The idea of a special meeting in the spring put on by the superintendent and green committee chairman for the membership to outline the coming year's operation has been used successfully at some clubs to disseminate information. You can expect several of the preceding questions to arise. This offers an excellent method to provide needed information to the membership. Also, it allows all members an opportunity to state complaints or comments concerning the golf course operation.

5. Occasional rounds of golf with both men's and ladies' groups regardless of the superintendent's playing skill provides constructive conversation opportunities. It is important that the membership understands that the superintendent is a golfer and understands the game. This alone often gives credibility to the superintendent's programs. Without it, golfers wonder (often mistakenly) if the superintendent really does understand how to maintain a golf course.

6. Use outside sources — If your club subscribes to the USGA Green Section Turf Advisory Service, use it to inform the membership about ongoing programs and the problems faced. If not posted in a prominent place, or reproduced in part in the club newsletter, it should be available to the board of directors and green committee for their information. This can be extremely valuable, because the USGA agronomist has nothing to sell. He is there solely to help your club produce the best possible playing conditions for the membership. More often than not, this tool can be very effective in explaining maintenance operations and offering useful suggestions for further improvements on the golf course.

While we should all strive to understand and respect the golfer's point of view, it is the superintendent's responsibility to educate the golfer about his maintenance programs. Through mutual respect and understanding, complainin' and explainin' can become a positive avenue to answer questions and disseminate information for the member and superintendent.

News Notes for Summer

The North-Central becomes the Great Lakes Region.

With the realignment of some states for the Green Section Turf Advisory Service, a new name has also been adopted for the North Central Region. The Great Lakes Region is the new title. **James M. Latham, Jr.**, will bring 30 years of turfgrass experience to TAS subscribers from Michigan to Montana. Although Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Iowa may feel Great Lakes Region is stretching it a bit, we think you'll feel right at home with Jim Latham. He has had tremendous experience throughout the nation. We know he can make a contribution to turf management operations at any golf club

interested in turf progress and perfection. His address is 4680 West Bradley Road, Suite 2, Brown Deer, Wisconsin 53223. Phone: (414) 354-2203.

The map shows all of the USGA Green Section Regions.

A USGA-trained agronomist is not more than a day away from your golf course. For the best golfing turf your course will ever have, contact your Regional USGA Green Section office today and subscribe for 1985.



A Turfgrass Research Memorial Fund Established for Dr. Marvin H. Ferguson

A Memorial Fund for Dr. Marvin H. Ferguson has been established by the Ferguson family and the USGA Foundation. Dr. Ferguson died in early January 1985. He served on the GREEN SECTION staff for 20 years, the USGA Turfgrass Research Committee, and he was responsible for many advances in turfgrass science, including the USGA Specifications for Putting Green Construction. In later years, he was the turfgrass research director for the American Society of Golf Course Architects.

Donors wishing to make a memorial tribute to Dr. Ferguson may do so through the USGA Foundation, in care of James R. Hand, President, USGA Foundation, Golf House, Far Hills, New Jersey 07931. Please attach a cover letter stating the gift is for the Dr. M. H. Ferguson Memorial Fund. It will be used strictly for turfgrass research, and the USGA Foundation will acknowledge the gift to the Ferguson family. Such donations are tax deductible and the donor will receive a letter of acknowledgement for tax purposes.