



Definitely pleasing, definitely costly.

Focusing in on Golf Course Maintenance – 1986

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“When against one’s will, one is highly pressured into making a hurried decision, the best answer is always say no, because no is more easily changed to yes than yes is changed to no.”

Charles E. Nielson

LIKE HIBERNATING bears in their TV dens, the nation’s golfers watched, since early January, magnificent shots hit from nearly perfectly conditioned golf courses from Waikiki to Augusta. Now it is late spring, and summer is half a step away. They have seen the best (in living color), and they look for the same conditions on

their home courses as they have seen on TV. It’s easy to overlook that those tournament courses have been groomed and pampered for a year or more and brought to their peak for this one week.

The condition of any golf course is determined as much by the money the club is willing to invest as by the talent that goes into managing the expenditures. Obviously, clubs with higher budgets can afford walking mowers for putting greens, tees, and walking aerifiers and triplex mowers for fairways — equipment that will certainly help the current and long-range course conditions. But what happens to the golf course superintendent who cannot afford these machines and yet is pressured by the mem-

bership to produce equivalent results? Is there any way to convey this dilemma more effectively to a broad portion of the membership? Yes, he can.

Successful golf course superintendents of the past have effectively used photographs and 35mm slides to tell their story to the green committee and club officials. Now the time has come when the use of a portable VCR can be even more valuable to the superintendent in communicating with club officials, the membership, and the members of his own maintenance crew. Let’s explore how this new electronic tool can be used to accommodate current and fast-changing trends in golf course maintenance.

Greens

The main area of concern and emphasis in any maintenance operation must be the greens. The ultimate goal is to provide the best putting surfaces possible given the soil, turf type, manpower, and irrigation system, but what does the word "best" mean? To some it may mean greens as fast as possible. To others, consistency and smoothness may be equally as important as speed. Still others are completely satisfied with slower greens that are smooth and covered with dense grass. It is in the area of putting green speed that pressure has been and continues to be felt.

The Stimpmeter, a new and accurate tool, was introduced by the Green Section in 1976. Its purpose was to establish a standard for judging green speeds for championship and regular play. In 1976, the average speed of putting greens was six feet six inches. The slowest greens were found to be approximately four feet eleven inches while the fastest were in the eight feet six inch range in the western United States.

When one looks at these readings and compares them to green speeds today, it is easy to see the effect the Stimpmeter has had on putting green maintenance requirements. There is general agree-

ment that regular putting green speeds of eight feet (plus or minus six inches) are desired by most players and consistently producible through good management by most superintendents. Few golfers would now accept the six foot six inch average speed of ten years ago. At the same time, the Speed Wars between neighboring clubs for the fastest greens in town, common a few years ago, have proven to be detrimental to quality putting surfaces. They cannot be sustained week after summer week with any assurance of success in holding the turf. Championship speeds are possible (10 feet six inches, plus or minus six inches) for short periods of time, but nature's grass plant can only take so much.

Tees

Close-cropped, firm teeing surfaces are common today. For years, high-budget clubs have treated their tees as much as possible as they treat greens: aeration, topdressing, weed control, and overseeding. Divot repairs have been traditional; it has become increasingly so on fairways as well. If there is a manpower shortage on the course maintenance crew, however, the membership might be encouraged to fill divots with a soil/seed mix from individual buckets placed

on golf carts or at each tee. A short videotape, displayed repeatedly on a screen in the golf shop, could instruct players how to do this job and how to repair ball marks on greens properly.

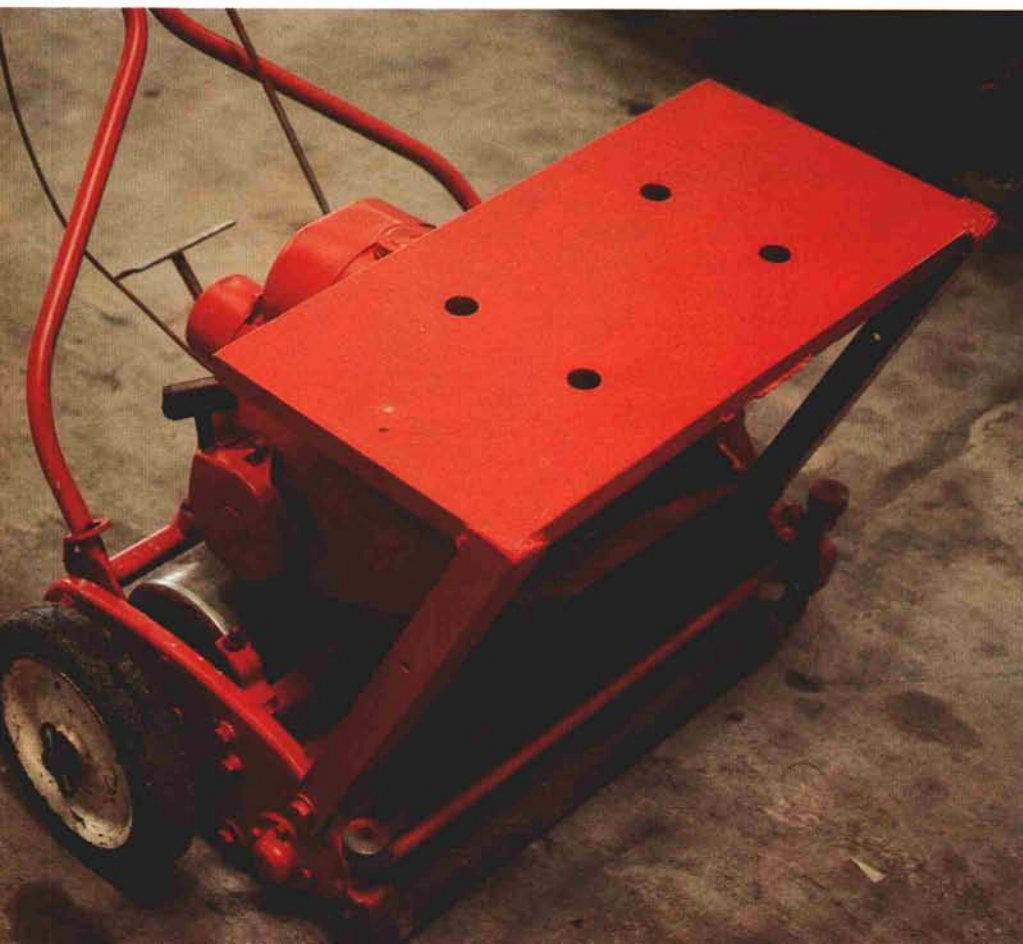
Fairways

In a perfect par round of golf, one-quarter of all shots are hit from the teeing surfaces, one-quarter from the fairways, and half are made on the putting greens. Since fairways are so much larger than tees, they have not in the past received the intensive care as have tees. However, this is now changing. Today, many clubs are mowing fairways with triplex mowers set at 1/2-inch to 3/8-inch and removing the clippings. Bentgrass populations have benefitted. Even putting green aerifiers are being used on fairways to relieve compaction and achieve topdressing at the same time. Results have been very good, but these practices are labor and equipment intensive. Not every club can afford them. Those that choose to do so must either increase their budgets or permit other high-maintenance areas (bunkers and approaches to tees and greens) to suffer.

As an alternative to cutting fairways with triplex mowers, an increasing

Hand mowing is not cheap.





(Top) The VCR and the irrigation system — complexity simplified.

(Left) A "roller" for greens to increase speed. Aeration will be next — and the cost of maintenance climbs.

(Above) Recording equipment inventory.

number of clubs are going to the faster five-gang mower concept with nearly equally good results. Many believe the five-gang unit is the answer to the smaller triplex and heavier seven-gang units of the past. With reduced fairway size and contour mowing, the five-gang unit can effectively produce the same results as triplex mowers in half the time.

Mowing Frequency and Height of Cut

It wasn't too long ago (perhaps a quarter century) that most courses mowed greens three times a week. A quarter century from now we may look back in wonder at mowing so seldom. When fairways are cut at 3/4-inch or higher, they must be mowed three times a week in order to prevent flyer lies. As the trend continues toward even closer fairway mowing, 1/2- to 5/8-inch, increased frequency will be necessary to maintain the playing standard. The closer the cut, the greater the intensity of management. Irrigation, fertilization, aeration, disease and pesticide controls — every part of the management program moves up a notch or two.

The golf courses most affected by the new, intensive trends in golf course management will not be the high-budget clubs. Indeed, they are setting the trends. Instead, it is those courses, green committees, and superintendents having moderate to modest budgets who are most likely to be affected adversely. When their members play one of the high-budget courses and then return to the home course, disappointment and even unrest may set in. They don't realize they are comparing kiwi fruit to zucchini. It is up to the superintendent, using whatever means he has, to put the story into perspective. Golf courses cannot be compared and no golf course is in *perfect* condition every day of the year.

The Use of a VCR in the Maintenance Operation

Although these are only brief thoughts, each must be explained to the golf membership. Communication with the membership has taken the form of articles in the club newsletter, bulletin boards, or other means. A portable VCR, however, can take communication one step further. The use of a VCR in golf course maintenance operations is limited only by the imagination of the user.

For management operations, the following areas offer intriguing possibilities:

1. Green Committee — Any operation that is done on the golf course can easily be captured on videotape for display later. This is particularly important where green committee members change often. As an educational tool for the entire committee, the use of a VCR recorder could prove invaluable. Continuing maintenance programs are the lifeblood of the superintendent's operations, and they must be explained, sold, and updated constantly.

How often do members not rake bunkers, fix ball marks, drive carts too close to greens? These and other very costly practices could be captured on film (while not implicating individuals) to show the green committee some of the problems of course management. Or, how can you (the superintendent) explain why the fairways are so wet in the winter and so hard in the summer? A tape of a putting green aerifier bouncing across a fairway would certainly be helpful in this regard.

2. Crew Training and Safety — While the VCR can be useful for membership education, its greatest use may be with crew training and safety. Rather than spending all of his first day on the golf course, a new employee might spend part of the day reviewing safety films about equipment operation and the inherent dangers of working on a golf course. Another portion of the day might be spent learning basic golf course etiquette and proper skills for particular operations he will be asked to do. This could also be done as a regular refresher course in golf course maintenance operations for existing employees. By demonstrating the right and wrong way to operate equipment, rake bunkers, fix ball marks, change cups, the golf course worker's thoughts can be channeled in proper directions. From a safety standpoint, employees need constant reminders about the safe operation of maintenance equipment.

3. Equipment and Building for Insurance Purposes — In case of a disaster or theft, it would be useful to have a visual recording of the maintenance building and equipment owned by the club. This could provide a complete account of the clubhouse and golf shop inventory and buildings.

Relating to equipment, how many times has a green committee or board of directors denied needed equipment replacement on your golf course? Perhaps they need more information about the equipment or to actually see the problems and condition of present equipment. Presenting a visual display (with

close-up views) could be a most useful tool in improving the equipment inventory in a prudent manner.

4. Mechanical Instruction Aid — The important operations of grinding, backlapping, proper mower adjustment, and other programs accomplished by the mechanic should be on film for training a new mechanic, assistant mechanic, or regular crew members. Finding a good golf course mechanic can be difficult. The superintendent and club should pass on as much information about proper equipment maintenance and repair as possible for future golf course operations.

5. The Irrigation System — Because every irrigation system is different, it would be invaluable to have on film how the irrigation system on your course operates so that in cases of emergency or employee turnover you can explain the basics of your particular system to the green committee. For example, what better way to explain the need for a new irrigation system than a video showing 10 to 15 heads, at different elevations, all connected to one station with wet and dry areas immediately adjacent to one another? A picture may be worth more than a thousand words in that case!

6. Before and After Shots — "I remember when" has long been uttered by the membership or maintenance staff concerning the way the golf course was in the old days. A complete video of every hole, including all of the architectural features, trees, putting green contours and fairway contours, could be a useful tool in providing a reference map.

If the club wishes to rebuild and retain exact contours, what better aid than a video of the area before reconstruction? For a green committee meeting, what better way than a video tape of showing a particular problem or portion of the golf course needing work and what is being proposed? What better way to show the facts?

Summary

In every endeavor it is important to remember the past as one plans and moves into the future. Extraordinary progress has been made in the care and management of golfing turf in the past half a century. It is safe to predict that even greater progress will be made with the grass plant of the future, but we must all recognize and remind ourselves that some limitations always exist in nature, and nature is an essential part of golf. As Hanna More once said, "The world does not require so much to be informed — as to be reminded."