

Golf Course Safety — Pay Attention Now or Pay (and Pay) Later

by JAMES M. LATHAM

Director, Great Lakes Region, USGA Green Section

ONCE UPON a time safety in golf course operations amounted to little more than the humane concern for a person's well being. The crews were a rather close-knit group of pretty macho outdoorsmen, used to long hours in the field, usually alone, taking care of their section of the golf course. They worked steadily and carefully to mow the greens, rake the sand, set the cups and tee markers, and pick a few weeds. If they skinned a knuckle or scratched an arm, it waited until they got back to the barn.

More serious injuries caused a great deal of alarm, because many operations had no salary protection for unworked

time, regardless of cause. A lot of people worked hurt, but they learned to be more careful. Those were the times when being one's brother's keeper really meant something.

Those were just the mechanical things. Chemicals? It's a wonder golf course employees ever lived beyond the age of 30. Weed killers were arsenic acid, sodium arsenite, potassium cyanate. Lead arsenate was used for bugs and some weeds. Disease controls were largely compounds of metals such as mercury or cadmium with some thiram thrown in for safety (for plants, not people).

Winter work involved mixing these chemicals with sand, topdressing, or

organic fertilizer so they could be spread more easily and uniformly than with a sprayer. This was done in the little old barn by a wood stove. Dusty? If the chemical was lead arsenate, everyone turned pink.

There were no respirators or dust masks, much less protective clothing of any kind. There were no hoods or enclosures on machinery. If engine fumes bothered you, work outside. Strangely, however, there seemed to be few health problems related to these close encounters with danger. That's just an observation, not a whitewash of poor working conditions. Ignorance was bliss. (Figures 1 and 2.)

Figure 1.



(Above) This facial rash was caused by sodium arsenite drift, in 1940. Protective clothing was rare, except (right) to keep the tractor driver dry while mowing wet grass. Personal comfort, rather than safety, was most important in the mid-1950s.

Figure 2.



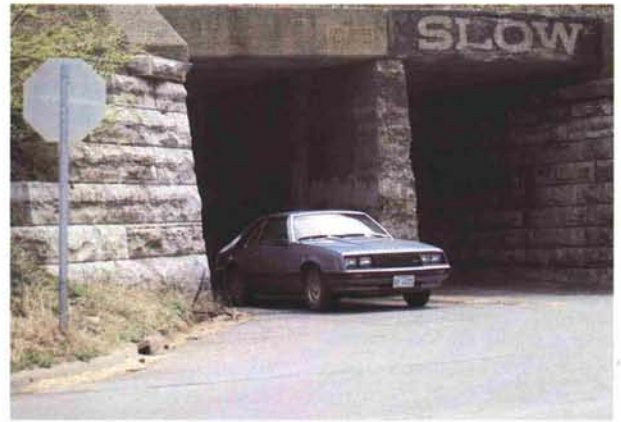


Figure 3. (Top, left) Steep slopes in playing areas must be fenced, before being put into use.

Figure 4. (Above) This cloud of agricultural limestone dust may appear to be dangerous to urbanites.

Figure 5. (Left) The "permanent temporary" greens on Milwaukee County Parks golf courses absorb play damage in bad weather and also enhance the safety of both players and workers during maintenance operations. Play is shifted off the regular green during mowing, spraying, aerating, etc., onto the alternate. It, then, gets the same maintenance treatment when play is returned to the regular green.

Figure 6. (Top, right) Never underestimate a safety message.

The voluntary move toward safe working conditions began, it seems, with increased mechanization and smaller crew sizes. More seasonal workers were used and constant retraining was necessary. To some, a guardless rotary mower was great, since it would cut small trees easier than a sling blade or scythe. Of course, as the cost of carelessness, toes and fingers went, too.

These summer kids found golf work delightful because of the suntanning potential. Rocks thrown from the neighboring rotary mower occasionally stung the almost bare body, but what a *tan!* As the modern chemical pest warfare escalated, however, drift worried some superintendents, especially since 2,4-D killed flowers downwind. Because DDT, chlordane, and other substances like them had been thrown around like so much talcum, they no longer worked. The effective substitutes, though, carried some pretty stiff warnings, even though they attracted little attention.

When environmental concern became popular, people got attention along with the birds and fish. Safety committees began throwing their weight around and finally the feds got into the act with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Safety was no longer a game for kindly folk. Surprisingly few golf courses were ever inspected by these people, but the message was clear and compliance with the rules was generally good.

THE PRIMARY source of safety information for golf course operations was the insurance companies. Many of them made safety inspections of maintenance operations centers (no more barns) and clubhouses, pointing out basic deficiencies in wiring, machinery, and tool inadequacies and indicating the need to place guards on moving machine parts. These safety experts gave lectures on protective clothing from steel-toed shoes to respirators, rubber suits, and hard hats. Golf coped with overregulation in the workplace, for a while.

With these problems out of the way, turf problems could again rate first priority for golf course superintendents.

OSHA did, however, point out just how slack golf course and clubhouse operational safety was. It was not that no one cared; they just had the priority set too low.

Naturally, with the governments involved, a lot of silliness got into the rule book, but in retrospect, the rules did a lot for accident prevention. Today those OSHA rules may be the salvation for many golf courses. They will need expansion to include golfers as well as employees, however.

The reason for this is an epidemic of extravagant court or insurance awards to claimants of various maladies and injuries incurred on or near golf courses. It would be untrue to call all such claims frivolous or even greedy, but they have certainly raised the cost of golf operations. As our litigious society carries this plague into the gentle game of golf, the threat to fiscal stability is indeed real. Insurability itself may be as great a problem as meeting its cost.

For employees, the safety *suggestions* of the past must become the hard and fast work *rules* of today. Noncompliance must bring punishment — even to discharging someone if necessary. Paperwork will explode, because today everything pertaining to personal safety should be documented. Physical discomfort in protective clothing is unfortunate, but to sweat in a rubber suit is better than to perspire in a lawsuit.

Golf course superintendents today have more people to worry about than their crews. They used to get a chuckle out of the golfer who fell or drove the golf car into the lake. It is no longer funny because that golfer may cite an unsafe roadway, lack of adequate warning devices, or any number of idiotic reasons that he or she was an innocent party to negligent golf course maintenance. How about your unguarded roadways on hilly courses? (*Figure 3.*)

Worse yet, how about someone who is allergy prone and feels ill after walking through the drift of plain water used to calibrate a sprayer. It's all poison to them. (*Figure 4.*)

SAFETY TODAY may mean survival of a golf course operation. Even doing one's best to improve the safety of an operation may not be enough, but consider these thoughts for employees:

1. Pull out your old OSHA checklist and get serious about the little things. For instance, in Japan, where cremation is mandatory, funeral halls report that an average 10 workers a year are injured by exploding heart pacemakers. Debris from the explosions blow out the observation holes in the furnaces.

2. Believe and abide by the Right to Know laws. Get a product description of every chemical or fertilizer you have or may have.

3. File the necessary hazardous material lists with your local fire department and make sure they know where the materials are stored.

4. Make sure the locked pesticide storage room meets or, better yet, exceeds state regulations.

5. Be mean about machinery or shop tool operation.

Really mean!

For golfers, maintain a steady but varying flow of safety information. The USGA publications "Accidents Can Happen — Be Prepared" and "Safety First on the Golf Course" are useful. But —

1. Consider everyone to be a blithering idiot who will not read and who has an attention span of 25 seconds.

2. Assume that you may play a part in a budding get-rich-quick scheme.

3. Believe that members *do* sue their clubs.

Now — YOU go set up the course so that no one can possibly do damage to themselves or others. (*Figure 5.*)

REMEMBER LIGHTNING protection, too, even though only eight golfers were among the 200 deaths from lightning a couple of years ago. Such a statistic in golf is spectacular and much more newsworthy than another eight people who were hit while talking on the telephone.

Next — check the boundaries of the property to determine how high fences should be if they are to keep golf balls from hitting cars, houses, or people outside the property. And don't forget the KEEP OUT signs and similar paraphernalia. A golf course is an attractive nuisance, so you have a responsibility to protect trespassers. Even the vandals. They can't get hurt on the property if you keep them out. (*Figure 6.*)

It is extremely important to put high priority on the correction of *all* unsafe conditions. It is a sad commentary on our society, but the need for physically responsible safety precautions has been far overshadowed by the need for fiscally protective rules. One can barely appreciate the beauty of a golf course without visualizing a number of bizarre ways that people can injure themselves or others. Murphy's Law isn't funny anymore.