Golf House Management Philosophy — It's a Matter of Quality

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HOW OFTEN has this happened to you? There's an important decision to be made at a golf club between Method A, which will cost more money but without question will produce the best long-term results, and Method B, a lower cost option with only reasonable promise of improvement. Those who choose Method A are rewarded with improved playing conditions and far fewer golf course maintenance headaches. This article is dedicated to those who choose Method B.

On subjects ranging from long-range golf course planning to the proper upkeep of cup liners, the lower priced Method B approach often costs more in the long run. As you read on, ask yourself: 1) Is my golf course maintenance operation a Method A or a Method B operation? 2) Are the decision makers given every opportunity to educate themselves before they make a judgement or decision? 3) Are those paying the bills (private membership or public fee players) receiving their money's worth when improvements are made?

Long-Range Planning

The foundation, and some would say the absolute rock, on which any golf course maintenance operation is founded is in a well-thought-out, long-range plan. Long-range plans should include:

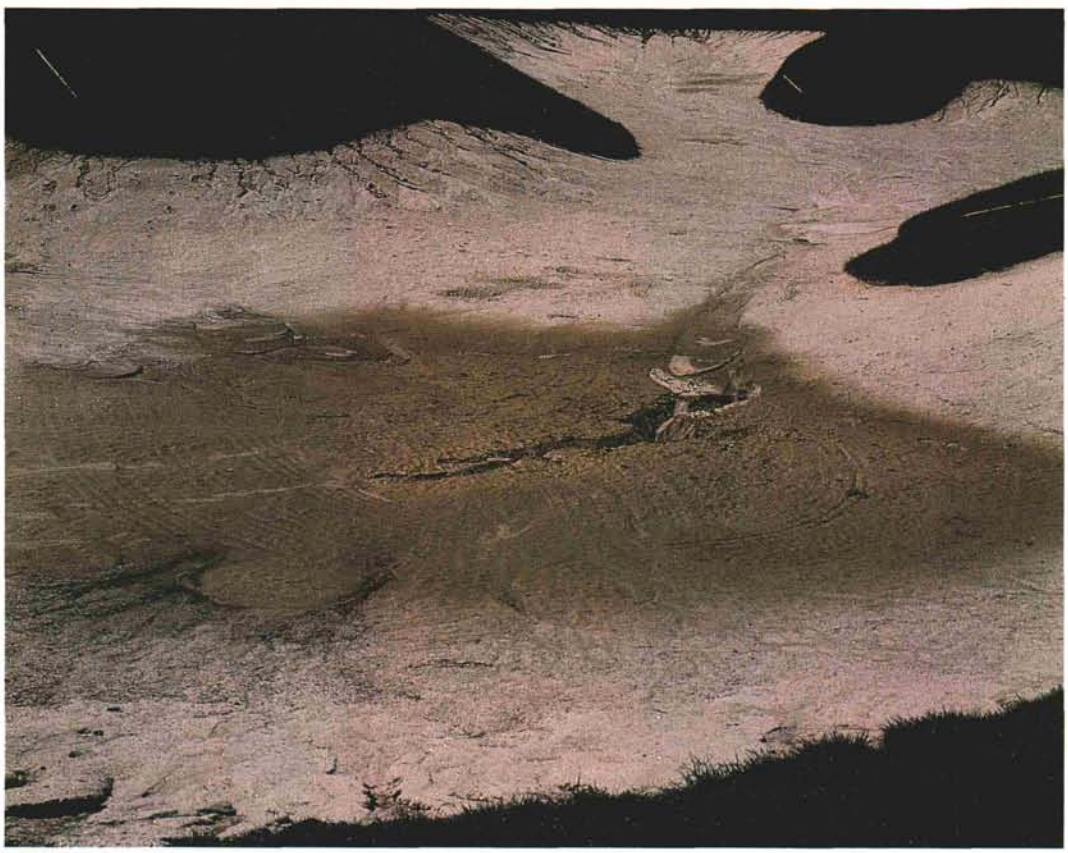
1. All the objectives specifically stated in a hole-by-hole analysis. These items should be prioritized, taking into account

Maintenance personnel must always please the golfers first.

(Above) Proper care in construction can make the difference between success and failure.

(Right) Basic drainage and good architecture? Not in this case.

(Opposite page) The prevalent problem of shade and roots can be avoided with good planning.



monies that are available and the impact on turf quality and golf course playability.

2. Once the objectives have been stated, sound recommendations can be made for each area of improvement. A timetable can be set up for completing each objective and permitting a check of progress in each area.

3. Incorporate a comprehensive tree care program. Trees are often forgotten on a golf course, and their value is often far higher than perceived. Tree pruning and root pruning can eliminate a great many turf problems if it is done regularly.

4. Include architectural changes in any long-range plan. It is vital that an experienced golf course architect be involved in the long-range program. In choosing an architect, you will want to look at his previous work and perhaps even discuss previous client satisfaction.

5. Keep a yearly progress report tracking all the work from the hole-by-hole objective list. In this manner, a five- or 10-year long-range program can be continually updated with new ideas added by changing leadership.

This long-range concept describes the main points to consider to ensure continuity and direction. The goal is focused, the leadership consistent, and the program is carried out by the golf course superintendent in a methodical and timely manner.

The important question is, Does your club actually plan for its future in this manner? Too often golf course operations have no long-range plan in force. Changes occur haphazardly through the personal desires of green committee chairmen or members. Often they do not have or are not given enough information to make the right decision. Every now and then, changes are made simply to place a personal stamp of one individual on his "home golf course." This situation can be avoided by establishing a long-range plan.

Another important aspect in long-range planning is the utilization of a professional golf course architect for making all architectural changes. The Method B approach often is to state, "That costs too much money, and we can save by doing it ourselves!" This may work in very rare cases, but it is far better and far safer to hire an experienced golf course architect. In the long run, he will save money by doing the job right the first time. There is no substitute for experience.

Irrigation and Drainage

It has been said that "the two most important things to remember while building a golf course are: 1) always use common sense, and 2) always provide good drainage. If there is not enough of Number One, be sure to provide that much more of Number Two."

This maxim applies not only during the wetter months of the year, but during the dry summer as well. Why is it then that so many golf courses exist where drainage is either ignored or improperly done, or when it's properly done, cov-

ered over with a layer of sod? Whether your method of removing excess surface water is through good surface contouring, through standard drainage techniques that have been used successfully for years, or through thinner type slit-injection techniques, the main point is to provide drainage to eliminate excess surface water from playing areas quickly.

More importantly, do not cover drain lines with sod if you wish to remove surface water through a tile system rapidly. While it may be unsightly, the amount of surface drainage accomplished by an open drain line will far exceed those covered over so they look better. A buried tile line will certainly carry water, but only after it has slowly percolated through the soil profile.

While drainage is extremely important, it is the irrigation system that provides the life-blood for the crop you grow. The proper and controlled application of water is and will always be the single most important element pertaining to golf course maintenance. Without it, golf courses as we know them in the United States would not exist. Even with an irrigation system, the superintendent's job is very difficult, unless he has close control of the irrigation system.

Perhaps your golf course is facing the question of wholesale upgrading and reinstallation of its irrigation system. Judging from visits to many courses, it is in this area where Method B can be devastatingly expensive. At the same time, a Method A irrigation system definitely requires close attention through its planning and installation phase:

1) Use the services of a qualified golf course irrigation engineer. Check his experience closely, and definitely visit other courses where he has worked. Receive as much input as possible before you make your choice. Bids will vary greatly, but remember, your choice of an experienced golf course irrigation design engineer with a good record can be the single most important decision concerning the ultimate success of the new system. Whenever possible, avoid design and installation done in-house. You are far better off with proven experience in this important area. This does not mean that the golf course superintendent should be left out; indeed, he provides an essential function in guarding the club's best interests by overseeing the installation and providing quality inspection and correction when it is needed.

2) If the cost of a top-grade irrigation system seems too high, do not cut corners and install a system that will be merely OK. Improperly spaced heads, lack of isolation valves, a reduction in coverage and controlability, and inadequate pressure are just some of the areas where shortcuts can be taken but will end up costing the club money in the future.

3) Use the latest technology for reducing electrical and water costs. Variable-frequency drive pumping and low-pressure irrigation systems are becoming more widely used, and tremendous savings of money are being realized. Strict water consumption laws are already in effect in Arizona, and similar laws are just around the corner in many other states.

If your club or golf course has the funds to proceed, then definitely use Method A. If funds are not available, it would be better to install just a portion of the system properly, or wait until money is available, through loans, dues increases, or assessments, to do the complete job the right way. This decision is extremely important. The playability of the golf course and the life expectancy of the superintendent will improve immeasurably if you go first class.

Construction

Within the long-range plan, the membership will surely want architectural changes. When embarking on a putting green rebuilding program or the improvement of bunkers and teeing surfaces, here are some important steps that a Method A advocate will follow:

Greens

1) Choose the right material. Select and test all of the available local sand and organic materials that will be used in construction. Have the materials tested by a reputable soils laboratory with experience in providing consistent results and recommendations for putting green construction.

2) Build the greens the right way. There are many different methods for building putting greens, yet only one method for repairing an improperly built green — a bulldozer. While the USGA Putting Green Specifications are not the only way for building putting surfaces, they have proven to be the most dependable way. Insist on following these specifications to the letter.

The USGA Putting Green Specifications are specific by nature and include off-site mixing, using some organic material for establishment and growth purposes, the installation of a two- to four-inch coarse sand layer to provide a perched water table, and 12 inches of topmix material. All of these factors should be covered by the testing laboratory.

3) Use your money wisely. If money is available to rebuild four greens using a less-expensive technique, it is better to rebuild fewer greens but rebuild them properly. Putting green construction is a hefty investment, and when they are built properly, it is money well spent.

Bunkers

1) As you should with putting greens, carefully select available sands and have them completely tested before you use them. In addition to physical testing at a qualified laboratory, actual testing in the field for at least five to six months is suggested. If the sand proves to be playable and drain well after a period of time, then a wise choice is assured.

2) While the use of a qualified golf course architect is recommended for putting greens, many outstanding bunkers have been done by talented golf course superintendents. If a golf course is fortunate enough to have such an individual, use his talents as long as the members accept his work. However, if there is any negative impact, it is far better to hire a golf course architect for bunker design. This is particularly true if the bunker is being done in conjunction with new putting green construction.

3) Provide good drainage. Not only should excellent drainage be provided in the bunker, but contouring around the bunker must be developed in a manner to avoid surface runoff into the bunker areas.

Tees

1) Use the same care in construction of tees as you would with a putting green. Quite often, the money used for tee construction is inadequate, soil testing is not accomplished, and the resulting teeing surface is unsatisfactory and must be completely redone. While a teeing ground does not need to be built according to USGA Putting Green Specifications, the topmix should be tested, organic matter mixed off-site, and at least eight to 10 inches of the topmix used for the surface. Complete drainage should be installed under the tee, combined with a four-inch gravel blanket around and over the drain lines.

2) Take your time to reduce settling problems. As the tee is constructed, compact the material as much as possible using physical and water techniques to reduce future settling. Do not try to

Proper equipment storage is a must.

build a tee overnight. Rather, allow several weeks for settling and, if possible, depending upon your region, construct tees before winter and complete the seeding operation in the spring. This allows settling during the winter. Also, to assure good drainage, try to construct tees with an imperceptible grade toward the rear. Perhaps one of the best techniques for developing a Method A tee is to consider the teeing surface somewhat like the foundation of a house. Use wood framing to establish a slight grade toward the rear, and use cross pieces to ensure the same degree of slope throughout the surface. This method may take a little longer, but the results are exceptional.

3) Provide plenty of teeing area. As a general rule, there should be approximately 100 square feet of usable teeing area per 1,000 rounds of golf per year on par-4 and par-5 tees. Par-3 tees need double this space. With some golf courses with more than 100,000 rounds per year, the required teeing area can reach half an acre or more. This amount of area is not available in most cases, and the construction must occur on available area. In every case, try to make the tee as large as possible, depending on the amount of present play or that expected in the future.

Equipment and Buildings

Another area where important differences can be seen between Method A and Method B is in equipment and storage. The Method A approach is to provide up-to-date equipment that is maintained regularly, replaced regularly, and stored properly to preserve its value for resale purpose. Method B, on the other hand, often uses the baling wire and tape technique that is inefficient, time consuming, and not to the benefit of the golf course or the players who pay the bills.

While every golf course has different amounts of capital to invest, every Method A club should include the following:

1) A long-range equipment replacement program. This will include every piece of equipment in the operation with scheduled life expectancy and depreciation for regular replacement.

2) Having the right equipment for the job. It is surprising to find golf courses that operate with little or no equipment for a particular maintenance job. For example, it is common to see golf courses gather leaves and debris by hand when sweepers and vacuums can greatly aid the cleanup process. Taking this idea one step further, the use of a large tractor-mounted blower greatly speeds up course cleanup operations and should be included in any equipment inventory, especially if debris from trees is a problem.

3) Provide adequate equipment storage and working conditions for the employees. Does your maintenance building include proper pesticide storage, locker facilities, a clean and well-lit lunch room, an adequate-sized superintendent's office, and shower facilities for emergencies? Does the mechanic's work area provide adequate space for his important function, and is there enough storage space in the maintenance building to keep equipment under cover through summer and winter? It is important to remember that the maintenance program of every golf course begins and ends at the maintenance facility. If you expect a well-maintained golf course, begin with the maintenance building.

4) Use a full-time mechanic. It is not uncommon to find a golf course operating with hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of equipment and not find a trained mechanic on the staff. Besides being invaluable for preparing and maintaining equipment on a daily basis, the mechanic is absolutely necessary when breakdowns occur. There is nothing

more frustrating, time consuming, and inefficient than a golf course without a good mechanic.

Maintenance Programs

Let us assume that a club has established a long-range plan, provided an excellent irrigation system, constructed everything properly, purchased and maintained excellent equipment, and provided adequate labor to reach its maintenance goals. It is now up to the most important person in the golf course operation to produce results. Excellent golfing turf can be produced in many ways. Nevertheless, when viewing successful superintendents on Method A programs, some distinct similarities come to the surface. These include:

1) Attitude. Successful golf course superintendents are usually goal-oriented, positive individuals who care deeply about their product. They have the attitude of producing whatever the client wants, as long as it is within reason. As Riley Stotten, the past president of the GCSAA, states, "You have to know when to hold and when to fold!" The successful superintendent knows when to bend to the wishes of the membership and when to stand firm.

2) Communication skills. It is becoming more and more evident that growing turf is frequently the easiest part of the superintendent's job. Over 50 percent of the job requires communication skills with members, employees, and in areas outside the club. Writing articles for the membership's monthly newspaper is an important part of a superintendent's communications.

3) Education. Successful golf course superintendents take advantage of all educational opportunities. Currently, computers, effective public speaking, and business management rank high on the list of desirable acquired skills.

4) Use outside sources of information. No one person has all the answers to every situation. However, the wise superintendent uses extension agronomists, irrigation engineers, qualified golf course architects, and the USGA Green Section. The Green Section in particular can prove an invaluable information source, and can be used as an excellent tool for advancing improvement programs.

5) Playing the game of golf. "Our superintendent believes we should use this type of bunker sand in our reconstruction efforts. Of course, he doesn't play golf, so he doesn't really understand the problem." This statement may be totally untrue, but everyone has heard it many times. Therefore, it is important for the golf course superintendent to play the game, no matter at what level of skill. A superintendent relates far better to the membership when he plays his own golf course.

6) Paying attention to detail. It is still the little things that directly reflect on a Method A or Method B type golf course. Are the cup liners always freshly painted? Are the flagsticks and flags in good condition? Are the benches kept in good condition and always placed in the proper place when the tee blocks are moved? Is the club entrance always kept clean to develop a good first impression when the owners enter their club? These are small areas that the successful superintendent covers daily just to keep his course and his operation in top shape.

The next time a decision must be made at your golf course between Method A and Method B, consider the following from Sidney J. Harris:

"One of the most serious mistakes we can make is to confuse the thing we call intelligence with another thing called judgement. The two do not always, or necessarily, go together; many persons of high intelligence have notoriously poor judgement."

Pledge yourself to good judgement. If you do, you will always be correct in the future.

Superintendent Ray Davies, Candlewood C.C., California, knows a quality temporary green is still needed when rebuilding an old green.