

It's the Little Things that Count

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THE MAINTENANCE and management of that tract of land known as a golf course requires an intriguing blend of art and science. The scientific aspects of the profession are obvious. Golf course superintendents, by necessity, must have an aptitude for science. We are concerned with such things as pH, evapotranspiration, cation exchange capacity, percolation, allelopathy, volatilization, synergism, etc. However, the scientific aspect of the business is not the subject here. Rather, we are concerned with the "art" of professional golf course maintenance and management.

Besides growing good turfgrass, what is involved in the art of golf course maintenance? It is my opinion that good turf, good golf, and a good time on the links involve more than a superintendent's scientific expertise. The scenario also requires the superintendent's artistic understanding of the dynamic blend between the game, its beloved playing field, and the golfer.

There are many ways to approach the art of golf course management, and I shall touch on only a small part of the artisan approach to golf course maintenance, call it the "little things." In reality, it truly is the little things that count. It is all the pieces which mesh together in near perfect harmony to produce a great golf experience.

During my 18 years in this business, there is one observation I have seen repeated many times: Golfers are simultaneously understanding yet cynical, and forgiving yet critical beyond description.

I have, for example, during the process of construction and renovation, relegated a golf course to a near unplayable status without complaint. At Aurora Hills (Colo.) Golf Course, in 1985, I had a contractor install eight miles of drainage to a depth of between four and eight feet throughout the course. The course was never closed. I have converted manual irrigation systems to automatic, with pipe and trenches everywhere, and only received comments of encouragement from the golfers. I've built greens, dug ponds, buried equipment, turned fairways into mud, and every other disruptive activity

imaginable with hardly a whimper of dissatisfaction from the golfers. As long as they understood in advance why we were doing the work and what they could expect on the course when they played, the golfers understood.

However, let the tissue run out in the ladies' restroom, or provide ball washers with no water, or leave litter in the parking lot, or forget to mow a green, or place the pin in a seven-putt location, and the phone rings off the wall. Why? If the golfer feels or perceives the superintendent is working to improve the course, there's no problem. If, however, the golfer perceives that the superintendent is not paying attention to details and taking care of the little



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Golfers appreciate this effort to communicate with an informational sign.





Sand bunker with an appendage. How does this situation impact the Rules of Golf?

things, he becomes irate. To ignore the little things, even while concentrating on the “big picture” agronomic aspects of turf management, is to communicate to the golfer that the superintendent is not a good manager or else he/she simply does not care about the golfer.

What are these little things that mean so much? The following is a short list of items which come to mind:

1. A clean golf car.
2. A properly marked golf course.
3. Putting cups at the proper depth without a mound one inch all around.
4. No bird baths in the bunkers.
5. Bunker rakes which aren't broken and have painted handles.
6. Clean tee towels.
7. A friendly wave from a maintenance employee.
8. Soap and water in the ball washers.
9. Green flags that are not at half mast.
10. Maintenance employees who are clean and neat.
11. A clean maintenance area, rather than some place that looks like a cross between a junk yard and a landfill.

12. Clippings removed from tees.
13. Clean restrooms.
14. No cigarette butts around tee boxes.
15. Properly adjusted mowers.
16. Drinking water on the course.
17. Ground-under-repair areas marked accordingly.
18. Advance notice of maintenance activities.
19. Maintenance employees who know when to mow and when to move out of the way.
20. Edges of bunkers clearly defined.

This list of 20 is just a start. Every golfer can come up with a different list. The message is, Don't get caught not being able to “see the golf course for the grass.” Great golf turf only gets you in the race; it's the little things in addition to great turf that guarantee the prize.

In keeping with the rule of semantics, that *everything* can never be said about *anything*, I would like to stress one final point about the little things. This point is about the little things in life. I shall refer to these little things as the building

blocks of a lifetime. The day will come for each of us to reflect on our life's accomplishments. There is no question that we all desire to look back and feel we did a good job, that we made a contribution to the game and to our profession. Thousands of golfers will have transversed our turf and gone home satisfied, anxiously planning to return another day. But what about the superintendent as greenkeeper, equipment manager, agronomist, administrator, supervisor, et al? We are not one-dimensional. What about the superintendent as husband, father, boy scout leader, coach, PTA member, and so on?

To me, it seems we sometimes expect so much of ourselves in our jobs that we can lose sight of what life is all about. Sometimes club members expect to see the superintendent every Saturday and every Sunday morning. Sometimes superintendents can never leave the golf course in the summer; not for a week, a weekend, or even a full day. Are we truly so important that we can't train an assistant or crew member to identify



(Above) Beautifully mowed fairways at Boulder Country Club.



(Left) Ball washer with a handle missing. Does this send a message about the superintendent's attention to the "little things"?

pythium, or that we can't tell the green chairman we are taking the kids to the mountains or beach for a week?

The stark reality of life's priorities became apparent to me three years ago, when the car in which my son, a high school junior, had always gone to lunch in, was involved in an accident. He was not in that car on this particular day, but the two girls who were had to be freed from the wreckage by the Jaws of Life and transported to a hospital by helicopter.

Yes, it really is the little things that count. Mine came in packages of 9 pounds 1 ounce, 6 pounds 13 ounces, 7 pounds 15 ounces, and 8 pounds 3 ounces.

Author's Profile: Dennis Lyon is Immediate Past President of GCSAA. He is Superintendent of Golf for the four golf courses of the City of Aurora, Colorado. A devoted family man with four children, Dennis has always been a strong proponent of keeping life in perspective.