

Section Maintenance — It Could Be Your Pot of Gold!

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MR. JONES and Mr. Smith are playing their regular morning match to determine the daily bragging rights. Mr. Jones has the honor and promptly hits the first shot out of bounds since he has inadvertently aligned himself with the misaligned tee blocks. After stating a few expletives under his breath, his next shot splits the fairway perfectly. Mr. Smith slightly pulls his first shot toward the despised oak tree grove to the left. After nearly five minutes of searching, the ball is located in eight inches of tall grass at the base of a tree. He barely advances the ball sideways on his next stroke and finally returns to the fairway on his third shot next to Mr. Jones' ball.

Both players find the left greenside bunker in four. Unfortunately, they have

completely different shots, even though the balls are only separated by the length of a putter. Mr. Smith plays first and explodes with professional aplomb to within 18 inches of the hole. Mr. Jones takes the same swing, yet his club bounces on soil, having caught the ball thin as it wings its way into the neighboring property. His club follows at about the same trajectory!

Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith are fictitious players, yet day in and day out the problems they encountered on the first hole are faced by thousands of players on hundreds of golf courses across the country. Misaligned tee blocks, excessively long grass near trees, and inconsistent bunker sand quality are three small examples of how a maintenance employee can affect a round

of golf. Inappropriate hole locations, poor bunker raking, indistinguishable bunker edges, over-irrigated greens, untended localized dry spots, heavily worn tees, and debris littered on the course are other examples that affect the play of the course and its appearance.

The question is, "What can be done to minimize the employee's negative impact while maximizing his/her positive output?" This answer is simple — training and organization.

There are many ways to develop a well-trained, organized, and motivated staff. For example, maintenance jobs can be divided into specific classifications with very narrow responsibilities. In other cases, where the staff is small in number, employees must be versatile enough to perform all tasks

Tall grass in the wrong place can result in an unplayable lie, or worse.



within the maintenance operation. A third option, section maintenance, involves a combination of these methods and may be a good choice for many golf course maintenance operations.

Standard Maintenance Organization

Golf course maintenance budgets for 18 holes can range from well over \$1 million down to less than \$100,000 annually. Given this broad range, there is no single method of maintenance organization that is best for every operation. The larger-budgeted golf courses have the potential for immaculate conditions, yet many small-budgeted courses achieve very good results within a limited framework. How is this accomplished? Often, the answer is proper training, crew motivation, and good organizational skills — key factors that can make or break a golf course maintenance operation.

For the sake of comparison, the differences between a standard method of maintenance and section maintenance will be examined. Though section maintenance may not be well suited to every operation, the advantages make it well worth considering.

As a point of reference, let's assume a total staff size of 16 employees on an 18-hole golf course during the growing season. The course has a decent irrigation system, modern equipment, adequate drainage, proper tee size, and good putting surfaces — in other words, no major structural or capital projects that must be completed by maintenance personnel. The greens are moderately sized (5,000-6,000 square feet), and the bunkers are not excessively large or numerous. A maintenance staff in this situation might be divided into the following classifications:

- One golf course superintendent.
- One assistant superintendent.
- One mechanic.
- One irrigation specialist.
- Two fairway/rough mowers.
- Two tee/trim mowers.
- One bunker maintenance/utility worker.
- One course preparation/utility worker.
- Two greensmowers (triplex)/utility or four (walkers)/utility workers.
- Two or four other utility workers, depending on whether the greens are cut with triplex or walk-behind units.

Sixteen employees.

A clubhouse gardener is not included, as this requirement can vary from

course to course. The golf course superintendent, mechanic, irrigation specialist, fairway/rough mowers, and tee/trim mowers are well-defined positions that usually require a total weekly commitment to each area. The employees responsible for course preparation, mowing greens, and bunker maintenance join with the assistant golf course superintendent and utility employees to complete other operations such as chemical and fertilizer applications, topdressing, aerification, course cleanup work, vertical mowing, bunker sand replenishment and redistribution, hand-mowing work, minor construction, and other tasks as required.

In short, this method of maintenance encompasses the entire operation and can be quite effective. It is used at many golf courses throughout the country with success.

As an alternative, let's take a look at what some consider a more efficient method of maintenance organization, one that capitalizes on human requirements such as increased responsibility, competition, and motivation. Many golf course superintendents have found the section or zonal method of maintenance to be the most efficient method for their courses.

Section Maintenance Organization

Take the same number of workers (16) and reorganize them using the section concept. The staff could include:

- One golf course superintendent.
- One assistant superintendent.
- One mechanic.
- One irrigation specialist.
- Two fairway/rough mowers.
- Two tee/trim mowers.
- Five section personnel.
- Three utility personnel.

Sixteen employees.

The golf course superintendent, assistant superintendent, mechanic, irrigation specialist, fairway/rough mowers, tee/trim mowers, and utility employees do not change in regard to job requirements. The change occurs in the areas of greens mowing, bunker maintenance, and course preparation. Instead of the combination approach discussed previously, employees are assigned to specific holes or sections of the golf course.

A typical day for a section employee might include mowing greens, hand-raking bunkers, changing cups and tee blocks from a pre-scheduled chart, fill-

ing divots on tees, and cleaning trash receptacles on their assigned holes. Other tasks could include bunker edging, sand replenishment and distribution, hand rotary mowing, spot watering, and cart path edging. The section employee is also responsible for the maintenance and replacement of hole liners, flagsticks, ball washers, tee towels, benches, trash receptacles, and tee blocks. Finally, the section employee is usually assigned a specific vehicle for transportation, a putting green mower, a rotary mower, and all the smaller hand tools required for the job.

An initial look at this method of maintenance might suggest an excessive amount of work for each employee. Since the area covered is smaller than normal, however, and the daily tasks are completed while the employee is in the area, wasted time is greatly minimized. In terms of time management, this method of maintenance is very efficient.

Advantages of Section Maintenance

The section method of maintenance may not be ideal for every operation, but the advantages of the system are numerous and are worth noting:

1. Responsibility. It is normal for most employees to desire a reasonable amount of responsibility in their working environment. By assigning individual sections of the golf course to individual employees, the ultimate results are in their hands. Some employees respond enthusiastically and with dramatic results. Some continue at their current level of output, and others may not respond well. It is the golf course superintendent's responsibility, then, to fill these positions with the most qualified individuals.

2. Competition. Again, it is natural for anyone to respond to competition when placed in this situation. Most superintendents report a positive competitive atmosphere resulting from section maintenance programs. Indeed, many superintendents provide rewards for the best section, perhaps on a monthly basis, to further stimulate the competition.

3. Pride. Sometimes it is difficult to instill pride-of-workmanship in a golf course work environment. A nice salary increase or bonus can only go so far. A job can become boring if it involves the same repetitive procedures day in and day out. The section employee is busy with many different jobs, and he/she may not have time to become bored.



(Above left) Pride of "ownership" can be a powerful tool for motivating employees.

(Above) Walking greensmowers are well suited to the section method of maintenance.

(Left) Discussing maintenance in the field is far more effective than in the maintenance facility.

When he/she is given the responsibility or "ownership" of a certain portion of the golf course, pride-of-ownership is usually evident.

4. Motivation. Perhaps the greatest positive impact the superintendent will derive from section maintenance is in terms of motivation. What better way is there to motivate than using competition, internal pride, a feeling of "ownership," and added responsibility! Naturally, not all employees will respond to the same degree, but those who are self-starters will shine in this system.

5. Care of Equipment. One interesting aspect of section maintenance is the reported reduction in the breakdown of equipment and the loss and breakage of small tools. Again, when given the responsibility of using their "own" equipment, section personnel usually exercise greater care. This can lead to less downtime and more time for the course mechanic to work on other responsibilities.

6. Quality and Quantity of Work. By encouraging responsibility, competition, and motivation, a more productive employee usually emerges. Golf course

superintendents using this system note that one of the first benefits is attention to detail and improved condition of the bunkers. Some consider that the green is the main focal point of the golf course, and that the bunkers provide the framing. If your framing is not up to standards, this method of maintenance can work wonders.

7. Reduced Employee Turnover. Motivated employees who enjoy their responsibilities and take great pride in their work are less likely to leave for slightly higher pay. The feeling of belonging to a productive team can be

a powerful force in employee satisfaction.

8. Streamlined Operation. Employees don't have to wait in the morning for job assignments when they're accustomed to the section concept. This allows more time for the golf course superintendent and the assistant superintendent to provide direct supervision in the field.

9. Accountability. The previously mentioned benefits all focus on what the section method provides for the employee and the golf course. For the golf course superintendent, section maintenance provides a method of accountability for the most important areas of the course — the greens, green surrounds, bunkers, and tees. If an area is not quite right, there is no question about who is responsible. If an area is perfect, praise can be directed to the responsible person.

Disadvantages of Section Maintenance

There are many compelling reasons to consider section maintenance. As stated previously, however, this method of maintenance is not necessarily suited to every situation and does have some drawbacks. Following are a few of these drawbacks:

1. Extra Equipment. Converting to a section method of maintenance often requires more equipment. Each section employee should be equipped with a vehicle with the capacity to carry several

pieces of equipment or to tow a small trailer. Individual power edgers, string trimmers, rotary mowers, hoses, and smaller tools need to be assigned to each person.

2. Staff Size. For the sake of the preceding comparison, an arbitrary figure of 16 employees was used. Many smaller-budgeted golf courses cannot realistically achieve this staff size, and section maintenance may not be practical for them.

3. Weekend Maintenance. Due to budget considerations, many golf courses minimize expenditures by using triplex mowers on weekends. Just one hydraulic leak, however, can change a normal section employee into a "Section 8" if it occurs at the wrong time! Although it is more expensive, maintenance for greens on weekends should be similar to weekday programs. Remember, grass doesn't know the difference between Sunday and Wednesday — it can die at any time if it does not receive necessary care during time of stress.

4. Finding the "Complete" Section Employee. Not all section employees maintain their sections in exactly the same manner. For this reason, some golf course superintendents must alter plans to compensate for individual weaknesses. For example, certain employees may not understand the difference between disease and wilt, yet they are excellent at providing detail work. In

this case, the golf course superintendent may decide to have one or two employees hand-water greens. Another common modification of the system is to use a single person for course preparation since some employees do not play golf and may not understand proper hole location.

Getting Started

Comparing the advantages of this system to the disadvantages, the advantages are too numerous to overlook. If section maintenance fits into your operation, here are a few tips from superintendents experienced with the method:

Divide the course into tight geographical regions. Try to keep each section as small as possible to minimize travel time.

Do *not* establish a section that includes all the early holes. For example, try to avoid a section comprised of the practice putting green and holes 1, 2, and 3. This employee would suffer from player interference and greatly reduced efficiency. Instead, try to incorporate the early holes into two or more sections if at all possible.

Provide necessary individual equipment. Although more expensive, the benefits of equipment "ownership" cannot be overlooked.

Include the entire staff. Even though a minority of the staff will be section employees, it is important to promote the team concept. There will be times when other employees will substitute during vacation or illness and on weekends. When every part of the golf course is in top shape, the entire staff wins.

Summary

Is section maintenance the best method for your golf course? This can be answered by evaluating the entire operation and answering these questions: Are you being as efficient as you can be? Are you paying close attention to detail work? Are the employees motivated to their highest level? Are you adequately staffed during the growing season? If the answer is "yes" to these questions, then the current system is working well. If the answer is "no," take a close look at section maintenance. The complex nature of golf course maintenance can be broken down into a much simpler form that can provide better results for you, the golf course, and the golfers who play the course.

How many mistakes has this employee made during course preparation?

