

'So You Want to Rebuild Your Greens': A Step-By-Step Survival Guide

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THE PUTTING GREENS of golf courses built many years ago were appropriately called "push-up greens" because they were nothing more than native soil pushed around and shaped into whatever configuration was desired. Not surprisingly, this method of construction produced a wide variance in quality. As the game advanced, it became clear that the old method of construction could not produce the consistent quality, smoother and faster putting greens that were being demanded.

As a consequence, the USGA Green Section conducted scientific research to determine how optimum putting greens could be constructed. In 1960, that research culminated in the publication of the Green Section's *Specifications for a Method of Putting Green Construction*. These specifications have proven over the years to be so successful that many new golf courses follow them religiously, or at least they should.

When the USGA introduced the Stimp-meter in the mid-1970s, the average "speed" throughout the country was 6' 6". With today's technologies and golf course maintenance expertise, even average courses can produce green speeds of 9', 10', or more for special events. During the intervening years, it became increasingly clear that well-built greens were easier to maintain in top form.

During the same period of time, older clubs with greens constructed by inferior methods were finding that the game was leaving them behind. As a consequence, many of them undertook to rebuild their greens to conform to USGA specifications and thereby make them competitive with newer courses. Today it takes some looking to find a prestigious older club that has not rebuilt its greens, at least in some parts of the country.

While rebuilding old push-up greens can be both necessary and desirable, it is also (unfortunately) expensive. Current estimates for the cost of construction run about \$5 to \$6 per square foot or more. Assuming that the average putting green is approximately

6,000 square feet, this equates to \$30,000 to \$36,000 per green, or \$570,000 to \$684,000 for 18 greens plus the practice putting green. It is essential, therefore, that any greens reconstruction project be undertaken with care. What follows is a step-by-step survival guide to assist any club considering such a project.

1. Make certain that rebuilding your greens will solve your problem. If your club or course does not subscribe to an annual Turf Advisory Service visit by a Green Section agronomist, it should do so. A Green Section agronomist can provide you with an unbiased expert opinion about the conditions of your putting greens and whether reconstruction is the only method to alleviate your complaints, or if other less costly techniques should be tried first. Many Green Section agronomists have witnessed the reconstruction of greens at various clubs throughout their region, have learned the pitfalls, and can share the benefit of that experience.

2. Hire a competent golf course architect. You should first prepare a short list of candidates for the job. There are many sources from which you can obtain information about available architects. *The Golf Course*, a book written by Geoffrey Cornish and Ron Whitten and first published in 1981, contains a directory of golf course architects throughout the United States, with a listing of all courses on which they have worked. The American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA), which was formed in 1947, publishes a roster of its members. The National Golf Foundation (NGF) also publishes a list of golf course architects, including many who are not members of the ASGCA. In addition, you may be aware of other courses in your region that have been constructed or rebuilt recently. The professional, superintendent, or green chairman at each of these facilities can provide you with the names of architects who were responsible for those projects.

You should interview each architect on your short list. At the outset, it is important to inquire about professional fees (they

might range from \$100,000 or less for an unknown to \$500,000 or more for a world-famous celebrity), his experience in reconstructing greens on existing courses, his familiarity with turfgrasses used in your region, his knowledge of potential contractors, his design philosophy, and his ability to assist you in selling the project to your membership.

If possible, have each candidate tour your course. Listen to his comments about what he might do to improve it. Is he sensitive to the character of the course, or does he simply want to impose his own *look*? For example, if your course is relatively flat, does he propose dramatically mounded greens that will appear artificial and out of place? If your course is short but compensates for lack of distance with tight fairways and small greens that require accurate shotmaking, does he recommend large greens that would compromise those values? Finally, ask the architect about his recent work, and call his clients. It is important to know whether they are satisfied.

After making your final selection, reduce your agreement with the architect to writing and, at a minimum, set out with specificity his fee, the number of visits he will make to the site during construction, and whatever other responsibilities you ask him to assume. In short, spell out what you expect of him.

3. Sell the project to your membership. You should work hand-in-hand with your architect during this process. It is vital that the architect have marketing and political skills, as every club has its share of members who are likely to be negative about the project. Usually, these are older members who, as the saying goes, don't even buy green bananas anymore. They become upset at the prospect of shutting the course down for the six months or so that is required for reconstruction.

Most good architects can present a slide show to the membership with dramatic pictures of their work and drawings or renderings of the proposed new greens. This will enable the membership to visualize the results of the project.



Greens reconstruction can be time-consuming and expensive, but if done properly can provide decades of good turf and cost-effective maintenance.

If your club is member-owned, it is possible that a greens reconstruction project cannot be undertaken without the approval of the membership. The experience of most clubs indicates that any vote on greens reconstruction will be a close one. In fact, many proposals are defeated when first submitted for a vote. However, the deliberations that lead to the unsuccessful result often provide constructive criticism that, if heeded, can result in a better project that is approved when it is resubmitted.

Selling the project is an educational process. Members first must be shown why new greens are needed. In addition to presentations by the architect, it often is helpful to have representatives of other clubs that have undergone reconstruction speak to the members. Moreover, the Green Section agronomist in your region, who is familiar with your course and with greens recon-

struction, can also be an effective speaker and advocate for the project.

After the members are persuaded that new greens are needed, they must be convinced that the proposed method of funding the project is fair. Ultimately, most clubs have found that a straightforward assessment is the most equitable way to fund the greens reconstruction.

A project that is shown to be agronomically and architecturally desirable and responsibly funded will meet little, if any, legitimate criticism. There will, of course, be the usual "parade of horrors" by doom-sayers who predict a drastic loss of membership if the project is pursued. However, clubs that have rebuilt their greens have consistently experienced increases in membership following completion of the project. The doom-sayers then are nowhere to be found; everyone then claims to have been

for the project "all along." As the saying goes, success has a thousand fathers.

4. Let bids to contractors. Once the project is approved, your architect will prepare an invitation to bid. A good architect will include in the bid invitation a set of detailed plans and specifications. These are critical because they define the project and the scope of work. Any work not included in the plans and specifications likely will cost extra.

A sample contract with the contractor should be included with the bid specifications. A form of such a contract can be obtained by contacting the USGA Green Section (908-234-2300) or your regional Green Section office. This form was used, for example, by the Lake Charles Country Club of Lake Charles, Louisiana, in its recent greens reconstruction project. It is drafted with the object of protecting the club. The

invitation to bid should make it clear that submission of a bid constitutes an agreement to be bound by the terms of the contract if the bid is selected.

Your architect should assist you in investigating and selecting the contractors you invite to bid on the project. As you did with the architects on your short list, you should investigate previous jobs undertaken by any contractor you consider.

5. Select the lowest responsible bid. It is important to understand that the lowest bid is not necessarily the lowest *responsible* bid. As a condition of the bid, each contractor should be prepared to furnish a surety bond that guarantees both the contractor's faithful performance of the contract and its prompt payment for all labor and materials. This will assure that the club's liability for the project is limited to the price set in the contract.

If the contractor walks off the job for any reason or fails to pay a subcontractor or materials supplier, the club is responsible only up to the amount set in the contract. Any additional sums needed to hire a new contractor to finish the job or to pay for labor or materials become the responsibility of the surety.

6. Sign a contract with the contractor. No project this size should be undertaken on a handshake. Without a written contract that limits the club's liability and spells out the contractor's responsibility, the club is at the mercy of the contractor and is usually responsible for contingencies beyond its control that can dramatically affect the cost of the project.

The sample contract mentioned previously is designed to protect the club from these contingencies. It should be understood, however, that the sample contract is a sug-

gested form and is not to be followed blindly. There is no substitute for consulting with an attorney to determine if all of its terms are best suited for you or are enforceable in your jurisdiction.

There is not much worse than rebuilding your greens and then finding out that it was done incorrectly. There are examples of clubs that have had to rebuild their greens several times in a 10- to 15-year period. By following through with the steps outlined in this article, you will be on your way to ensuring the best possible greens for the long-term enjoyment of the golfers at your club.

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Be sure you need to rebuild and that rebuilding will actually solve your problem. Sometimes deep-tine aerification or some other practice can overcome the problem.

