



*When golfers and crew share the same turf, the maintenance equipment can be modified to provide protection from errant shots.*

# FORE!

## Guidelines to Consider When Golfers and Maintenance Crews Share the Same Turf

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**S**IMPLE MATHEMATICS dictate that as more people play golf, the time once set aside for uninterrupted maintenance of the course will be used for additional tee times. At popular, heavily played public courses, the only time for maintenance without golfers is during the early morning, the very early morning, because play is often

permitted at first light. Even the traditional practice of closing the course on Monday at many private clubs has slowly gone by the wayside.

Junior golf, corporate outings, and Monday afternoon member play are only a few of the reasons why the "day of rest" has become just another day of business as usual.

Let the golfers off from the front and back nine at the crack of dawn, then throw in a few 7 a.m. shotgun starts for good measure, and perhaps try a few night outings with golf balls that glow in the dark. It is very obvious why golfers and mowers share the same turf much more now than at any time in the past.





*As the popularity of golf increases, the unavoidable distraction of maintenance activities will become a more frequent occurrence. Cog Hill Golf Course, Lemont, Illinois.*

Only a few private clubs still enjoy the luxury of being closed all day on Monday, although many are closed to member play or outings at least until noon. Most private clubs hold back play, at least on weekdays, to provide ample time for the crew to stay well ahead of the golfers. Where golfers and equipment occasionally meet, the employee typically is instructed to create as little distraction as possible — get out of sight and turn the engine off until the members play through. This policy is impossible on the majority of daily-fee public courses, except perhaps at the most elite resorts.

Various factors and situations at a number of courses also dictate maintenance practices that interfere with play. Oakland Hills Country Club, the site of many U.S. Open Championships, is a good example of an unusual problem. Fairways are mowed four to six times a week during the afternoon despite the heavy play at this very popular course. Granted, there are several reasons why afternoon mowing is advantageous. Mowers produce a cleaner, more uniform quality of cut on dry fairways compared to wet fairways. Furthermore, the smashing and smearing of earthworm castings are much less of a concern when the fairways are cut after the turf and the castings have dried. It could even be argued that dry mowing is

less likely to spread diseases across the playing surfaces than dew-laden early morning mowing operations.

The primary reason for mowing in the afternoon at Oakland Hills Country Club, however, is the absence of suitable sites to spread the clippings that are collected after mowing. They don't have an adequate site for composting, and there is a limited rough area out of play for clippings or other plant debris, so the fairways are mowed frequently and the dry clippings are returned to the playing surface. Consequently, golfers and mowers meet almost every afternoon at Oakland Hills and on an increasing number of other courses.

#### **Not A Clue**

The unfortunate reality is that many new golfers don't have even the slightest knowledge about course etiquette, and many experienced golfers have chosen to forget. Allowing faster golfers to play through, being ready to hit when it's your turn, repairing ball marks, and keeping carts a proper distance from greens and tees are but a few examples of procedures that have no meaning to many neophyte golfers. Ask a non-golfer to mimic a golfer on the tee, and many will make a few wild and crazy gyrations and then yell "fore!" as they

swing. It's ironic that "fore" is heard only on rare occasions despite the numerous snap hooks and power slices produced on many crowded courses each day.

Perhaps the escalating fee for a round of public golf or the cost of membership at a private club fosters the attitude that golf should be played without even the slightest annoyance or distractions. Maybe the golfers' desire to emulate their favorite tour professionals make them believe that the round of golf they see on TV on Sunday afternoon is the same round of golf they are entitled to when they play, every time they play. Some golfers begin to expect manicured courses, ultra-fast greens, and several officials who wave "Quiet Please" signs at the slightest

cough or murmur. At this point these golfers seem to have little regard as to where they hit the ball and who may be in the path.

The initial session of my first group golf lesson was spent learning course etiquette. It was stressed that I was responsible for my golf shot — where it goes and the consequences of what it hits. If the drive is hit out of bounds to the left, over the fence and trees and into a car in the parking lot, then I was responsible for the damage, not the ball. When the shot endangers anyone on the course, we were instructed to shout "fore" as a warning.

Just how responsible a person is for the damage or injury a golf ball causes is a legal issue and beyond the scope of this article. In today's litigious society, where convicted felons in prison sue the arresting officer for interfering with their armed robbery attempt, hearing of a golfer suing the driver of a moving vehicle for stealing a ball after it is hit through the windshield might not be all that surprising! The bottom line is that regardless of the golfer's attitude, a considerable amount of course maintenance is being done when golfers are present. Let's assume that under normal circumstances the golfer is responsible for his ball, and now let's discuss ways to make the golf course a safer place for everyone.



## The Solutions

The most obvious, but most difficult to achieve, solution is to complete as much maintenance as possible before the golfers tee off. Sometimes the layout of the course provides the crew enough time to stay well ahead of the golfers except during the shotgun-start events or when golfers are allowed to tee off on the first and 10th holes.

Attempts to spray, mow, or perform other maintenance tasks during the night or before dawn have achieved only marginal success at very few courses. The risk of injury to the employee and to the turf is high, even when equipment with headlights is provided. Observing the spray pattern and the mowing pattern, or detecting hydraulic fluid leaks and many other potential problems, are almost impossible to achieve at night. Furthermore, almost all courses irrigate at night, a practice that also interferes with most other maintenance programs.

An increasing number of courses are requiring the maintenance crew to wear hardhats. There is no denying that a hardhat can minimize the potential for serious head injury from a golf ball, especially when the employee is facing away from play. Many golf course owners believe the use of protective hardhats reduces the liability associated with on-the-job injuries and that their policy indicates an effort to address safety concerns.

Some superintendents, however, believe that the use of hardhats is a two-edged sword. They do provide a margin of safety, assuming the errant golf ball hits the hardhat instead of other vulnerable parts of the body. Does the use of protective devices, though, encourage the golfer to hit into the crew under the assumption that they are less likely to injure someone? Similarly, does wearing a helmet make the crew less attentive to

nearby golfers because they feel less threatened? If the use of hardhats makes the crew and the golfers more careless, then they may not provide the desired level of protection. Conveying the limitations of head protection to all parties will depend on the communication skills of the golf professional and superintendent.

The use of highly visible shirts can be another effective, but more passive, form of

example, many courses utilize the roll-over protection available on some models of lightweight fairway mowers as a base for netting, plexiglass shielding, or hardware cloth barriers to enclose and protect the operator. The climate generally dictates what degree of protection is safe and acceptable to the employee; for example, a plexiglass enclosure is not practical when afternoon mowing is done during hot, humid weather.

## Guidelines for the Golfers

"Fore" is the universal signal used to warn golfers of an imminent or errant shot. Unfortunately, many golfers signal too late or not at all. Some simply have never been instructed in the basics of golf course etiquette. Golfers are never too young or too old to learn proper etiquette. An interesting observation made at many courses is that an increasing number of employees are being hit and injured by golf balls during junior golf days. The young beginners have a limited ability to control where the ball is hit and often hit away without warning when the crew is working nearby. Although the golf professional is usually responsible for the junior golf program, a number of courses encourage the superintendent to talk to the participants regarding safety on the course, replacing divots, repairing ball marks, etc. Junior golf is an important and

very popular program at many courses, a program that provides a unique opportunity to educate beginners before bad habits develop. Without adequate education, golf may not continue to be a "gentleman's game," or even a safe game.

Employees generally are instructed to keep a watchful eye for golfers, and most make every effort to cause as little distraction as possible. Most operators will move to the side, stop, and then idle the equipment until the golfers hit through. Golfers can do their part by being ready to hit as soon as



A well-placed sign informs golfers that the crew has the "right of way" when the flagstick is out of the hole. Bonnie Brook Golf Course, Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin.

protection for the employees. Most golfers have little trouble seeing an employee riding a large moving mower, but they may have difficulty detecting someone hand-raking a bunker or repairing an irrigation head. A bright red or yellow shirt can address this problem. The use of a consistent uniform also distinguishes the employee from the golfers, an important consideration that may help speed play on a busy course.

Other ways to protect the employees on rough or fairway mowers is to construct a safety barrier around the operator. For





*Whether or not hardhats provide a reasonable amount of protection from injury is a subject for debate. Some superintendents believe that golfers are less likely to warn the crew, by shouting "Fore" or waving, when hardhats are worn.*

it is their turn — good advice regardless of the employee situation.

If there is doubt as to whether or not the employee is aware of the golfers, then a simple hand signal can be used. When the employee acknowledges the wave with a return hand signal, then it is okay to hit away because the employee will watch for the ball. If the employee is not on a noisy mower, for example, or repairing an irrigation leak, then shouting "fore" followed by a hand signal will readily get their attention. Although common sense would dictate that a hand signal and/or the word "fore" is needed, many golfers overestimate their ability and believe they will never hit into the crew. If this were so, then there would not be a large bin of low-cost golf balls rescued from the water hazards in the pro shop of nearly every course.

Hand signals and the acknowledgement by the employee are especially important when hitting to the green. If the employee signals to the golfer to hit, then the golfer should do so without hesitation. Golfers should not expect the crew to interrupt their maintenance work and then hide out-of-sight while the golfer selects a club, makes several practice swings, and then hits, especially on a busy course. All golfers prefer minimal annoyance and interference, but in reality, distraction is part of the game, a part golfers should learn to cope with, just like wind, rain, or a difficult lie.

Golfers should not hit to the green from the tee or the approach when the employee

has removed the flagstick from the hole. This is a signal used at many courses as an indication that the employee is performing an important maintenance task that requires concentration. He or she cannot watch for errant shots and will try to finish the task as soon as possible, after which the flagstick will be replaced. The flagstick will be out most often for mowing, but may also be removed for bunker maintenance.

### **The Rules of the Game**

Under the Rules of Golf, distraction is considered a part of the game (Decision 1-4/1). There will be times when noise from mowers or other maintenance practices cannot be avoided.

### **Through the Green**

Mowers and other maintenance equipment are generally considered outside agencies (Definition, Rule 18). If a drive hits a mower and ricochets out of bounds, it is a rub of the green (Rule 19-1). If a ball at rest is moved by a mower, the golfer is allowed to return the ball to the original spot without penalty (Rule 18-1). If the ball is not immediately recoverable or is deemed unfit for play after, for example, being damaged by a mower, another ball can be substituted (Rule 5-3).

If a ball is imbedded by maintenance equipment, the golfer is permitted to lift, clean, and drop the ball, without penalty, as

near as possible to the spot where it lay but no closer to the hole (Rule 25-2).

### **On the Putting Green**

If a stroke played onto the green is moved by an outside agency, it is considered a rub of the green (Rule 19-1). If a ball at rest is moved by an outside agency, it can be replaced on the original spot without penalty (Rule 18-1). If a ball played from the putting green is moved by an outside agency, before the ball comes to rest, then the stroke is cancelled and replayed without penalty (Rule 19-1b).

### **Summary**

Golf without interference from day-to-day maintenance is a luxury fewer courses will enjoy in the future. Even private clubs find that as the amount of play increases, golfers and employees will spend more time sharing the same turf. For example, despite the negative impact on the pace of play and the health of the turf, the golfers' desires and expectations for faster greens for day-to-day membership play necessitate much more employee time on the greens spent double cutting, rolling, etc. Junior programs and outside outings are becoming more of a priority at many courses. The annual corporate outing may be the only time some golfers play all season. The limited ability and limited knowledge of golf etiquette possessed by these groups of golfers pose a significant hazard to the maintenance crew.

There are several ways the employees can minimize the potential for injury, including the use of hardhats and high-visibility uniforms. The following set of guidelines for golfers may further help minimize the risk to the employee as well as the inconvenience to golfers. Courses may elect to modify the guidelines to suit specific needs or situations at a particular site.

1. Learn how and when to use the universal warning "fore."
2. Signal to the employee if possible, and hit as soon as your signal is acknowledged.
3. Do not hit onto the green when the flagstick has been removed from the hole by the maintenance crew.
4. Be prepared to hit as soon as the flagstick is replaced or when the golfer is motioned by the crew to hit away.

An effective way to introduce the guidelines might be during an introductory golf lesson or during the organizational meeting of the various leagues that exist at many courses. A note in the membership newsletter, a message on the scorecard, or signs in the pro shop or locker rooms can be effective as well.

Be considerate, and everyone will have a safe and enjoyable round of golf.