

Strategies for Successful Long-Term Maintenance of Golf Courses

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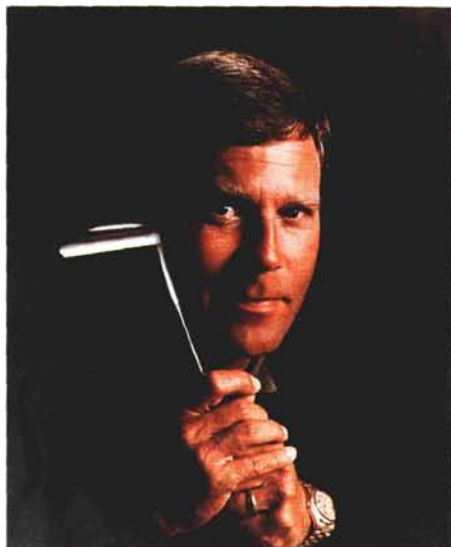
LET ME get one thing straight here. My topic is "Strategies for Successful Long-Term Maintenance of Golf Courses." I can just hear everyone now — "Here comes the touring golf professional talking to all the superintendents on how to care for their golf courses." I assure you, I come knowing well that I am just at the incubation stage in my life of doing something other than playing golf.

First of all, I'm happy that Byron Nelson is receiving the Old Tom Morris Award at this conference. I know of no other kinder gentleman in the world who's meant so much to golf. When you meet and know eminent people like Harvey Penick and Byron Nelson, you feel blessed. Byron has not only been a marvelous player, but he's been interested in many other facets of the game. We can only learn from people like that, and I think it's only fitting that he's receiving the Old Tom Morris Award.

My knowledge about the life of Old Tom Morris means so many things to me. I've always loved one of Old Tom's quotes, and it relates to some of the things I'm going to say. It relates to the Old Course at St. Andrews and the amount of play they've enjoyed over the centuries — "She (meaning the Old Course) needs a rest even if you don't." That quote is a very, very appropriate statement today.

Most of the opinions I'll share today are just that. They're opinions and observations based upon my understanding of the importance of superintendents, how they communicate, and how important their work is. I know that it's a wonderful thing that we enjoy this great game as we do. We're enjoying the best of times, at the height of the golf industry. Everyone is coming to the game. We have so many converts it's unbelievable. There are lots of different ideas as well. I would just like to go on record as saying that whether it be a public, semi-private, or private course, please think about days of rest. Give the men and women a time to work on their golf courses. They need it sorely, I can tell you that.

My architecture partner is Bill Coore. Bill and I met about 1985 and we started talking



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philosophy. He had worked under Pete Dye. Pete employed him on construction jobs, and of course he loved architecture from the start. But he was selected for a different role when he came to Texas. Pete and Roy Dye built Waterwood National in east Texas. Six or eight months into the process, they needed a superintendent. They pointed at Bill and said, "All right, you're it. You're going to take care of the golf course."

Bill said, "I don't know anything about taking care of a golf course."

"Well, you'd better find out, because you're it."

That was Bill's introduction.

Throughout a process of time he sought out people for information, and Bill has taught me the importance of seeking out information from superintendents. We've learned a great deal from you, and we plan to use your expertise in the future. We've worked with Jerry Takuchi, from Houston Country Club; Doug Petersan, previously at Prairie Dunes and now at Baltimore Country Club; Bill Shrum, at Denver Country Club and Brook Hollow, where we just renovated their 18 holes; Bob Randquist, of Southern

Hills, where we added nine holes; and countless other people.

What is demanded of superintendents these days boggles my mind. Superintendents have got it tough. First of all, we all know how subject to the weather we are. We're like farmers in that regard. There are a lot of different things demanded of the superintendent in terms of people's viewpoints and philosophies, too. There are new converts to the game, and sometimes what they want in their minds is very unrealistic in reality. For instance — green speeds. Now, there's nobody who loves fast greens more than I, but I think that there comes a time when we really have to temper our green speeds for the sake of the health of the grass.

In my opinion, we've reached the brink on other things, too, including balls and implements. I'm antique enough to know that the technology we've got is tremendous, and that we're hitting golf balls distances that we've never thought we would. I happen to be, and will be for the rest of my golfing life, a protectionist when it comes to defending the timeless designs of some of the older architects. We can't let technology ruin these designs.

I was fascinated by Joe Baidy's presentation about the Donald Ross course at Acacia Country Club. I think he gave a beautiful description of how you can transport Ross's original ideas into today, and how Donald Ross and certain other people with great imagination can create timeless courses and defend the spirit of the game.

On many golf courses that you see in older books, let's say in the 1920s and even going back to the early 1900s, it seems that there was a dearth of trees across the landscape. The architects were interested in the ground and undulations, and they truly did look for gently rolling properties. In all, they didn't move much soil. But over a long period of time, trees, just like humans, grow and mature. They change a lot of perspectives and change angles on golf holes. Sometimes you have to make a subjective conclusion to say, "This is the intent of the architect, and this is where this golf hole

should be attacked from, from a strategic point of view.”

It's a painful process, but you have to talk to memberships about trees. I think everyone is very protective about trees, but I've also learned the importance of making a choice between having good grass or lots of trees. It's a very painful thing when you try to explain to someone, "We're really going to have to prune that tree or we're going to have to take it out." Hopefully, the club has some old pictures to show people; I think it helps tremendously.

For instance, Brook Hollow Golf Club in Dallas, Texas, is a Tillinghast course. We had a wonderful old

aerial shot showing the very beautiful roll to Brook Hollow, but there were no trees. There were hundreds of bunkers in the old aerial, but it's a different proposition today. It's a very difficult thing to go back to the original, and I think you have to temper them in some regard.

I think everyone knows that the West Course at Royal Melbourne in Australia was designed by Dr. Mackenzie. Alex Russell, a fine Australian player, picked right up where Dr. Mackenzie left off and built the East Course. It's very, very hard to tell them apart. In my mind, I don't think that I've ever seen a golf course that is as well taken care of and depicts Mackenzie's intent as well as Royal Melbourne. It is a spacious, gigantic, and just plain big course. Some of the opinions that I have about the golf course you have to take with a grain of salt because Royal Melbourne sits on 600 feet of sand, and it's the most beautiful property you have ever seen.

There is a book that has come out that's fascinating and is called *The Complete Golf Course — Turf and Design* by Claude Crockford. This man took care of this golf course for 40 years; it was his life. He studied its every shape and form.

I really would like to see people get hold of this book. The book is available through Peter Thompson's office in Australia: Thompson, Wolveridge and Associates, 11 Craford Street, Mount Eliza, Victoria 3930, Australia. The book is fascinating. He thought thatch was the absolute bane of



The seventh hole at Royal Melbourne in Australia demonstrates the overall spacious, gigantic proportions of this beautiful golf course.

all turf problems, so he would go about systematically relaying turf on the greens. After removing the sod, the thatch was cut off the bottom and the turf was laid on different parts of the golf course in different directions.

They call the golf course superintendents in Australia *curators*. A curator takes care of this course. It strikes me as a unique course for a lot of reasons. First of all, it has a tremendously different climate; it can be very hot. I played one day with Greg Norman when it was 105°. It was about 6 percent humidity with a very hot wind blowing from the north, the equator. The turf was tremendously stressed. At the end of the day I said, "You've got to put some water on this thing or it'll go away." And at the end of the day they came with little hand-held hoses. They came across the green, sprinkled it a little bit and that was it. I thought, "This course is unbelievable to go through these stresses." There's no question, it's marvelous golf terrain.

The seventh green was built by Claude Crockford. The old Mackenzie hole was too close to the clubhouse. The seventh hole is a 160-yard par 3, and it's an absolute devil. And I don't think I've ever seen more immaculately prepared approaches. The areas in front of the greens are just extensions of the greens themselves. Those approaches are topdressed, rolled, hand cut, and are just marvelous.

Every time you read about golf courses in old books, the approaches were so much of the thought process when building the green.

To me, these are areas that can serve with all classes of golfers. It's an area they use, but in my mind, you've got to be able to maintain a consistent turf or people won't use it. At Royal Melbourne, they're beautifully portrayed, they're natural, they're rolling, and it's a wonderful presentation.

Sometimes in windy conditions the greens are very keen, and sometimes it pays to play to the left or right of the flagstick. I think a lot of people come to the game and think that you have to play directly at the flagstick all the time. Well, if you play in Scotland or other places, you have to learn to play for position, but it relates to what the golf course gives you and how the ground is prepared.

Fairway bunkers don't necessarily have to be flat. I think a flattish nature can help provide a nice recovery, but a long time ago a bunker was a bunker, and you were meant to lose half a shot sometimes. Most of the courses built back then were predicated on match play. You played to a certain position and you had a certain advantage over your opponents.

Through my readings there is no one like Bobby Jones. I don't think anybody wrote like he did. For example, *Bobby Jones on Golf*, published in 1966. It is still very appropriate today. This is an example of his architectural statements: "It seems to me that many courses are designed with an eye on difficulty alone. In the effort to construct an exacting golf course that will sort out the experts, the average golfer who pays the bills is entirely overlooked. Too often the worth



(Top) Long, intimidating carries off the tee or to the green are fine for professional or low-handicap golfers, but the average golfer should have a choice — a place to bail out if he wants to. (Above) Over time, trees change the appearance of a course and the strategy needed to play the hole. Sometimes hard decisions need to be made about removing trees for the sake of maintaining architectural integrity.

of a layout is measured on how successfully it has withstood the efforts of the professionals to better its par or lower its record. From the standpoint of the inexpert player, there is nothing so disheartening as the appearance of a carry that is beyond his best effort and that offers no alternative route. In such a situation there is nothing for the golfer to do, for he is given no opportunity to overcome his deficiency in length for either accuracy or judgement. The problem that is supposed to be offered to him becomes no problem at all when he has nothing to look forward to." I'll just say one thing. In a lot of instances these days, the emphasis is all on carry, and in my mind, it's an unthinking proposition. It would be more judicious to work out an alternate route in a lot of instances.

Jones also wrote, "In an article I once received from the United States Golf Association Green Section, the statement was made

that 'we believe that much of the difficulty in maintaining putting greens is due to excessive use of water. The greenkeepers and green committees point out that they do this in self-defense, because golfers all want soft greens.'" I think that's a pretty true statement these days. I was once asked how I regarded the practice of keeping green surfaces soft, even soggy. Looking at the question purely from the playing standpoint, I have to agree with this next statement: "There can be little question that the great mass of golfers in this country prefer the greens very soft. Such conditions make play much easier for all classes of golfers, and is in great measure responsible for the fact that tournament scoring is uniformly lower here than at the seaside links and the British Isles."

I cannot say which induced the other, but what he believes in the one for placing of our bunkers very close to the putting surfaces, and the maintenance of soggy

greens that will hold any kind of a pitch, whether struck with backspin or not. It seems to me that the ideal green would be sufficiently soft only to hold the properly played pitch, and by hold, I do not mean it to stay within a very few feet. To carry out the intention of the designer, conditions ought to be such that a definite penalty should be sustained by the player who puts himself out of position. In this connection, I think one of our greatest needs is a fairway grass or treatment that will make the ground in front of our greens more reliable. If the greens themselves are to be maintained in a firmer condition, the need must arise on occasion to drop the ball short of the putting surface, allowing it to roll the remaining distance. I know very few courses where this is possible without great uncertainty. I believe in that. I think there's a way of presenting courses to players who can't carry the ball. There's got to be something for them to do as an alternative.

Let me say one thing about slow play. Let's suppose for one minute that there were no yardage indicators anywhere on the golf course. It seems when I play with my friends a lot of people usually say, "What's that yardage over there?" In some instances, they only hope to carry the ball a certain distance. Can you imagine if there weren't any indicators? You'd have to use your brain and actually think about a club to hit before you got to the ball. It seems to me that we're taking the stuffings out of this game.

The game has meant a lot to everybody here; it's meant everything to me. I've seen a lot of things I don't like in the game. I think it's a way of life, and I think there's nothing like a superintendent. Superintendents have the toughest job in the world. I cannot salute you enough. You put up with everything in the world. Let's face it, if there were 15 members from a course plus me in a room, you'd probably get 15 different ideas — from how to present things to what architecture means. I'm just saying that I'm certainly not alone in recognizing how important you are.

I think we're on the cutting edge of discovering new or improved grasses. The turf-grass universities all over the country are coming up with some incredible grasses. We all know that we're going to have to live with less water for irrigation in the next 10 to 15 years. So, it forces us into a situation that we have to keep searching. I'd be totally remiss if I didn't mention Dr. Milt Engelke, at Texas A&M University; Dr. Terry Riordan, at the University of Nebraska; Dr. Virginia Lehman, who's in Oregon now; and the USGA. They were there when I got started in trying to learn something about turf, and it's remarkable. Carry on this process; I think you're the most important people in the game.