

THE GREEN COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSON: Are You Up To The Challenge?

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IT'S A LOUSY JOB, for the most part. You are a previously sane individual who joined a club for entertainment, a little exercise, and some social camaraderie, who somehow finds himself not only on what is arguably the club's most important committee, but also responsible for the club's most valuable physical asset — the golf course. Gone are the enjoyable rounds of golf, uninterrupted by a playing partner's constant advice of what he would do if he were in charge. Relaxing lunches at the club turn into mini-board meetings with uninvited attendees pursuing an agenda of gripes formulated during their morning round. And not only does the superintendent take every opportunity to subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) remind you that the management of a golf course is no job for an amateur, the women, men, seniors, juniors, hackers, and flat-bellies are all convinced that you listen and respond only to the complaints of groups other than the one they feel represents their interests. The final straw may be when your spouse threatens divorce if you ever volunteer for any committee again.

Club politics aside, at first glance being the Green Chairperson might appear to be a *no-brainer*. Today's superintendents are better educated and more professional than ever before. There are computerized irrigation systems to precisely manage water, and maintenance equipment that can do more in less time and yield improved quality. Chemical companies have developed safer yet more effective pesticides and fertilizers. And turfgrass scientists are constantly developing new grasses and maintenance practices that allow us to enjoy the game even in the most demanding climate.

Unfortunately, in spite of all this progress there has never been a time in the history of golf that good leadership in the position of Green Chairperson has been more greatly needed. Both the game of golf and the golf course maintenance industry are under attack from many sides. Those who know nothing about the game or who can't afford the game at any cost consider it a sport only for the elite. Extremist environmental advocates



One of the most difficult challenges facing the Green Committee Chairperson is meeting the needs of all types of players.

paint golf courses as ravaged tracts of formerly pristine land that now glow in the dark as a result of chemical overload. Government regulatory agencies seem determined to pattern mandates after the tax code. Every day, more and more people want to use the course and expect it to be better conditioned than what was considered championship caliber just 10 years ago. And those better educated superintendents, computerized irrigation systems, and new mowers don't come cheap. Today's golf course budgets are growing rapidly and almost always represent the club's largest outlay of funds.

The position of Green Chairperson is anything but a *no-brainer*. In fact, this job

should be filled only by an individual with exceptional leadership skills, an interest and willingness to learn a whole new vocabulary, the mental toughness necessary to make hard decisions, and the time to do the job right. Not many people in any club meet these criteria. As a result, most Green Committees are poorly led and in many cases do more harm than good in spite of the best of intentions. The unfortunate truth is that the lack of good leadership may well be the biggest problem many clubs face.

This article is written to help the new Green Committee Chairperson be more effective. It is hoped the following tips will prove helpful in making your term a successful one.

Tip #1 — Assemble a Committee with Club Management Experience

Many of the most serious mistakes made by committees are due simply to a lack of tenure. When terms are limited to less than three years, there is an understandable inclination to want to “leave your mark” on the course. New bunkers, tees, and mounds are added under the direction of amateur architects following a personal agenda. These new features seldom complement the rest of the course and are almost always expensive and/or difficult to maintain.

Perhaps the most dangerous additions are the trees that are planted in every open area of the course. This design philosophy invariably seems to be to get the trees as close to the greens and tees as possible. Sadly, the legacy you and your committee leave will be greens that remain under constant stress from a lack of light, poor air movement, and root competition.

The tip, of course, is to make certain the committee is composed of individuals with experience in club affairs and then allow them to remain on the committee for at least

three years. One-year terms are invitations to poor management in any business. Golf course management is no exception. And don't forget the old saying concerning the size of your committee — “there should always be odd numbers, and three is too many.” Realistically, a committee of five to seven should offer good representation of even the most diverse membership.

One excellent means of guaranteeing both continuity and experience is for the club's immediate Past President to become the newest member of the Green Committee. The committee is soon made up of all Past Presidents — individuals who are very familiar with the entire club operation. With a committee of five, tenure will likewise be five years. Given the experience of the committee, long-range planning will be realistic and considered by the majority of the membership as credible. Variations on this formula also have been used successfully.

Tip #2 — Develop a Mission Statement

It should be the committee's responsibility to determine a realistic level of main-

tenance for the course. While most people would want the course in “member guest” condition at all times, this seldom is a realistic goal due both to agronomic and budgetary restrictions. The course can be *peaked* for a special event, but the committee and golf course superintendent jointly should determine the level of maintenance appropriate for day-to-day golfing activity. This maintenance level should provide playing conditions agreeable to the majority of the membership while placing agronomically reasonable demands on the course itself. *Remember, for a mission statement to be useful, it must be realistic.*

Tip #3 — Prepare a Master Plan

Every club's master plan should include at least the following:

- A tree planting and removal program that considers the architectural and agronomic influence of trees on the game of golf. A tree care program is best developed through the combined efforts of the superintendent, golf professional, a professional arborist, members of the committee, and,

Major construction affecting the architecture of the course should not be attempted without professional guidance.





A good relationship between the superintendent and the Chairperson is vital to the success of the course as well as the individuals involved.

ideally, a professional golf course architect. This team should evaluate the existing inventory of trees as well as locate future plantings.

- A professionally prepared cart path routing plan so that even if the path system is built in stages, it eventually will all fit together.

- Location and design of new course features that can be built by the superintendent. Tees, bunkers, mounds, etc. should be professionally designed by the architect and approved by the membership prior to any construction efforts.

- An analysis of water quality and water availability for the future.

- Identification of large capital improvements so the club can ready itself financially over a period of years rather than in a few frantic months. Such improvements include new irrigation systems, pumping plants, maintenance facilities, the reconstruction of greens, and other major architectural changes to the course.

Tip #4 — Develop and Adhere to a Capital Equipment Replacement Plan

The committee should request from the superintendent a capital equipment replacement and acquisition schedule. This schedule

should identify how much longer each piece of major equipment is expected to last and recommend a year for replacement. Occasionally the Green Section staff visits a club that has implemented this very sound business practice. Unfortunately, the vast majority of committees across the country choose to ignore these needs and simply pass them along to the next committee year after year. When the time finally comes that the purchases no longer can be ignored, the club finds itself totally unprepared. This is *crisis management* at its worst and always results in wasted funds and labor resources, membership dissatisfaction, and a prolonged reduction in the quality of the facility as a whole.

Tip #5 — Address Environmental Concerns

- The committee also must accept the fact that golf course maintenance as we now know it will almost certainly change radically due to environmental concerns. In the near future virtually all courses will need to conserve water, reduce chemical use, convert to superior grass varieties, and implement community-friendly programs such as the USGA-sponsored Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses.

The members of the committee need to begin educating their fellow members that:

- Absolute perfection in terms of weed control is no longer a practical goal. Weeds that threaten the course from an agronomic standpoint and those that adversely affect playing quality should be controlled. But there are many, many times golf courses are sprayed for weeds that really could be tolerated. These “weeds” often can become the basis for sanctuary areas and *native* areas. Make no mistake, there is a selling job involved here to convince people that there is a difference between a weed patch and a nesting habitat. Influential members of the committee will be much more persuasive than even the most eloquent superintendent.

- The same types of compromises in terms of appearance will be necessary for water features. Instead of immaculately manicured borders surrounding a totally weed-free lake, we need to learn to accept buffer strips and a few aquatic weeds. Repeated chemical treatment of water features to compensate for insufficient depth, nutrient runoff, and stagnation is neither cost effective nor sensible.

- What is perhaps most important, the committee members must help educate the golfers of the club that the course cannot reasonably be kept in “member/guest” condition at all times. Attempting to do so will result in a turf that is kept in a constant state of vulnerability to damage from disease, insects, weeds, and traffic. While chemicals are extraordinarily valuable tools for golf course maintenance, the goal at every course should be to create favorable growing conditions and establish a level of maintenance that reduces the need for such crutches as much as possible. A course that is not constantly pushed to the maximum has far fewer problems year in and year out *and* requires less input in terms of chemical controls.

Tip #6 — Get to Know Your Superintendent

Establish a personal relationship with the golf course superintendent. Many times the Green Committee Chairperson takes the position that if the superintendent is taking good care of the course it is best not to interfere. While this attitude might seem appropriate at first, consider the problems that arise when something goes wrong on the course and the lines of communication are not well established.

Most superintendents are like employees in any profession. They are anxious for the opportunity to communicate their needs to their employers. However, golf course superintendents have the added problem of working in a profession so specialized that the average Committee Chairperson initially will have little idea of what the superinten-

dent is talking about. It is equally important that the superintendent have a good understanding of what the membership needs. These needs should be articulated by the Green Chairperson.

There are a number of steps the new Chairperson can take to make certain good communication exists between himself and the superintendent.

- Play golf together often. Be certain to play with all types of members rather than the same group each week. This will help you see the course from their perspective and better understand their demands. Play other courses, too. Put together a foursome of the Pro, Superintendent, Green Chairperson, and one other. Meet your counterparts at the other club if possible.

- Attend local superintendent meetings and Green Section conferences together as often as possible. Try to attend the annual Golf Course Superintendents Association of America meeting. This is always an “eye-opener” for the Green Chairperson, and the time spent in the seminars and looking at the newest innovations the industry has to offer will prove very productive.

- Hold committee meetings in the maintenance facility occasionally. Let the entire committee learn a little more about what it takes to care for the course. If the condition

of your maintenance facility is too poor to hold a simple meeting, consider the working environment in which your course maintenance staff must work on a daily basis.

Tip #7 — Utilize the Green Section’s Turfgrass Advisory Service

The staff of the Green Section visits more than 1,500 courses each year, with maintenance budgets ranging from much less than \$100,000 to well over \$1,000,000. The agronomist can help you reach a balance between the agronomic needs of the course and the desires of the players. They can help you identify the potential of your facility as well as pinpoint areas in which both short-term and long-term improvement efforts need to be made. They will give the superintendent and the committee an honest assessment of the programs in place and help formulate new programs if necessary. The Green Section’s Turfgrass Advisory Service is one of the best bargains in golf and a resource every Green Chairperson should tap.

Do You Have “The Right Stuff”?

How critical is this need for stronger leadership at the top? Look at it this way. Never before has our industry been better prepared to deal with the challenges of the

future. We have the best-educated superintendents, a scientific and research community that produces invaluable information on a regular basis, computerized irrigation control that gives us the best-ever management of water, and unbelievably efficient equipment. We have immediate access to critical information sources and a worldwide network of turfgrass professionals of all types who freely exchange ideas. Unfortunately, the sad truth is that all of these assets can be negated at the management level by one chairperson or a committee whose only goal is to have faster greens and 100% pristine conditions. Simply put, poor leadership is worse than no leadership at all. The game of golf and the golf course maintenance industry cannot meet the challenges of the future without the support and leadership of those who are the ultimate consumers — the golfers.

Hopefully, all these challenges do not scare you away from accepting the responsibility of Green Committee Chairperson. Make the commitment, accept the challenge, and follow the guidelines outlined above. The pay may not be great, but the knowledge that you have had a positive impact on your course, those who use it, and the lives of those who maintain it, should go a long way toward justifying the effort.

The Long-Range Plan should include an evaluation of water quality and future availability.

