



# A View from the Chairman

The green chairman's role in turfgrass preparation.

BY KEITH HAPP

**T**he role of the green chairman has been described in many terms: challenging, frustrating, tiring, rewarding, and stimulating are just a few. However, after speaking with many Green Committee chairmen, one thing is clear. Those who volunteer to chair the Green Committee demonstrate a true love for the game of golf and their golf course. Although every course is different and maintenance budgets allocated for course preparation vary, a common goal is often expressed: improve the course to enrich golfer enjoyment.

In an effort to identify and define the role of the chairman of the Green Committee, green chairmen from four golf courses were interviewed. Two are current incumbents and two are past committee chairmen. They are:

- Mark Studer, Oakmont Country Club, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
- Mack Saunders, Glen Oak Country Club, Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania.
- Ed Madenford, Conestoga Country Club, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.
- Ron Moehler, Chartiers Country Club, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

A structured interview consisting of a list of ten questions was presented to each, and a summary of their answers follows.

**Q** Why did you want to be the chairman of the Green Committee at your course?

*Saunders:* I never really sought it out. It was a case of evolving into the position of green chairman. In a nutshell, I felt I could add value to the

golf course, and representing the membership could add value as well.

*Moehler:* We had a master plan in place and there was no action being taken. I felt that I could move forward to get the renovations done according to the master plan. There were a number of people who believed we needed to act on the master plan, so that is why I did it, and we were successful in getting it through.

*Madenford:* I've been doing this for probably 16 to 17 years. When I was a lot younger I just wanted to make the course better, improve playing conditions, and make some architectural changes. I grew up at this club and over the years it has really changed. Years ago you just cared about the greens. Now you have to care about greens, fairways, tees, roughs, bunkers — everything. It has evolved. I've noticed the complaints from the members have changed over the years, and they are more demanding.

**Q** How do you define the role of the chairman of the Green Committee?

*Saunders:* I see the chairman of the Green Committee as essentially the *gatekeeper* of the club. The key asset is obviously the golf course. The chairman represents the golf course superintendent and the golf course requirements to the membership, the Board of Directors, and Executive Committee, and carries feedback to the golf course superintendent and the maintenance team.

The job has to be done with a fair amount of balance so that you don't end up offending someone unnecessarily. The green chairman's role is a

To address golfers' questions, the green chairman should have a basic level of understanding concerning the agronomic programs used on the golf course. Action plans and maintenance goals are regularly discussed between Mark Studer, green chairman, and John Zimmers, golf course superintendent at Oakmont Country Club (PA).





The USGA Turf Advisory Service visit provides an excellent opportunity to assess the long-range direction of the golf course maintenance program among the members of the Green Committee and golf course maintenance staff.

delicate balance between representing the members and representing the needs of the golf course and superintendent. In my mind, above all else, the chairman has a responsibility to build a level of trust and credibility with all the constituents in order to be truly successful.

**Q** How would you define the role of the chairman with regard to the maintenance of the course and its setup?

*Saunders:* The chairman must ensure that the superintendent is always set towards the improvement of the golf course. One of the things that we constantly say at Glen Oak, and really emphasize, is never to accept the status quo. The chairman has to work to see that appropriate funding is provided through the budgeting processes and sell the needs of the golf course to the board. After programs are funded, the chairman must work with the superintendent to ensure that the programs are completed or implemented on a timely basis. Again, this is a delicate matter because many times the full benefit of funded improvements won't show or won't come to fruition for several seasons. You've got to make sure course officials

understand that the expected results won't happen overnight. However, there has to be a level of trust and confidence on the part of the board and the members that you are, in fact, going to do what you said you were going to do.

A chairman who has been around a long time and has an intimate knowledge of the golf course and putting surfaces can help with course setup, identify possible hole locations, and determine the playability of the course with the superintendent. It's also important for the superintendent and chairman to play golf together on a regular basis. The superintendent needs to see the course from a player's perspective as well as from a superintendent's perspective.

**Q** How are course conditioning concerns and the accompanying membership complaints addressed? Are all complaints brought to the superintendent, or are complaints filtered before they are brought to the superintendent's attention?

*Madenford:* We are very particular about this subject. Complaints must be put in writing, addressed to the board, and sent to me. I want



them to put it in writing, and that way I will be sure to give them a written response. The reason I do this is because I don't want to be attacked when I'm playing golf. If they put it in writing, then it is serious to them and I will answer it in writing.

*Saunders:* First of all, the chairman must be seen as an approachable person by the membership and at least have a level of knowledge about turf-grass and maintenance that makes him somewhat credible. You can't talk about these things without some fundamental level of knowledge to help the members understand what you're trying to do.

Secondly, while the superintendent is always available, we ask that complaints be routed to the chairman or the general manager so that the superintendent is not bombarded with unnecessary and time-consuming complaints. From that point, the chairman can take issues to the Green Committee or directly to the superintendent, depending upon the issue urgency. To close the feedback loop, the chairman has a responsibility to respond to the member who originated the complaint. In many instances the chairman can handle complaints without even involving the superintendent. Simply explaining to a member what is being done and how it will alleviate and mitigate his or her complaint is often sufficient. Finally, I see the chairman as relieving the superintendent of unneeded pressures that members unknowingly place on him.

**Q** How is the performance of the superintendent evaluated? Are there maintenance standards in place? Are annual conditioning goals clearly defined?

*Studer:* A performance evaluation is a must. The superintendent should submit his performance expectations in writing, and at that point the superintendent and green chairman jointly fine-tune the written plan and conduct mid-season and end-of-the-year written evaluations. Part of the superintendent's compensation should be tied to this review. A written job description is a must. Without one, you have *mutual mystification*. The written job description that we developed when doing the performance review is a crucial part of the contract.

Specify who does the performance evaluation. No more than two people should officially evaluate the superintendent's performance: the green chairman and possibly the club president. In business, committees do not evaluate employees;

supervisors do, and the green department is a business of the club headed by the chair.

**Q** Is there a master plan in place (using the service of an architect) to help focus course improvements?

*Saunders:* We have a master, or long-range plan. It is terribly important for these plans to be dynamic and not static. I worry about developing a plan, putting it in a shiny binder on a bookshelf, and never referring to it again. We found that the needs of the course and the priority items tend to change. A plan should adapt to those changes. We don't make any changes to our golf course without a golf course architect being involved and agreeing with what we want to do.

**Q** How are essential agronomic programs (aeration) scheduled? For example, is aeration placed on the calendar of events and then golf is scheduled around this treatment?

*Studer:* The first step is to have the superintendent outline what he feels is needed and when it should be completed. This written aerification and cultivation plan should be discussed with the Golf Committee and Pro Shop staff a minimum of one year in advance. For example, our staff coordinates four agronomic procedures in early April and again in late August. The dates are published in February on the golf calendar. During the August cultivation, no guest play is allowed and players know this policy well in advance. Our part-time staff is still employed in August and, weather permitting, complete the green, tee, fairway, and approach aerification. Moving our maintenance from September to August has helped get the work completed in half the time and recovery is witnessed after only one week of disruption.

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*Madenford:*

First, every year I give our golf professional an aerification schedule. We aerify

one week in the spring and a small aerification in the fall. It's on the calendar and scheduled by January 1. They run their golf around us . . . you have to be proactive or the golf program will take over. If we put our schedule out there first, it supersedes golf events.

**Q** What role does the chairman have regarding communications between Pro Shop and superintendent, Golf Committee and superintendent, and the membership and superintendent? Do you act as a facilitator?

*Saunders:* The green chairman acts as a major facilitator with all of those constituencies, and the chairman has to use a variety of communication methods. For example, we developed a column in our club newsletter entitled "For the Good of the Game." This newsletter includes an article on golf course activities, respect for the golf course, and the whys of various programs that are underway. In some cases, I feature information that we received from the Turf Advisory Service visits. It informs members of the things that we need to be doing or specific activities that we are doing well.

Last year we conducted an open Q&A session for all of our members. The focus was installation of the new irrigation system. We explained why we were spending \$1.1 million and the benefits that could be expected. It's very important for the

chairman to have this communication throughout the club.

*Studer:* Communication is the key. New technologies help us show the committee, board, and members what is happening to their turfgrass. We use a digital camera, laptop, and LCD projector to show pictures of before and after work. Every committee meeting includes a PowerPoint presentation showing the latest aerification methods or irrigation repairs. Weather permitting, part of each committee meeting is conducted on the golf course to see firsthand what progress is being made.

We recently installed a new irrigation system and had a map of the course in the lobby and at our indoor practice facility. Members could follow the progress as the staff color-coded the map as to what had been completed. For us, the opening golf meeting and dinner is the perfect opportunity to present a 20-minute PowerPoint presentation of our four spring aerification procedures. Questions are fielded and all members learn how crucial this cultivation is for the continued health and playability of our turf. As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words.

**Q** How is course closure handled? Does the superintendent have the authority to make this decision? If not, who has the final say?

*Studer:* It is your superintendent's call! If you micro-manage these decisions, you undermine the long-term goals of managing the turfgrass. Listen to your turfgrass professional and trust his decision-making. This is the green chairman's best opportunity to reinforce the team concept of turfgrass maintenance by allowing the staff to stick to their action plan.

Why is this so important? When obstacles have been removed for the superintendent to do his job, you can now, in all fairness, hold him accountable for the turfgrass health and playability. For example, if you micro-manage aerification schedules and course closings, you perhaps have given the superintendent a legitimate reason for subsequent turf problems. This would not be good for the club or the superintendent. Let the staff do their job.

Other maintenance decisions the green chairman should endorse and help clearly define are:  
How long should play be suspended for frost?  
When can I use my cart today?  
Do we have to play temporary greens?  
When will the course reopen after the storm?



*Saunders:* I would simply say the superintendent has *total* control and responsibility for the golf course. He is told and encouraged to make whatever decision is appropriate. The chairman, in my mind, sets the tone and creates the environment in which the superintendent feels comfortable to make a responsible decision, not one that is expedient or political just because some members want the course open when it should not be. The overall golden rule that we use is, we will never put our golf course at risk.

**Q** How is the operating budget developed, and how are monies allocated for capital improvements to the course and equipment purchases?

*Studer:* You cannot approve a fair grounds budget before specific, written course-conditioning standards are determined. For example, the Green Committee and superintendent decide the frequency and height of cut for greens, tees, fairways, and rough. The next step is to evaluate what additional items cost, like one or two additional fairway mowings. Is it worth it and do members expect it? Our club has compared our operating budget to other clubs that have similar conditioning expectations. Our local golf association conducts an annual green department questionnaire and publishes the results. This has developed into an excellent starting point for reviewing expectations and budgets.

Capital budgets can blindside the committee if they are not openly discussed and appropriately justified. We have a revolving 10-year budget based on a complete written equipment inventory with the remaining useful years of every piece of equipment listed. The staff prioritizes the replacement schedule.

*Saunders:* We adopted a sequential process. First, we analyze where we are in the current fiscal year in terms of expenses. Second, we know that our club increases dues annually in the area of three to five percent. We simply take between three and five percent increase of the existing year's budget to get a ballpark number for the following fiscal year. Specific needs are taken into account as we project the upcoming budget cycle. Finally, the superintendent and the chairman work jointly to prepare a formal budget document. All the rationales used to develop each individual line of the budget are included in the final document.

In terms of capital, the superintendent prepares a list of capital requirements for projects and



equipment replacement, including supporting rationale and cost estimates. I, separately, prepare a similar list from my perspective and then we meet jointly to discuss and prepare one final, prioritized list for the next year. The overall guide that I have learned to use is that I know at my club if I present a good case I can get about \$100,000 for capital projects or equipment replacement for the following year.

## CONCLUSION

The Green Committee serves a vital role in the preparation of the course, and the chairman of the Committee is the link that connects the circuit between membership/golfer, other functions of the club and the superintendent. The chairman is a facilitator who supports and guides the superintendent to help achieve conditioning desired by the players. Nothing can be more satisfying than receiving praise for course conditioning and playability. This can happen when clear and obtainable goals are put forth.

The United States Golf Association Green Section offers a publication entitled *A Guide for Green Committee Members* (USGA Order Department, 800-336-4446). Many commonly asked questions regarding the function of the Green Committee and the chairman are answered in this booklet. Contact your local Green Section office for further information and/or assistance.

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The buck stops here. The final decision on the care of the golf course should be made by the golf course superintendent.