

RAISING THE BAR:

HOW HIGH CAN YOU GO?

BY CHRIS HARTWIGER

Raising the bar does not have to mean raising the rent.

Raising the bar” or “taking it to the next level” are phrases long on expectations and short on explanations. The enthusiasm generated by these phrases can spread like wildfire. Unfortunately, these phrases mean different things to different people, and this spells bad news for a golf course and its members who are searching for “the next level.” A grass roots effort to “raise the bar” can create a lack of respect for current conditions and an insatiable demand for perceived golf course improvements.

Turfgrass conditions on golf courses across the country have never been better. However, golfers often are not any happier today than they were 10, 20, or 50 years ago. This article will attempt to boldly go where no man has gone before. The phrases “raising the bar” and “taking it to the next level” will be reviewed and a method will be offered to show golf courses where to focus if they are seeking “the next level.”

DEFINITIONS

The phrases “raising the bar” and “taking it to the next level” will be used interchangeably in this article. A review of the most sophisticated, up-to-

date turfgrass management textbooks offers no help in seeking a definition for either phrase. A little detective work is needed to get to the heart of this matter. Hundreds of interviews with course officials revealed some important answers. In response to the question, “What does ‘raising the bar’ mean to you?” most course officials offered some spin on the following themes. “I played at Top Dog C.C. across town and the course is always in perfect condition” or “we want a course that is in great condition all the time.” These desires do not reflect tangible results that can be achieved, but dreams that may never be met. More times than not, a desire to “raise the bar” ends up being translated into some type of change that improves the appearance or presentation of the golf course.

The definition for “raising the bar” in this article is any improvement to the playability of the tees, fairways, or putting greens. The game of golf is played up the middle of the golf course, and this is where the emphasis of maintenance should remain. Today, golf courses are spending more money than ever before, but often there is little value for the extra money being spent. The

Reducing hand work in hazards does not alter the role of the hazard, but it does free up resources to be used on other portions of the golf course.



Unmanaged tree growth has rendered three quarters of this tee useless. This is not what the architect intended.



zone of intensive maintenance has spread from the middle of the course to the rough and even into the woods. Courses are spending tens of thousands of dollars on mulch, pine straw, and labor to maintain the woods!

WHY FOCUS ON THE MIDDLE OF THE GOLF COURSE?

There are several reasons why golf courses seeking “the next level” should focus on the middle of the golf course. First, there are many mid-level courses that try to compete with bigger-budget courses. These courses simply can’t compete at the highest level, and instead of making a few areas on the golf course excellent, they end up with many areas that are average.

Pursuing excellence on a few areas is a much better strategy for most golf courses. A man-hour study conducted at a golf course in middle Tennessee revealed that 13% of the maintenance budget was spent on the putting greens. More than 60% of all shots in the average round of golf involve the putting greens. Every extra dollar invested in the putting greens impacts 60% of all shots in a round of golf.

Natural beauty is a key part of the golf experience. However, not many people would pay a green fee or club dues to “look” at a golf course once a week; people pay to play the game.

A golf course that focuses on the middle provides improved value to its players.

A few courses are blessed with great natural terrain, a spectacular routing, or challenging architecture that have attracted golfers for many years. Other golf courses may not be as fortunate and must actively compete for play. In many cases, the condition of the putting greens establishes the reputation of a course, and this is yet another reason to focus on the middle of the course. A course with a smaller budget may not be able to match conditions with higher-budgeted courses, but they should be able to provide putting greens that are comparable.

SHOW ME THE MONEY

There are two ways to provide the funds necessary for any improvement on a golf course: raising the budget or reallocating resources. Increasing the budget is an easy way to accomplish improvements, but it may not be practical or realistic. For courses serious about getting “to the next level” with reallocated budget dollars, the first step is to identify areas where money is spent inefficiently or where money is being spent on areas with little or no impact on play.

On-course landscaping is marketed by course officials as a way to add color and enhance the golfer’s experience. This may be true, but not many golf courses commit enough money for



Unnecessary landscaping at tee complexes is an example of resources that could be spent more effectively on tees, greens, and fairways.

maintenance techniques to maintain a hazard. Wouldn't a better choice be to spend this money on areas where the golfer wants to be?

For courses serious about improving playability, there are funds to be found if consideration is given to shifting resources from hazards and peripheral areas. The biggest challenge is getting course officials to agree on what areas they want to be excellent. The improvements are the easy and fun part.

RAISING THE BAR

Entire articles could be written about how to improve playability up the middle of the course. The sections below are designed to offer suggestions and to stimulate thoughts about ways to improve the middle. Keep in mind that every course is different and not all ideas may be practical for a given situation.

ARCHITECTURAL INTEGRITY

Every golf course should ask this question: "Does the golf course play the way the architect intended?" If the answer is no, a golden opportunity exists to make a substantial improvement in playability.

Trees are the number-one cause of changes to architectural integrity, and they impact course architecture in a number of ways. Inappropriate tree plantings can wreak havoc on playability. For example, a tree planted between a fairway bunker and the putting green creates a double hazard. The golfer's only option is to chip back to the fairway, and the opportunity to hit a heroic recovery shot is lost.

Trees grow with time and can change architectural integrity. If golfers are using just one side of the tee to avoid tree interference, something is wrong. The infamous par-3 dogleg is a scenario that should set off warning signals, too.

Mowing patterns are altered over the years through regular maintenance. Fairway perimeters can become long and straight, while putting green perimeters tend to become round. On courses with the same fairway and rough grass, fairway perimeters can be restored with little expense. Restoring putting green perimeters is possible, but it is more expensive and may require resodding.

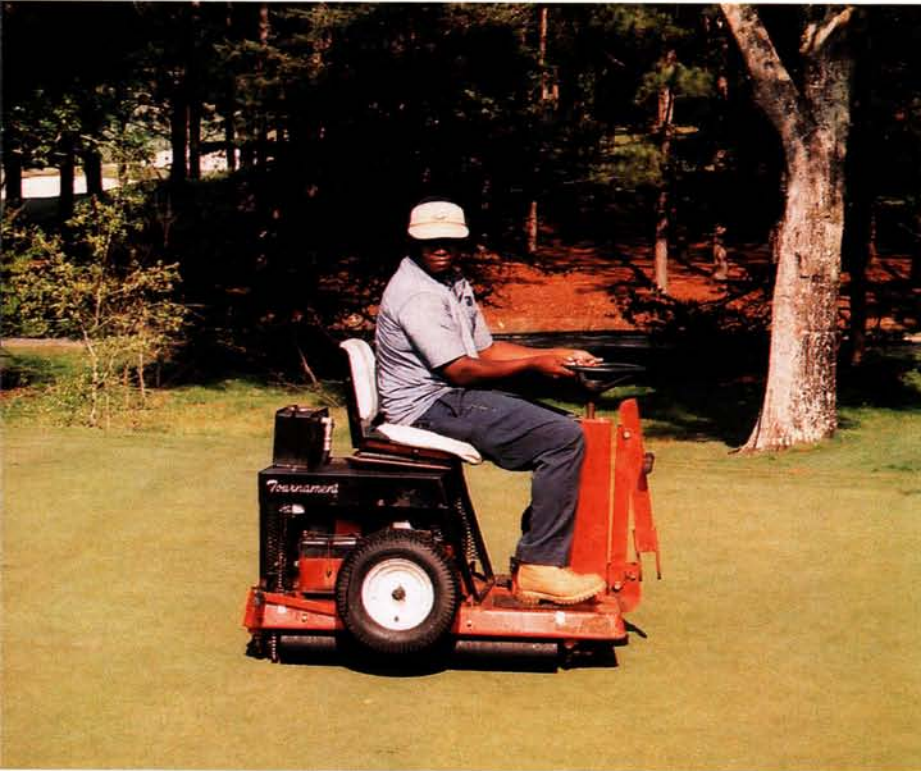
installation *and* maintenance of appropriate plant materials. Too often, the wrong species are planted, they are not planted in scale with the area they are designed to complement, or the resources to properly maintain on-course landscaping are not available. The result is a product that looks inappropriate or unkempt. Time spent on these areas takes away from time spent on the primary golf course areas.

Maintaining turfgrass or vegetation inside lateral and water hazard boundaries is a classic poor use of money. Maintenance should be minimal inside hazards. A ball that lands in tall grass in a lateral hazard is treated no differently under the Rules of Golf from a ball that lands in the water in the same hazard. Officials at many golf courses would be amazed at the number of labor hours spent maintaining hazards each year. Wouldn't money be better spent on putting greens, where more than 60% of all shots are impacted?

Cart path edging, clearing and cleaning the woods, and unnecessary tree plantings are more areas where resources could be reduced. Money spent on dubious, expensive specialty products has skyrocketed over the past ten years and could be reduced or eliminated.

The search for the perfect bunker continues to ring the cash register. Thousands of dollars are spent on expensive sands and labor-intensive

It is advisable to maintain a relationship with the golf course architect who was responsible for the design. If that individual is no longer available, work with an architect familiar with the original style of design. Every five or ten years, it is well worth the expense to have the architect provide recommendations for maintaining the design integrity.



Instead of spending time string-trimming a hazard, this staff member is able to roll the greens. This practice will impact 60% of all golf shots on this day.

PUTTING GREENS

Putting quality has improved dramatically over the years. Today, golf course superintendents have more tools and resources available. Because putting greens account for such a small percentage of acreage on the course, it is possible to have outstanding putting greens on a modest budget.

Outlined below are a few common shortfalls in putting green management programs. Addressing deficiencies in these areas will produce positive results immediately.

- Outdated mowing equipment. Keeping mowing equipment up to date improves the quality of cut.
- Lack of support staff. A well-trained mechanic must have time to keep bedknives and reels finely tuned.
- Infrequent topdressing. Light, frequent applications of sand topdressing improve green speed and smoothness and provide numerous agronomic benefits.

- Lack of organic matter management. An appropriate cultivation program enhances stress tolerance.
- Poor growing conditions. Shade is the enemy of every turfgrass species.

TEES

The requirements for high quality tees are straightforward. Tees should be level with complete turfgrass coverage. Size should be adequate to handle anticipated play. Trees should not be an obstacle that pushes play to one side of a tee. Improving tees is a great investment because every golfer plays from a tee on every hole.

FAIRWAYS AND APPROACHES

Top quality fairways and approaches are characterized by firm, dry conditions whenever possible. Turf coverage should be complete and golfers should be able to play the ball down during the golf season. Generally, the greater the mowing frequency, the higher the turfgrass quality. Mowing height should be a local decision, and it should be based upon the average player at the course. Higher handicappers prefer taller heights of cut, while low handicappers prefer lower heights of cut.

Fairway improvements can involve investments in drainage and equipment. Other fairway improvements can be inexpensive and quick to implement. For example, keeping fairways firm and dry does not have to be more expensive, but it does require membership education. Patches of brown are acceptable. Most golfers will enjoy the extra roll and shot-making options associated with firm, dry fairways.

CONCLUSION

The “next level” may be closer than you think. By taking an approach that focuses on the middle of the golf course, it is possible to enhance playing conditions with as much or as little as a course is willing to spend or reallocate. More importantly, a renewed focus on the middle offers an avenue to channel the enthusiasm of those wanting to take their golf course to the next level. Implementing these suggestions will improve your golf course, and no one will be dissatisfied with better tees, fairways, and putting greens.

CHRIS HARTWIGER hurdles plenty of bars regularly in traveling to golf courses throughout the Southeast and Florida Regions.