



# THE TEN MOST COMMON GREEN COMMITTEE MISTAKES

Green Committees serve a vital role in the management of a golf course, but there is a great disparity in their relative effectiveness.

BY DAVID A. OATIS

**G**reen Section agronomists make nearly 2,000 Turf Advisory Service visits to more than 1,500 different golf courses during the course of each season. Visits are made to every type of course imaginable, from elite championship sites to public and municipal courses, to low-budget nine-hole facilities, and the structure and relative effectiveness of the various committees that oversee the operation of these courses vary nearly as much as the facilities themselves. Nevertheless, most of these varied courses have a few things in common. They all take pride in their facility and have a strong desire to improve it. And yes, most of the committees that guide them have the propensity to make mistakes. Just as each course has its strengths and weaknesses, so do their committees. Some are remarkably effective, while others squander funds and/or are ineffective. You might be surprised to learn that the mistakes made by Green Committees often are quite similar, both from course

to course and decade to decade. World-renowned architect Alister Mackenzie apparently had little regard for committees. In his 1930s manuscript, *The Spirit of St. Andrews*, he wrote, "The history of most golf clubs is that a committee is appointed, they make mistakes, and just as they are beginning to learn from their mistakes, they resign office and are replaced by others who make still greater mistakes, and so it goes on."

So, Green Committee mistakes are not new, nor are the mistakes they make very original. Most have been made countless times before by countless committees at countless golf courses. Upon surveying the Green Section staff (whose resume includes a combined total of 250 years of service and approximately 30,000 Turf Advisory Service visits), it became quite clear that there is a distinct pattern to the mistakes most commonly made by Green Committees. Although it has been said that "a wise man learns from his mistakes," the author prefers the adage "Only a

A Green Committee should have a workable number of members (7-11) to promote discussion and to reach timely decisions. Committees should be comprised of golfers of all playing abilities and both genders to take into account different perspectives and to keep lines of communication open.

fool learns from his own mistakes. A wise man learns from the mistakes of others." It is hoped that this effort to identify common Green Committee mistakes will help your committee avoid them.

## THE ROLE OF THE GREEN COMMITTEE

No discussion of Green Committee mistakes would be complete without first discussing the role of the committee. Much has been written on this subject, and a good discussion is contained in *A Guide for Green Committee Members* by the USGA Green Section, available from the USGA order department (Publication #PG 1715, \$2.00 each, 800-336-4446). You can also contact your regional Green Section office for a copy.

Green Committees have the responsibility of overseeing the management of the golf course, but they must not be involved in its day-to-day management. Rather, they are an advisory board whose role should be to hire a golf course superintendent and make broad-based decisions on budget and policy. They need not have specific knowledge of turfgrass management, but they must understand the game of golf, have a desire to learn, and have time to devote to the process. Effective participation on a Green Committee requires a significant commitment of time and energy, and it is not a commitment to be taken lightly.

In charge of the committee is the green chairman. His task is to organize and hold regular meetings of the committee and to develop and maintain a close relationship with the golf course superintendent. At courses with problems or conflicts, this can be a most unenviable role, yet it also has the potential to be extraordinarily rewarding. An effective chairman and committee working with a competent superintendent can develop and implement plans to maintain and make improvements in a golf course that can be enjoyed by golfers for generations. Conversely, when an ineffectual committee and a superintendent cannot cultivate a constructive relationship, it can drag the course down, creating or adding to problems, the effects of which will be suffered for years. Perhaps the simplest description of the committee's role is that **"... they must protect the golf course from the golfers!"** If the average golfer had his way, the greens would never be aerified, pesticides and fertilizers would never be applied, and trees would only be planted

and never removed. In truth, chaos would reign, turf would fail, and playability would be abysmal!

Being a chairman or member of the Green Committee is not a popularity contest. Tough decisions frequently must be made regarding disruptive and expensive programs and projects, and thick skin and an ample dose of conviction are required. Green Committees serve a vital role in the operation of the golf course. In this role, committees have many opportunities to make mistakes, so now let us review what the Green Section staff believes are the ten most common ones.

## TOP TEN GREEN COMMITTEE MISTAKES

### No. 10: Shopping for the Right Opinion

"Their minds are made up and they do not wish to be confused by the facts," describes the committee that falls into this trap. Some committees look for a superintendent or consultant who will give them the answers and corresponding recommendations they desire. "Sure, we can keep the greens in championship condition all season!" ... "Heck no, you don't need to aerify!" ... or "We don't need to close the course for maintenance!" might be some of them. Sadly, there are superintendents and consultants who will give committees the answers they are looking for. Green Section agronomists occasionally have been labeled as "the superintendent's mouthpiece" by such committees. Realistically, however, if the opinions of the USGA agronomist happen to be in concert with the superintendent's, it just may be because the superintendent has it right in the first place.

Turfgrass and golf course maladies often require complex, expensive, and/or disruptive solutions that every golfer would choose to avoid if given the option. It is the mission of the USGA Green Section to help courses devise the most reasonable and effective solutions to their problems, but cheap and easy are of little value if the solution is not effective. Sometimes, courses need to take a step back in terms of conditioning in order to take several steps forward. For instance, courses that want top-notch putting greens usually need to put up with the disruption of aerification, verticutting, topdressing, and pest management programs. All of these programs are disruptive to the golf schedule, but failure to follow through with sound management programs will produce turf problems that will be even more disruptive.

Medicine doesn't always taste very good, but we still have to take it!

Second opinions are valuable, but solutions should be selected based on whether or not they are logical and will be effective as opposed to whether or not they will inconvenience the golfers. Motives always should be considered when reviewing the recommendations.

### **No. 9: Not Enough Time to Participate Fully**

An effective Green Committee member must put in the time! This means attending as many of the regular meetings as possible. It also means educating oneself on the subject of turfgrass management and learning specifically about issues that might be facing their individual course. Prospective committee members should not underestimate the time commitment or the effort it takes to attend meetings, seminars, and Turf Advisory Service visits, or the time it takes to educate oneself. Reading textbooks, articles, trade publications, and the *Green Section Record* are part of the process. It also is essential to spend time with the superintendent, both on the course and at conferences and seminars. Chairmen and committees also must take the time to develop open, honest relationships with the golf course superintendent. The committee member who doesn't have time to participate fully generally is not capable of making informed decisions.

### **No. 8: Figurehead Chairman**

The green chairman should be a duly elected course official and a voting member of the Board of Directors. The green chairman in that capacity has far more leverage and influence on the outcome of controversial issues and is a much more persuasive advocate of the golf course management operation.

Conversely, the structure at some courses is for the green chairman to serve "at the will (read 'whim') of the president." While this arrangement can function acceptably in some cases, it can fail miserably when personalities clash and/or difficult decisions have to be made. It also sets the stage for the green chairman to effectively become the "puppet" of the president. When personalities or agendas clash, the green chairman can easily be removed from office and replaced with a more agreeable candidate. Frequent turnover in the leadership position of the Green Committee is never a good idea, but it can be especially disastrous when it happens in mid-season!



Sometimes the cheapest route is not the best decision. The Green Chairman at this golf course owned a sand supply business and offered the course an inexpensive sand source. Unfortunately, in less than two years, the sand had to be removed in slabs due to contaminants in this riverbed sand.

### **No. 7: Micromanagement**

Green Committee members and chairmen must have a basic understanding of and a strong interest in course management programs. It is a steep learning curve indeed for Green Committee officials, and armed with plenty of newfound knowledge, it is easy to become a backseat driver. It is uncomfortable and inhibiting to have one's every move scrutinized, and that should not be the role of the Green Committee. Rather, the committee should make broad-based policy decisions and should not be involved in the day-to-day maintenance of the golf course.

In some instances, strong-willed green chairmen have begun directing maintenance personnel, and this jump in the chain of command can only cause chaos and confusion. If a course official believes that additional direction is needed or priorities should be shifted, he or she should discuss it with the superintendent face to face and never in front of the maintenance staff. The committee member also must realize that the competent superintendent has a better appreciation of the "big picture" and may have other maintenance issues to deal with that have higher priorities.

### **No. 6: Unrealistic Demands**

Just about every committee wants more in terms of turf quality and playing conditions than they can afford, and some want more than is humanly possible. Perhaps it is just basic human nature, but placing unrealistic demands on the golf course superintendent, maintenance personnel, and turf-

grass is an all too common pitfall. Examples include trying to maintain championship conditions every day of the year or requiring that the greens be a specific speed every day. These are problems often fueled by televised golf coverage. Most of the courses portrayed each week on television are in nearly flawless condition, and this one-sided view of course conditioning gives golfers everywhere the unrealistic notion that the courses are maintained in this condition every day of the year.



This golf course allows the club president to select and plant a tree of his choice in the location of his choosing! Planting the wrong type of tree in the wrong location creates a problem that can last for generations.

The extraordinary playing conditions achieved for the United States Open Championship frequently are cited by golfers who never realize that the courses hosting national championships are selected years ahead of time and then may go through a lengthy (and often very expensive and disruptive) period of intense conditioning to achieve those remarkable conditions, which, by the way, are maintained for a single week in June. Rarely do normal courses have access to the hundreds of volunteers U.S. Open course superintendents have. Let there be no mistake, extraordinary conditions are achieved during the United States Open Championship and other televised events. However, these conditions cannot be maintained on a regular basis throughout the year. Turfgrass has its limits, even if the budget does not, and golfers everywhere need to keep in mind that there usually is a direct relationship between fast putting green speeds and dead grass.

Interestingly, noted architect Dr. Alister Mackenzie also had something to say about perfection: "It is possible to have too high a degree of perfection. If we have never had a bad lie, we are not likely to appreciate a good one, and moreover, the ability to play from a bad lie

differentiates between a good player and a bad one."

#### No. 5: The Legacy

According to Freud, all humans have egos. Based on personal experience, some egos are much larger than others, and a committee or chairman with a large ego can be easily transformed into someone who wants to "leave their mark on the course." To that end, peculiar and impractical designs are sometimes contrived and perpetrated on the course, squandering labor and funds and wreaking havoc on the course. Low priority, pet projects are sometimes funded, even when there are not enough funds to purchase much-needed supplies or equipment, and this frequently occurs to the detriment of the golf course and the maintenance budget. It may also hurt the superintendent's credibility if he is forced to "go along" with an inappropriate project.

Green Committees can avoid this pitfall by utilizing and listening to competent consultants and by developing master plans for long-range improvement. Such plans often address proposed architectural changes for the golf course, but also should include the more mundane infrastructure necessities such as irrigation and drainage systems, maintenance facilities, cart paths, tree management programs, etc. The plans should be updated and re-prioritized regularly and adhered to as closely as possible. This is the way to keep focused and on track.

#### No. 4: The Inability to Make Tough Decisions

The duties of a green chairman and Green Committee are not for the fainthearted. Issues often arise that require tough decisions that may raise the ire of an entire golfing membership. It should always be the goal of the superintendent and the course officials to avoid disruption of the golf course and golf schedule, but the solutions to some problems require just that. Severe soil problems may require aggressive cultivation programs. Badly deteriorated bunkers may require total reconstruction. An antiquated irrigation system may require an expensive replacement project, and playability problems and poor turf performance may require tree removal programs. Issues such as these can be emotionally charged, and the decisions will have far-reaching impacts on the viability of the course.

There are many undesirable consequences of not following through with the necessary cor-

rective programs, and one of the most common outcomes is continued poor turf performance. The ever-popular band-aid approach rarely is effective, yet it continues to be selected in lieu of more expensive and/or more disruptive solutions. While a band-aid approach might be needed on a short-term basis, consistent reliance on this type of approach winds up wasting money and perpetuating problems. At some courses, "it seems there is never enough money to do the project right the first time, yet there always seems to be enough money to do it over!"

### No. 3: Unbalanced Representation or Fails to Represent All Golfers

Committees can be too large; of that there can be no doubt. Large committees (more than 12-15 members) often have difficulty staying focused and on track. They tend to have too much discussion and have trouble reaching decisions. Some have suggested that the most effective committee size is an odd number less than three, but there is risk involved in having such a committee and it is not common. A workable committee size usually is between seven and 11 members.

Committees that are unbalanced often fail to consider the effects their actions will have on golfers of different abilities. It should be no surprise that many of the changes made in the name of "toughening up the course" or "modernizing"

it wind up penalizing shorter hitters and/or higher handicappers. Green Committees should be comprised of golfers of both genders and all abilities. This helps to take different perspectives into account, and it helps to keep lines of communication open with other golfers.

### No. 2: Short Tenure

Individual committee members spend a tremendous amount of time learning about the science of golf course management, and the experienced committee member becomes an extremely valuable resource. Superintendents typically spend a tremendous amount of time helping to educate committee members, as this is an important part of their duty. Frequent turnover in Green Committee members produces duplication of this effort, is wasteful of the superintendent's valuable time, and can be extremely frustrating. Frequent turnover also wastes the time and expense incurred in each committee member's educational process, and it greatly increases the odds of making those *rookie mistakes*. Frequent turnover makes continuity an impossibility.

### No. 1: Poor Communication Skills

Maintaining an open and direct line of communication between the superintendent and the Green Committee is essential, and it can be difficult to achieve. After all, committee personnel usually change on a regular basis, so the committee that



Some committees expect the world in terms of conditioning, yet fail to provide the necessary tools to get the job done right. A poor irrigation system or worn-out maintenance equipment can prevent the turf management program from achieving its full potential.

hires the golf course superintendent is likely not to be the committee the superintendent answers to just a few years later. Taking into consideration that individuals often volunteer for different committees to effect change, it is to be expected that the goals of the committee will change according to the personnel who make them up. When these changing goals are not clearly communicated to the superintendent, problems are guaranteed to arise.

One of the more effective means of keeping committees and superintendents on the same page is specifying maintenance guidelines (see "When in Doubt, Spec It Out," March-April 1997 *Green Section Record*). This should be mandatory reading for all Green Committee members. Assuming effective communication is maintained between committee and superintendent, the next step is to ensure that the committee communicates effectively with the Board of Directors and the golfers.

The old adage "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing" certainly applies here. Frequently, committee members try to answer complex agronomic questions and wind up giving inaccurate information that just confuses the process. Even the most experienced Green Committee member should be quick to say, "I don't know the answer

to that question, but I'll check with our superintendent and get back to you." Doing so can save a tremendous amount of embarrassment, confusion, and grief!

One could argue that many of the world's problems are the result of poor communication, and this is certainly true of the realm of turfgrass management. Golf course superintendents rarely consider themselves salespeople, yet sales is a big part of their job. Successful superintendents must sell their management programs and philosophies to the golfers and to the various committees they answer to. The same can be said of Green Committees. Together with the superintendent, they must sell their programs to the golfers. While good playing conditions alone help sell the programs, an ample amount of written and oral communication must also be provided. Committees need to communicate effectively with the golf course superintendent and with the golfers, particularly when major projects or expenditures are being considered.

Some programs are hard to sell, but Green Committees that try to educate the golfers, schedule town meetings, and provide written documentation and access to their consultants to explain why the programs are needed, generally fare the best. Conversely, committees that take an arrogant approach and assume the golfers will simply take their word for it, frequently experience vehement opposition and fail to gain the support of the golfers.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding some of the most common pitfalls will help committees and superintendents avoid them, so the next step is to put all of these ideas to work. Discussing the many pitfalls at the board and committee level is an excellent idea. Committees might even give themselves a grade in each category as a means of assessing their relative effectiveness. But the acid test is to get outside input, and this is only for Green Committees with extremely thick skin. The ultimate challenge is to have a few golfers give the Green Committee a grade in each of the categories. An unbiased opinion from the outside will assuredly provide some useful information, and for less-effective committees, it might just be an awakening.

DAVID OATIS joined the USGA Green Section in 1988 as an agronomist in the Mid-Atlantic Region and has been director of the Northeast Region since 1990.

Being a Green Chairman or Green Committee member can be a tough job. Someone is always out to get you!

