

GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENT: Expense or Investment?

Does your golf course have a superintendent with a turfgrass background?

BY PATRICK M. O'BRIEN

Although the number of professionally trained golf course superintendents continues to grow, there are still many golf courses across the country that employ superintendents without any technical training. Based on my almost 25 years with the USGA, golf course superintendents work at between 85% and 90% of the 17,000 golf courses in the United States. This fact in and of itself is not a problem. There are plenty of superintendents without turfgrass degrees who do a fantastic job for their employers. There is a problem, however, when the course owners believe they cannot "afford" a professionally trained superintendent and settle for hiring a person they know does not have the qualifications they seek. In other words, these clubs are saying that they believe reallocating \$10,000 to \$30,000 of the existing budget or even spending this amount of extra budget dollars to hire a professionally trained superintendent will not increase course revenue by this amount or more. My experiences in the field differ by seeing the golf course superintendent as a potential revenue generator.

A low-budget golf course in Georgia, the "Brown Acres Golf Club," a few years ago was struggling with low revenues and play due to poor course conditions. Other golf courses in the area had better conditions, and even lowering the green fees to below \$10 did not attract more golfers. No knowledgeable, trained superintendent had taken care of the golf course for the past 20 years. The course was maintained with dull mowing equipment, was never irrigated properly, and was hard as

a brick. The basic philosophy of the club leadership was to cut costs all the time. The result was a cow pasture golf course that nobody wanted to play.

My best friend happened to be the Green Chairman and I encouraged him to hire a superintendent to get the golf course on the right track again. I happened to know about an assistant superintendent, "Tom Green Thumb," at a nearby private course who was willing to accept a big challenge as his first job. How they could afford this college-educated individual who could do practically anything on a golf course was the big question. My advice was to hire him and pay him with existing budget dollars, and the result would be a better course. The Board of Directors agreed to try it.

Mr. "Green Thumb" found out quickly that the golf course had many problems, including a lack of water, old equipment, weeds, and terrible putting greens. First, Mr. "Green Thumb" took inventory of the old equipment and showed how an equipment leasing option would address this issue. Second, plans were made to enlarge the course pond to increase the water supply and reduce the high cost of buying city water. Maintenance standards were developed to outline what could be done with the budget dollars at key playing areas. Due to the improved course presentation and playability, revenue improved dramatically the first year. Capital projects, seldom done in the past, are now done annually due to steady revenue generated by the better course. Within 12 months, better turfgrass brought more revenue and more members.

"Brown Acres Golf Club" is the classic example of how to improve revenues through better agronomy. Many times low-budget courses hire a golf professional to run the operation. If low-budget courses have a choice between a superintendent and a golf professional, hire the superintendent. Use agronomy to attract more golfers to play your golf course. The key point is to use agronomic knowledge to grow turfgrass and to make your conditions competitive with other courses in the area.

This Georgia golf course is just one example of how to increase play and revenue through agronomy. Note that "Brown Acres Golf Club" did not increase its maintenance budget in order to hire Mr. "Green Thumb." The course paid this new staff person out of the existing budget. With a superintendent, the annual dues of \$400 per year produce a better product, and all revenues generated are allocated to the course, not to any other departments. "Brown Acres Golf Course" is now competitive with other public courses in the area.

The assets of every golf course are what generate revenue. A good layout in good condition always attracts players, but remember that the most important asset of every golf course is the golf course superintendent. Hiring a trained professional with the qualifications needed to make your course a success is a money-winning proposition.

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