



After going to the trouble of renovating a golf course, it is imperative that adequate follow-up maintenance be sustained to maintain the integrity of the renovations.

CAN'T GET NO... SATISFACTION!

An informed membership will help you succeed with project work: managing golfers' expectations.

BY CHRIS CARSON

After a long winter and spring, four members of your Board arrive at the club in mid-June to play the newly renovated course. It's finally open! Considering the heavy assessment they've paid and the time they've waited, they are anticipating something special. As they play the first round of the year, however, their surprise mounts. They find bare areas in the rough that haven't been repaired, irrigation trenches that have been filled but not yet grassed, broken cart paths, soft sand in the new bunkers, and slow, bumpy greens.

Surely this can't be the result of all that work last fall and winter? They paid a lot for a new and improved golf course, and here on opening day it isn't perfect. In fact, it isn't even close!

MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

When Boards and superintendents undertake a project, they are responsible for more than the cost of the job, the quality of the work, and even the completion timetable. Perhaps more important is the management of golfer expectations.

In many ways, this can be the hardest task of all. Let's look at why. If a member restores a classic muscle car, he knows that if he does his homework and pays the right person enough money, he can own a perfect showpiece. The quality of the paint, the bodywork, and the mechanical parts will all be topnotch. That same person can be bitterly disappointed with the results of a golf course renovation if he has similar expectations of completed excellence.

The main reason is that a golf course project brings with it the additional



Whether using cool-season or warm-season grass, each needs adequate time to develop before the area receives foot or cart traffic. This bermudagrass putting green requires a grow-in period to allow the sprigs to knit together and become dense.

variables of time and weather. Even when a job is declared finished, it really isn't; it must mature, the scars must heal, the grass must adapt to its new location, sand must settle. These concerns will dissipate over time, but if golfer expectations were for perfection on opening day, there will be problems. The speed with which this all occurs depends on many things, but largely on the weather. Good weather can help keep a project on schedule, and unfavorable conditions can make it impossible.

It is important for all involved to know what the job is going to look like when complete, how long it will take to mature, and how the course will look and play during the construction period. In many cases, the main issue will be how a member's overall enjoyment of his course will be affected and for how long. If you address these issues up front, you will be shaping golfer expectations and the job will be better understood and accepted.

AVOID SURPRISES

The courses that have been most successful with projects are those that talk about these issues from the start. Though it is tempting when asking for money

and support to paint a rosy picture of the end result, you will be doing a better job of selling — and have a better chance for long-term success — if you are straightforward about these concerns.

If your golf course has a newsletter, it is an excellent vehicle for outlining the proposed renovation. You can head off trouble by describing the improve-

ments and offering a timetable for completion, but also cautioning golfers about specific limitations on play during the renovation period and after completion, until the changes have matured. Even a brief report, perhaps with a course diagram, on the club bulletin board would be helpful in eliminating confusion and misconceptions.

It's all about avoiding surprises. By handing out a timetable that shows when holes will be closed, how you will play the course during construction, how and when you will allow play, and how you will handle weather delays, you will be taking a big step toward managing the expectations of your golfers.

Certainly you'll want to talk about the long-term gain and the improvement to your course; it's only natural when selling a project to do that to generate enthusiasm. But if you also present a discussion of the possible pitfalls of the job and a realistic timetable for completion, you will be heading off trouble. Remember, it's not the immediate gain that you seek, but the long-term improvement of the golf course.

IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM

Let's look at several issues pertinent to a greens regrassing project. To say only



Although this is a new bunker, it is in need of additional drainage to eliminate worse problems down the road.

that you want the fast greens that new turf varieties can provide is not enough to justify or to identify the project. And to say that turf quality on your greens is poor and therefore they must be regrassed is insufficient, too, and a recipe for disaster. To succeed with this type of work, you must look at the entire problem and not just some of the symptoms.

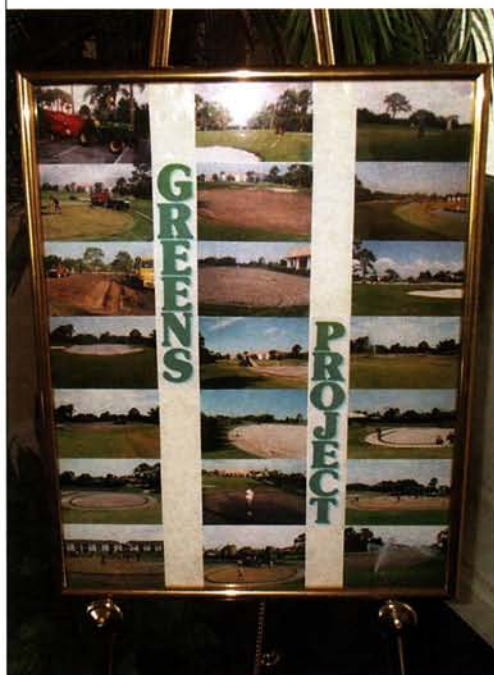
For example, the reasons for poor green quality may be too many nearby trees, poor air movement, poorly drained soil, or some combination of the three. If a regrassing is performed without correcting the underlying causes of the turf problem, then early failure of the project and member displeasure will be guaranteed. If your greens are poor enough to require regrassing, there must be reasons why.

Identifying and solving the underlying causes for the original failure is your best chance toward succeeding with your new greens. If your golfers aren't happy with the quality of your greens now, how will they respond to an expensive project that doesn't work?

Your superintendent also must review his management program. Significant changes to the makeup of the greens and their surroundings might require changes to the way those greens are maintained. Certainly the fertility and water programs will need to be adjusted, but so, too, will cultural procedures like verticutting, topdressing, and aerification. Dramatic new mounding and bunkering may require more staff and different equipment to be maintained properly. This is an all too common surprise that can significantly impact the maintenance budget. The maintenance department must have the tools needed to complete these tasks, so if those tools aren't available, they should be included and budgeted for in the project planning.

Let's not forget the most difficult membership management problem of all: the golfers will almost certainly want to play the new greens before they are ready. It is critical that the greens be allowed to mature to the

point where they can withstand the wear caused by play. Though golfers will be eager to play their new course and may become vocal about having to wait, the level of golfer unrest will be much higher if you open too early and cause damage to your new greens. If you've done a good job of communicating the need for patience going in, and if you've established up front a reasonable timetable for opening, you will be under much less pressure to open early.



It is important to communicate with the golfers throughout the renovation project to keep them apprised of the progress.

THE BUNKERS ARE NEW ... WILL THEY ALWAYS LOOK THAT WAY?

Now let's take a look at another problem. In years past, sand bunkers were regarded as hazards, as areas to be avoided. In fact, the Rules of Golf still declare that they are hazards, but today's golfer, ironically, demands that they be groomed playing surfaces. The demand for consistent and perfect sand depths, raking, and firmness has caused today's superintendent to expend intense effort trying to satisfy his golfers. Most super-

intendents would agree that their crews spend much more time maintaining these hazards than they do the greens!

They are up against an impossible task. Sand settles and moves with rain, wind, and time; bunker edges get broken down by machine and foot traffic; debris and soil infiltrate the sand to change its consistency. Bunkers are constantly changing, and what used to be viewed as part of the charm and challenge of the game is now viewed as poor maintenance.

Golfer expectations are so high that today's bunker is a much different feature than it was in the past. That's important when it comes to defining what you want your bunker renovation project to achieve. While you may have great success in restoring interest, character, and challenge, you will not — and over the long term cannot — achieve perfectly consistent bunkers. Golfers will have a greater appreciation for the dynamic nature of bunkers if you take the time to educate them prior to renovation. If they have an understanding about the changes brought by time to bunkers, they may become less demanding — and more satisfied — with the end results of the work.

GIVE IT TIME

It seems contradictory, but in general, new course construction will both improve over time through turf maturity . . . and deteriorate through the natural aging process! If the Board and golfers understand this aging process and the superintendent has a plan to minimize its impact, then the chances for success with a renovation project will be good. If all involved have planned well, have communicated throughout the work, and have managed the construction properly, the transition from work zone to enjoyable golf course will be smooth . . . and the golfership will be satisfied.

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