



Proper course marking is crucial to the play of the game. The person responsible for course maintenance and setup should understand the *Rules of Golf* so that questions about marking can be accurately addressed.

ENHANCING THE IMAGE OF THE GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENT

Proactive is always better than reactive.

BY BOB BRAME

The topic for this article originated with a request for one of our staff to participate in a panel discussion about ways to enhance the image of golf course superintendents. The entire staff was polled on the topic and the results have been combined with my experience working with golf course superintendents for 39 years, 18 of those as a superintendent. Enhancing the superintendent's image within the golf industry and at most courses is a very real need. Hollywood's depiction of Carl in *Caddyshack* did not present today's professional superintendent in a positive light. Such images linger in the minds of golfers, who already have the perception that growing and mowing grass on a golf course is straightforward and comparable to the home lawn experience. This, of course, is neither true nor accurate. Too many superintendents have defaulted to a reactive posture with how their image is being viewed and how it affects their ability to be successful, as opposed to being proactive. The following suggestions are categorized, with the three categories building on each other, and are offered to enhance in a proactive way the golf course superintendent's image in today's industry.

I. WITH THE GROUNDS STAFF AND OTHER COURSE EMPLOYEES

- Separate yourself by how you dress. The superintendent should stand out from other grounds staff. It's necessary to occasionally get more hands-on, have a change of clothes in your office. A razor, comb, and shower essentials should also be accessible in the maintenance complex. Do not enter the pro shop or clubhouse grubby or wearing jeans.
- Avoid wearing commercialized clothing. Display your course logo or professional associations (e.g., GCSAA, local superintendent associations, and golf associations) as opposed to companies and products.
- Budget for staff uniforms or course logo shirts. The crew's appearance and performance directly reflects on the superintendent's image.
- Avoid, or be very cautious with, your name or photo being used for product endorsements. Regardless of how good a product may be, published endorsements will be seen as a compromise in objectivity.
- Keep your office and the maintenance complex clean and well organized.



- Implement and maintain a consistent and professional procedure for answering the office phone and recording any subsequent messages. Whether recorded by a machine or the staff, return calls promptly (within 24 hours).
- While on the course, utilize a clean and neatly organized vehicle/cart with your name and title displayed for golfers to see.
- Have a positive attitude. Smile. Don't whine. Use humor when appropriate. Image is a character issue.
- Be clear, patient, and consistent when instructing/guiding the grounds staff. Make sure that they understand their task and have the needed training/tools to be successful.
- Know the names of all course employees. Treat them like individuals and know as much about them as possible.
- Watch and listen patiently before speaking.
- Never criticize your predecessor.
- Do not take cell phone calls when talking with someone. It's rude. Program your voice mailbox and let it work for you.
- Meet regularly (at least weekly) with other key employees like the golf professional and clubhouse manager.
- Work closely with other departments, particularly where responsibilities overlap, such as maintaining the practice range, cart usage, and starting times (routine play, outings, and shotgun starts).
- Play golf regularly with assistants, other key employees, and various groups of golfers. To the extent possible, work to lower your handicap, which may include taking lessons from the golf professional.
- Know the *Rules of Golf* and how to properly mark the course, even though this may be the golf professional's responsibility. When asked a

ruling or marking question, know the answer or know how to look it up quickly.

- Avoid stringing together 12- to 16-hour days.
- Take at least one day off every week. Other employees need the same. Delegate responsibility.
- Make sure everyone is aware that you have a life (e.g., a spouse, children, hobbies, and community interests) apart from the course.

2. WITH GOLFERS

- In addition to a smiling demeanor, wave and acknowledge golfers by name. Keeping up with names will likely be a never-ending process, but it's worth your best effort. Everyone likes to be called by name.
- Contribute regularly to the course newsletter or Web site. Carefully proof and spell-check all written documents prior to release.
- Post pertinent information about course maintenance, pesticide applications, projects, and the grounds crew. The first and/or tenth tee, along with the pro shop, locker rooms, and clubhouse are possible posting sites.
- Openly utilize tools of the trade like, but not limited to, a soil probe, soil thermometer, hand lens, and slope gauge. Be open to, and ready for, questions about such tools. The possible exception might be the Stimpmeter, for which discretion should be exercised.
- Eat at the clubhouse regularly to answer questions and address golfer concerns.
- Always have a short speech ready for anyone who asks, "What's happening on the course?" or "How are things going?" or similar queries. Don't make light of such questions — they offer opportunities.
- Solicit golfer input on key decisions when possible and appropriate.

Working with outside contractors should mirror the same patience used with the grounds staff, golfers, and committees.



A clean and well-organized office and maintenance facility tells everyone who visits that the superintendent cares about presentation and attention to detail.

- When problems occur on the course, it's not necessary to launch into a detailed scientific discussion. Keep your answers simple and to the point. Golfers want to know: (1) what happened, (2) can you fix it, (3) when will things be back to normal, and (4) are there any cost/financial concerns. Be honest and don't make excuses.
- Accept compliments graciously. Don't argue with or qualify compliments. Avoid responses like, "The weather's been great; anyone can grow grass with these conditions." It is more appropriate to say, "Thanks, I really appreciate your noticing what we've been able to accomplish."
- Work with the pro shop staff to teach and emphasize course etiquette.
- Make your e-mail address available and check it regularly (at least daily). If you don't have e-mail capability, it's time you did. Establish an address that reflects a positive image — machoman@dontmesswithme.com or stimp11@fasterthanothers.org are examples of what to avoid.
- Offer to attend and speak at specialty group meetings (ladies' day, men's outings, neighborhood association, etc.).
- Offer assistance when golfers have questions about their home lawns. It's a perfect opportunity to highlight the differences between course maintenance and home lawn care.

3. WITH COMMITTEES, YOUR SUPERVISOR OR OWNER

- Know your budget and the budgeting process. Carefully monitor and compare actuals to the budget as a fiscal year progresses. Know the specifics of either black or red numbers.
- Keep accurate records and make them available for review.
- Be actively involved with long-range planning.
- Document with pictures. Nothing refreshes the memory like reviewing before, during, and after photo documentation.
- Be prepared and use PowerPoint or similar technology for meeting presentations. The use of a digital camera, laptop, and projector will enhance communication.
- Dress for meetings to look as good as, or better than, everyone else in attendance.
- At least occasionally, have committee meetings at the maintenance complex.
- Include select site visits on the course as part of committee meetings when digital images and a projector won't allow comprehensive coverage of a topic.
- If you or someone on your crew makes a mistake, disclose the specifics immediately; don't wait for any possible damage to become visible or compromise playability.
- Invite course officials to appropriate industry meetings.
- Obtain a yearly unbiased outside review of the maintenance program. This should occur in the form of an on-site agronomist presentation and a written report.

Golf course superintendents should be cognizant of, and always looking to improve, their image. It starts with candid objectivity to identify weak points. Along with a candid personal evaluation, secure input from close friends who know you and who care enough to be honest. Limitations then can be outlined, targeted, and resolved.

Author's note: Thanks to Patrick O'Brien, Director of the Green Section's Southeast Region, for surveying our staff and setting the stage for this article.

BOB BRAME is the director of the Green Section's North Central Region. In addition to working as a superintendent for many years before joining the staff, he has worked for and continues to work with superintendents, making this topic a four-decade assemblage.