

Communicating Without Saying a Word

Availability speaks louder than words, and playing golf can communicate more than a score.

BY THOMAS VOGEL



Before each round, teams are picked and then rotated every six holes to play three distinct matches. Superintendent Tom Vogel, CGCS (fourth from left), and professional Rod Johnston, MGP (third from left), tee off with two members — Dr. Richard Rea (second from left) and Dr. Kamienski (hitting). The benefits from their time together will extend well beyond the playing of 18 holes.

Most golf course superintendents would agree that we must communicate — to our memberships, customers/golfers, and guests — any concerns we may have about the golf courses we are responsible for maintaining. However, we also need to communicate when there are no concerns and all is going well. Newsletters, e-mails, Web sites, and meetings are the most used avenues to inform golfers of our efforts and intentions for the course, but another avenue that I believe is overlooked as a way of communicating is by playing golf.

Twenty-five years ago, Portage Country Club hired Rodney Johnston as its golf professional. Rod has a strong

belief that the two most important persons at a club or course are the golf course superintendent and the golf professional. He opened a line of communication between the two of us by inviting me to play a round of golf with him. At first, I was not too excited about playing golf with the golf professional. At that time I was not that good of a player (I had a 22 handicap) and didn't want to expose my poor playing ability. Additionally, I felt it would be taking up valuable time I needed to maintain the golf course.

Rod suggested we play at least once a week to discuss the importance of conditioning and the scheduling of

events and how they interact between the two departments. For the betterment of the golf course I agreed to play. Playing golf with friends is one thing, but when you play with the pros you see (and hear) things from a different perspective. There is a lot more to the game of golf than just hitting the ball and looking for it. As a 22-handicap player I didn't think about it too deeply — as long as the grass is cut and the greens are mowed, my job is done, right? I found out quickly I needed a new way of thinking.

A lot of finesse goes into playing golf at a higher level and I saw a new beginning to what I needed and wanted to set as a goal. It also made



A few times each summer, Rod Johnston and Tom Vogel invite or are invited to play with ladies. They are always interested in sharing time and hearing from both genders and all handicap levels.

me think of my golf game, and I discovered that I now wanted to play better golf. Rod took time and worked with me and, after a few lessons, lowered my handicap to 18 in just a few short weeks. As my handicap decreased, I had a better feel for the golf course and how much the little things counted in the game. Rod has continued to help me through the years and, although I am not a golf professional, I do maintain a 12 handicap, which I think is respectable in the golf world.

The gist of this article, though, is not about me and my now lowered handicap; it's about playing golf with the golf professional and the two of us becoming a team for a better golf experience for and with our members. What happened 25 years ago quickly grew into an 8:53 a.m. standing tee time on Sunday mornings. Once we realized the benefits of playing together, we invited members to play along. This action opened a line of communication that I never realized existed. Prior to this I would talk with members at green and golf committee meetings or

over the shoulder at lunch, but never for four hours on the golf course.

Playing golf with our customers allows the formal atmosphere to vanish,

and they become very curious about what, how, and why we do things the way we do. In every case, after the game is over they leave with a better understanding of, and more respect for, our professions. They appreciate the camaraderie that Rod and I have, knowing we're working together to make a better experience for them.

Now the 8:53 a.m. tee time has become so popular that our members actually ask to play with us. We try not to play with the same group every time, extending an open invitation to anyone who is interested in playing with us. We also do not pick who we play with by handicap or gender. We play with men, women, and mixed couples no matter what their handicaps. All too often women think they are passed over and feel left out.

Including them is an excellent way of letting them know we want them to play and have a good time. We value interacting with the ladies as much as the men.

Another important group we try to invite is the new members. Sharing



Occasionally Tom Vogel and Rod Johnston spend time playing with a husband-and-wife team.



Golf professional Rod Johnston has helped superintendent Tom Vogel to lower his handicap. Their regular communication has made every member of the Portage Country Club a winner.

our golf time with them shows that we are accessible; they can ask us anything and feel comfortable doing so. It's not about how well we're playing — it's about sharing time and ideas and showing the members you care. In almost every case, when our round is over, I feel as though I've not only played golf with a member, but I also made a new friend. Their subsequent waves are stronger, the hellos are more meaningful, and that's very important to me. Sometimes when things are not as they should be, we need a friendly vote or understanding of our side, and playing golf with members and building relationships bring support on our behalf.

From listening to comments from other superintendents at local association lunch meetings or at national and regional conferences, a strong working relationship with the golf professional

is very rare. My question is — why? There is nothing more important than these two departments interacting, both in operations and in the desire to meet a common goal. This doesn't mean that we agree on everything, but we do have the opportunity to talk things out and agree on a course of action. I do believe that egos can sometimes get in the way, and no one wants to give in to the other. But what must be considered is what is right, not who is right. Superintendents need to keep in mind that the golf course staff does not have as much opportunity to interact with the members/customers as the golf shop staff, and we need all the positive support we can get. Having the golf shop staff in sync with the golf course staff just makes sense. When everything is working on an even keel, it also helps reduce the "seven year switch." One of the last things we

need is to have a new golf professional every few years, not to mention a new superintendent. We need to keep the staff we have, and sometimes that means standing up for the golf professional and supporting his/her operation.

I'm not suggesting that building a strong working relationship with the golf professional and members/golfers will always be easy. Sometimes it's work, sometimes you have to bite your tongue, and sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do. However, in the end, those rounds are time well spent and everybody wins. Nothing is better than a win/win combination. For me, the lower handicap has been a bonus.

THOMAS VOGEL, CGCS, has been the golf course superintendent at Portage Country Club in Akron, Ohio, for 27 years.