

# ALL ABOARD!

## Working Together Has Never Been More Essential!

### Part 3: Golf Course Superintendents' Responses

By Keith Happ

This is the final article of a three part series that examines the views and perspectives of the three parties most involved with meeting the needs and desires of golfers. This article presents the responses of golf course superintendents (GS1-GS4) to the same questions posed to general managers and the golf professionals. Anonymity was provided to elicit open responses.

The first two parts of the series may be found at:

Part I: *Green Section Record*. 2009. Sept/Oct. 47 (5): 1-7. [Part I](#)

Part II: *Green Section Record*. 2010. March/April 48 (2): 23-27. [Part II](#)



One of the most frustrating aspects of the superintendent's job is finding, training, and retaining quality employees. Developing a dedicated labor force is becoming a more difficult task.

**Question: What is the single most important aspect of your job?**

**GS1:** Communicating with the golfers is important. I have always tried to be proactive and anticipate golfer needs. My motto is: provide information before questions are asked. I write a weekly newsletter, and it has been my main vehicle to communicate to our golfers during our major bunker restoration project. When the golfers are investing in their property, especially during an economic downturn, it is essential that we communicate how their money is spent and how the project is progressing. Keeping an open line of communication is the most important aspect of my job.

**GS2:** The most important aspect of my job is to prepare the golf course for daily play. I manage my staff, I have a budget and the members have expectations. I have to teach my staff within the confines of my budget to achieve golf course standards put forth by the golfers as many days as possible during the year.

**GS3:** The most important aspect of my job is to maintain high quality playing conditions as many days as possible. It is becoming more challenging due to the economic climate we are in. It has always been difficult to do more with the same level of funding; now golfers want more or at least the same conditions for less!

**GS4:** The most important aspect of my job is to provide playing conditions that meet the expectations of the golfers. I try to communicate what we need to do in our job and present as many options/ways for achieving the desired result. It is getting very difficult to make ends meet and accomplish this aspect of my job!

**Question: What is the single biggest pitfall of your job? Most frustrating?**

**GS1:** The most frustrating part of my job is finding good quality employees. When you have 20 to 25 employees with 20 to 25 different personalities and, at times, 20 to 25 different schedules, it becomes very frustrating and demanding to communicate with each employee on his/her level. Our employees will not get rich working on our golf course. Each employee needs to understand why they are here and what needs to get done. We are trying to manage our people to produce a product that meets golfer expectations.

**GS2:** The biggest obstacle for me is trying to recruit, train and retain high quality employees. Finding seasonal employees in our part of the country is very difficult. We retain a staff of only 8 people in the winter and grow to 28 in the summer. Of that staff of 28, 13 to 14 are going to work 7 or 8 months and another 6 to 7 people will be college or high school level employees who work 3 to 4 months. It is very hard to develop a work force that, once trained, can be relied upon to get the job done and want to come back.

Over the last ten years, turfgrass managers have been pressured to strive for perfection. Perfection is unobtainable! We all are trying to do this while our labor pool is shrinking. So, I am hoping that this current economic recession may actually help to lower course conditioning expectations to a more affordable level. I think that in the long run this will be good for the game of golf. Golf is getting too expensive. If the funding is not there to hire employees to achieve course preparation criteria, then we will have to change our course set-up criteria.

**GS3:** The biggest pitfall at our course is not being able to achieve what I believe is the full potential for turf conditioning at our facility. We just don't have the budget to do the extras that could really make a difference. It is frustrating because there is so much room for improvement. For example, we started several programs that were having a very positive impact on our course, and then this economic climate came upon us and we had to alter our strategies going forward. It is frustrating. We

can't do the same job with fewer resources. There are only so many programs or options we can use or absorb in our current budget and still produce the desired product. Budget limitations are by far my biggest frustration. I feel we aren't making progress; we are just maintaining.

Personally, as a turf manager, if you aren't striving to get better, to produce a better product, then you aren't doing your job. The current economic climate has made us work harder and smarter to utilize allocated funds as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Conditioning the golf course for play is a critical aspect of the job. There are many variables associated with this task, and the number one issue is resource allocation. Communicating with the golfers and the other department heads is a critical part of the process.



**GS4:** My biggest challenge is Mother Nature. It seems we battle weather issues constantly. One of the most frustrating side-effects of the weather problems is educating everyone associated with the course (golfers, pro-shop, supervisors) and how the weather affects everything we do. For example, we aerated greens on our scheduled date. We had a spell of low temperature immediately afterward and everyone (non-turf people) asked, "Why aren't the surfaces healing?" The constant need to educate and communicate is challenging. If it were as simple as turning on the heat, we would do it, but it is a variable we cannot control!

**Question: Do Other Key Department Heads Understand the Scope of Your Job?**





**GS1:** I think the other department heads understand my job, but probably not the full scope of what I do each day. I think there is a perception that we have all this money and we are just thinking of ways to spend it. I also think that other departments believe their issues are more important than what we deal with on greens and grounds. I constantly communicate our needs by quantifying and justifying everything we do.

**GS2:** To a certain extent, yes, other departments have an understanding of some of the issues I deal with or at least most of what I do each day. I can say with certainty that they do not completely understand all of the things we have to deal with on a daily basis. They are unaware of the times people do not come to work, how the weather affects our schedules and programs, or how equipment breakdowns impact completing tasks. But I must admit I don't know all of the intricacies of their jobs either. I don't even pretend that I do. The Pro, GM and I acknowledge that we do not know everything about each other's area of expertise. We have a greater respect and appreciation for each position. We end up working better as a team once we admit we can't do their job better than they do.

**GS3:** Our golf professional is active and makes an effort to understand what, why and when we do things. He is involved on a daily basis and takes the time to understand how the things we do impact his part of our club operation. He does not, however, have a full appreciation of all that is involved with course preparation.

Our clubhouse manager doesn't care to know. He is not involved, nor does he have the level of interest our Pro has demonstrated. His focus is food and beverage, and it really does not extend beyond that.

As a whole, we try to work as a team, but it is very difficult when there is no interest in other departments. I am very interested in how other departments operate. But I think, in our

particular situation, some people just see the golf course as a backdrop setting for lunch!

**GS4:** I believe that to some extent the general manager, assistant general manager, tennis pro, food and beverage manager understand what I do on a daily basis. However, I don't think anyone can fully understand another's position until you have been in their shoes. Full understanding takes time.

### Question: What Are Your Areas of Conflict?

**GS1:** My biggest problem is defining the area of responsibility of other department heads. For example, the tennis pro is responsible for the tennis and paddle ball courts, but my staff handles the maintenance of this area on a day-to-day basis. So when it comes to capital expenditures, I believe that our department should be responsible for overseeing quote proposals that allow us to get tasks and projects completed. If another department head wants to handle the bidding process, then they should do so and also use their own people to conduct

work for their department, rather than think they can tap another department's labor resources.

**GS2:** Conflict always arises during budgeting time. I think that each of us as a department head is trying to get a fair share of the resources in order to do our jobs well. Funds are limited and there is always going to be a department that believes they aren't receiving a fair slice of the pie.

However, as long as we work as a team, we can get the work done and meet member expectations club-wide.

Last year we spent a lot of money on the golf course. This year we will be spending a lot of money on the clubhouse. We have a long range plan and work to complete it in phases. We

The golf course superintendent should have the final say regarding golf cart traffic. The rationale for the specific manner of golf cart use, as dictated by weather and environmental conditions, is best disseminated to the golfers when the golf professional and the general manager are informed.



know when it is our time to receive our portion of capital monies.

The other major conflict arises when our golf pro wants to maximize cart revenue during outings, but his desires interfere with my staff being able to ready and maintain the course for play. We need a certain amount of time to prepare our product. We want to maximize revenues as well, but for this to be accomplished, we must be able to achieve course setup standards.

**GS3:** The most common areas of conflict are trying to accomplish tasks while not interfering with play of the golf course. I think we do a good job of managing the staff, but without question, it is the hardest part of the job. It becomes even more difficult when play is scheduled without receiving any advanced notice.

Another area of conflict develops when other department heads fail to realize that my time is very valuable. I might be asked by another department head to take care of an issue, and because they may not understand the scope of my job, they think I can drop everything and meet their needs immediately. Course conditioning is my focus and all else is lower

sit at the same table to have open discussions on priority issues before each year begins. We do not have a general manager to hold other department heads accountable. It is very important in these tough economic times to meet and address areas of conflict so we can resolve issues before the heat of the season.

**GS4:** It just never seems like there is enough time in the day to get everything done. The conflicts we have tend to center on golf course availability. We just can't seem to avoid conflict when it comes to preparing the course for play. We need time to get important tasks and projects completed to meet member expectations. For this to be realized, we need to reach compromise with the Pro Shop.

### **Question: What Are Your Areas of Agreement?**

**GS1:** The CEO/GM has made each department head responsible for their budgets, workers and department affairs. This makes each department head feel like he or she has ownership of their department. We strive to maintain standards of excellence within our means, without total supervision. Our process of implementing our procedures is not



The biggest area of conflict? Budgeting. All parties identified the golf course as the number one asset at their respective facilities. Justifying the need for capital dollars to address infrastructure issues is a delicate process.

priority.

One of my most difficult tasks, as well as frustrating, is gathering all concerned parties to

micromanaged.

**GS2:** Our golfers are here because of the golf course. They did not join because of the quality



of the restaurant or the temperature of the pool. They didn't join because of the level of service they receive at the Pro Shop. They joined because of the golf course and their love of the game. So, when the golf course is well conditioned, member satisfaction is high and revenues increase. Players are happier, they want to bring guests, and this activity is what allows other departments at our facility to exist. I know all department heads agree that the course is why this facility exists.

**GS3:** We all agree that I have the freedom to make decisions on how we get things done when it comes to anything outside of the clubhouse. I make decisions regarding members being on the course or if we need to send people off the back to the front holes in order to get work completed. I know this isn't always the case at other courses.

**GS4:** We all agree that our focus is on the members and the experience they have while on property. It is not about us as department heads or about us as employees. Everything we do is for the members and making sure that they are enjoying their experience and time at the golf course.

An important second area of agreement is that the golf shop staff knows that my department has the final say regarding the use of golf carts. We are fortunate that we have a golf course that drains very well. We don't have to restrict golf carts frequently, but when it is necessary, we do so as a last resort to minimize damage while not inconveniencing the golfers.

**Question: Where do you rate the importance of the Golf Course to the overall operation?**

**GS1:** On a scale of 1 to 10; ten. It is the most important asset of the club.

**GS2:** I attend board meetings as well as committee meetings, and the overwhelming consensus is that the golf course is our most valuable asset. That's why we're here and that's why the members join.

**GS3:** It is easy at our course to be number 1 because all we have is golf. We don't have a tennis court, pool or huge fancy clubhouse. People come here to play golf.

**GS4:** I would rate it as the number 1 asset. I am sure, if you polled other department heads at this facility, they would say the same thing. We

have a large membership with 1100 resident members, and some belong for other amenities. Some members don't even use the golf course, so obviously they are not going to rate the course as high. It is a big place and we try to be all things to all members.

**Question: What percent of overall revenues (all inputs) is spent on the golf course maintenance?**

**GS1:** 16.85 percent of all revenues are spent on the golf course.

**GS2:** About 25 percent.

**GS3:** Eleven percent.

**GS4:** Fifteen percent

**Question: Is there a defined protocol for handling member comments/complaints?**

**GS1:** A golfer should report a concern to the respective committee chair. The chair then is the liaison from the membership to the staff or COO. Our protocol is clear. Do not complain directly to the Superintendent; the chair handles these issues.

Still, we hear from the golfers. For example, green speeds are too slow, the rough is too high, or is not cut enough. We try to be proactive. We have a defined protocol, and the chain of command is strong. Our process works well.

**GS2:** We do not have a formal protocol. I spend a lot of time talking with golfers and interacting with them on a daily basis. I make it a point to approach players on the practice green. When I am on the course I stop and talk to as many golfers as I can. So, I make the effort to hear about complaints before they get blown out of proportion.

I have a very good relationship with my green chairman. He never tries to catch me off guard or back me into a corner. Communication is key, and all superintendents should spend time on the golf course talking to the golfers. They are the customers.

**GS3:** We have a membership committee that deals with golfer issues. Our club email allows complaints or concerns to be communicated immediately if desired. We encourage voicing good or bad comments; it is nice to hear the





Maintaining open lines of communication are essential. Regular meetings with the green chair, golf professional and general manager facilitate proactive communication with the golf course superintendent.

good things as well. If it is a golf course issue, it will get sent to the green chairman. If it is a pro shop issue, it will be sent there to the golf committee and so on.

**GS4:** We do use comment cards, which allows comments to be directed to the appropriate department. All comment cards go through our general manager, and if it pertains to the golf course, it is sent to the Green Committee and then onto me. We have never had an issue develop into a serious complaint.

## CONCLUSION

There was clear consensus among the respondents that conditioning the turf for play was the most important aspect of the golf course superintendent's job, and communication is essential to develop a game plan that allows conditioning criteria to be met. Without question, achieving course conditioning expectations provides golfer satisfaction. The major challenge faced by the golf course superintendent who is attempting to achieve golfer satisfaction varied from trying to find and retain competent labor resources, to securing sufficient financial resources in order to maintain the turf quality.

All agreed that, while there may be a general understanding of their role and importance in their operation (to grow and condition turf), none believed that other department heads had a full, clear appreciation of the scope of their

responsibilities and daily challenges to meet golfer needs.

The budgeting process creates conflict with other departments. While the golf course was clearly identified by all parties as the number one asset at their facilities, frustrations emerged regarding asset allocations and percentage reductions during difficult economic times. A range of 11 to 25 percent of each revenue dollar was invested in turfgrass maintenance at the facilities represented in this article.

All golf course superintendents reported that a mechanism was in place to deal with complaints and comments regarding the conditioning of the course. Open lines of communication were essential to successful conflict resolution between departments as well as with the golfers.

The need for strong lines of communication with the golf professional, general manager, and other departments is essential to achieving golfer satisfaction. All golf course superintendents reinforced the need to and the importance of working together with other departments at their courses to achieve this primary objective.

After examining all responses, it is clear that the roles of the three people most involved with meeting the needs and demands of golfers vary greatly. The golf professional has the most direct contact with the players, the golf course superintendent has the most direct effect on course conditioning, and the general manager has the greatest level of influence regarding resource allocation. When all parties are on board and work together to maximize customer satisfaction, success can be achieved.

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