

# Sometimes Superintendents Can't See the Golf Course for the Grass

A round of golf at Perfect Meadows.

BY DENNIS LYON, CGCS



*The following fictional story is based on my many years of experience maintaining public golf facilities. It reflects some of the mistakes made by me and other superintendents and how we can better meet golfer expectations.*

It was a beautiful summer morning when AJ (Average Joe) Smith and his friend Slammin Sammy Jones drove up Perfect Meadow Lane. This

was their first trip to Perfect Meadows Golf Course and it looked spectacular. As they entered the facility, AJ and Sammy commented on how there was not a brown spot to be seen. The fairways were green and lush with perfect stripes from end to end. The greens had a deep emerald hue with billiard table surfaces. Both AJ and Sammy felt they had just pulled into someplace special.

After checking in at the golf shop, they drove their cart to the practice range to warm up and find their swing on this beautiful day. The practice tee looked good from a distance, but it was sorely torn up. The surface was soft and wet. Their divots flew almost as far as their range balls. AJ and Sammy didn't accomplish much on the range, but it gave them a good excuse to wash their clubs.

Undeterred by the practice range, off they went to the tee on the par-5 first hole. The teeing ground looked beautiful — bright green and freshly striped. AJ went first and placed his tee into the ground. Unfortunately, his tee went down through the grass almost out of sight. Although the tees were freshly mowed, the height of cut of the turf was mowed at something well over one inch. AJ swung away anyway and watched his ball go just off the fairway and into the perfectly manicured four-inch rough. It was never to be seen again, at least not by him. Had AJ been able to find his ball, it would have been almost impossible to advance as it lie buried in long grass.

Sammy teed off next and watched his ball go down the middle of the fairway. AJ spent five minutes looking for his ball and eventually took a stroke-and-distance penalty and teed off again. This time his ball landed in the fairway just past Sammy's drive. Sammy hit away and watched his ball soar down the fairway. He then watched it land with a thud and roll about two feet. Unfortunately, and although Sammy hit a perfect shot down the fairway, his approach shot was blocked by a large tree. The tree probably looked cute when planted 20 years ago, but it did not seem cute to Sammy today. AJ's ball landed on the other side of the fairway and experienced the same two-foot roll. AJ thought to himself, "This is going to be a long round." Once on the green, both AJ and Sammy found craters where their balls had landed. "Looks like the greens are a little on the soft side," said Sammy as he repaired his ball mark. "Soft is an understatement," said AJ. Once AJ and Sammy cleaned the mud off their balls, they both putted toward the hole. "Slow and bumpy" best described the putting surface. The greens looked great from a distance but were spongy with lasting footprints. After two more putts, and thanks to his layup to get around a poorly positioned tree, Sammy carded a double bogey. AJ took several putts, shrugged his shoulders and said he was not going to keep score today. Once back in their cart, off they went to the second tee, a par 3. There they encountered two

other groups also waiting to play the hole. At least the weather was nice that day.

AJ and Sammy finally finished their round at Perfect Meadows in something over five hours. They did not have fun. Although the course looked great, it played poorly and slowly. They renamed the course "Imperfect Meadows" and vowed never to return.

This story is fictional; however, I feel it is a fair representation of some of the typical mistakes superintendents, including me, occasionally make. Superintendents, by nature, love to grow grass. Beautiful green turf is like music to our ears and often brings joy to our hearts. The problem is that we may not see the golf course for the grass and the trees. Most golfers appreciate a beautiful golf course, but their round of golf and enjoyment of the game depend almost entirely on playing conditions and not just on how the course looks. The relationship between the course, the player, their ball, and its journey from the teeing ground to the hole determines whether a course is in great condition or just another pretty picture.

It took me many years in the golf industry to realize my job as a superintendent was not simply about growing grass; rather, it is about providing great playing surfaces. The grass and other plants we grow are simply tools to help provide the conditions golfers expect and need in order to play and enjoy the game. A round of golf on a beautiful course with poor playing conditions is like spending a beautiful afternoon with a gorgeous person who has bad habits, bad manners, and a bad attitude. Substance matters, doesn't it?

I am also a big supporter of superintendents playing their own golf course. I feel this is the best way to evaluate course conditions. A round of golf with the golf professional, course official, or a member is also a great way to enhance communication and evaluate playing conditions at the same time.

When a round of golf to evaluate the course is not feasible, I recommend the Super Golf Tour, which is what I call touring the course two or three times per week and playing parts of several holes. Take your clubs as you

travel the course and play a few tee shots, a couple pitch shots, a bunker shot or two, a couple of fairway and rough shots, and make a few putts on several greens. This will assist you in experiencing the course as your golfers do. Doing so will also help ensure the course is providing great playing conditions that are fair, fun, and in accordance with its architectural design.

In closing, I am hopeful you are never in a situation where you cannot see the golf course for the grass and the trees. I also hope that my fictional story and my experiences help provide a good perspective for focusing on the playability of a golf course, not looks. A superintendent's job is really not about growing plants but is about providing great playing surfaces and great course conditions for our golfers and the game we love.



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