



Life on the Road — Lessons Learned by the “New” Guys

A positive way to state an
age-old reality: Mistakes made!

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*Failing to plan for
traffic delays is an
easy mistake for a
new agronomist to
make.*

In this article, we pool together lessons learned from common mistakes (okay, let's just say it) experienced in our early years as agronomists and those we've seen made by both inexperienced and experienced superintendents. We do so from our perspective as the four newest additions to the Green Section staff.

Many examples presented here were learned the hard way. Some are lighthearted in nature, whereas others are not, but everything discussed falls into the category of important lessons learned. May we all learn from our mistakes and be better for it tomorrow! Lessons learned certainly do come in all forms.

AGRONOMIST MISTAKES

Let us begin first by looking at ourselves. After all, if we are to point out mistakes of others, we ought to at least have the humility to look in the mirror. As for superintendents, agronomics generally are not the biggest challenge when we join the Green Section. For us, it is adjusting to life on the road. We quickly must become expert travelers.

If your facility has ever signed up for a Turf Advisory Service (TAS) visit, then you know the general makeup of

a visit. In our time with you on your course, we gain a good idea of your professional life as a superintendent, but you don't get to see ours as agronomists outside of this visit. So, in addition to a few of our mistakes, we also share with you a brief behind-the-scenes glimpse at the life and times of a Green Section agronomist.

TRAVEL CHALLENGES

During peak golf season, travel schedules get very demanding and extensive. There is a good chance we stayed in a hotel the previous night and will be staying in another one after your visit. We never know if the occupants in the neighboring room will be a quiet family on a vacation or boisterous partygoers. Getting a good night's sleep is no guarantee, but there are tricks that help.

Unless it is a full-day visit, it is likely we will visit another facility (or two) other than yours that same day. Excellent organization is a must to avoid misplacing pertinent information from the previous visit or the upcoming travel schedule.

Often we will travel several hours by car or fly that same day. There is usually very little room for error during the peak travel season, so when a

mistake happens, things can go awry quickly, but we can't let any of this impact our job when visiting your course. You will always get our very best, even when:

Traffic delays do not allow for time to sit down and eat, but perhaps there's just enough time for coffee and a breakfast burrito in the car. And, while also answering a call and looking at a map, we then proceed to spill coffee or burrito fixings on ourselves. The next problem becomes the need to change clothes, look presentable, and still be on time.

Flight delays or cancellations occasionally result in getting only a few hours of sleep the night before your visit.

GPS devices don't recognize all roads or routes. In fact, there are times when they are flat out misleading. Maintenance facilities are not always easy to find, so the first visit to a course can be especially interesting.

There is no cell phone coverage. If it is our first time in the area and we are not familiar with roads (which is generally the case for all visits the first year, and to some extent for the first several years on staff), getting lost can become a major ordeal when we can't contact the golf facility en route to a visit.

GETTING ALL THE FACTS

Once on site for a TAS visit, all too often we want to make an immediate impact and prove ourselves sooner rather than later. As new agronomists, this is especially true when making our first visit to a facility. But there's not much worse to damage one's reputation than a hurried response or premature diagnosis. Instead of jumping to the first conclusion that seems to be the answer, it is always best to take the time to gather as much information as possible, thoroughly examine the issue, see a representative portion of the golf course, and offer a well-thought-out explanation, complete with a realistic solution. Several memorable moments for our staff through the years include attempting to diagnose the cause of a dark line on a putting green (no more than a shadow from an overhead power line) and recommending major bunker redesigns or fairway contour realignment that would destroy a course's classical architecture — unbeknownst to us at the time because we had not done our homework on course history and the original architect.

Early on, we are taught to not judge a book by its cover. In our case, this would be a golf course by its front entrance. Sage advice, because some of the most enjoyable golf facilities we visit are maintained by talented and innovative superintendents in places where one would least expect.

SUPERINTENDENT MISCUES

This section highlights a few of the common superintendent mistakes that we have observed, especially for those lacking head superintendent experience or those taking over a different golf course.

TAKING ON PROJECTS

Oftentimes, when new superintendents arrive at a course, they are all revved up and ready to go. Initially taking on ambitious projects to show the membership and course officials that they are the right choice for the job can lead to disastrous results. Without proper experience or research into a project, you may be taking on more than you are capable at the time. Even though

you may personally have the experience of undertaking large projects, such as rebuilding tees or a green, it is very important to understand the limitations the current equipment, new crew, and resources might play. Bottom line: Be cautious when taking on large projects to avoid attempting to perform something that is beyond your capabilities.

applications. Just because something worked great at a previous site doesn't mean it is right for your new location.

This extra time also can serve as a great teaching tool to highlight the results and benefits of various products. Be objective about the products purchased for use. Human nature causes us to want a product to work once it



Projects like tee box rebuilding and even re-leveling a tee surface require not only a well-researched plan and experienced crew, but they often may take specialized equipment, like this laser level and box-blade.

RUSHING INTO PROGRAMS

If you are new to a golf course or position, failing to learn the site conditions of the new course can result in wasted resources, time, and energy, and could lead to turf problems. Understanding the new course and learning its history prior to implementing wholesale new programs is recommended. Utilize proper soil testing prior to product selections and find appropriate and tested sands for putting green aeration and topdressing programs. Take plenty of time for any product selections and use test plots. Learn firsthand how effective a product may be in various conditions on your specific course before implementing course-wide

has been purchased and applied. Be cautious that you are not prejudiced from that point of view.

AIMING TO PLEASE EVERYBODY

We all want to do well, be liked, and give golfers an enjoyable experience when playing the course, but it is an impossible goal to try to please everyone. Instead, develop a golf course maintenance standard document with input from the golf course officials. Committees, course officials, and the golfers should all be aware of the realistic limitations of the golf course, both agronomically and financially. Once you have developed a good plan, communicate it and stick with it.



Course officials and golfers should all be aware of the realistic limitations of their golf course, both agronomically and financially. A superintendent trying to please everybody will have his head spinning in all directions.

Aiming to please everybody will have your head spinning in all directions.

PUSHING FOR UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Everyone wants to provide the best playing conditions possible, but it is important to understand that without a sound agronomic background in the maintenance program, this can be a recipe for disaster. Good playing conditions result from sound maintenance programs and practices. If the proven cultural practices (aeration, topdressing, fertility, water management, pest control, etc.) are not the foundation of your current plan, be aware of the types of playing conditions you promise.

Thinking you might be able to, or saying you think you can, but really knowing that you can't and shouldn't strive for unrealistic expectations, is not recommended.

MANAGING MISTAKES

It's just the nature of the job that every superintendent is going to make a mistake now and then. A few common characteristics have proven to be quite valuable to weather the storm when a mistake occurs and to help avoid making more mistakes in the future.

COMMUNICATION

Good communication will always be part of the foundation for all successful

superintendents. Many superintendents have embraced new forms of technology to improve communication with golfers. Golf course maintenance websites, blogs, and mass emails are examples of new ways to increase golfer education on specific agronomic practices and course conditions. New technology should not replace face-to-face communication, but instead work towards keeping golfers as informed as possible.

DEVELOP AN AGRONOMIC PLAN

Developing an agronomic plan and a maintenance routine are extremely valuable. Build a solid foundation for

the management program, but make it flexible so adjustments can be made easily, if necessary. Keep course officials informed of the plan and when and why adjustments are necessary. This method will prove to be valuable when environmental conditions have an impact on course conditions and turf health. Staff efficiency will benefit from a defined agronomic plan as opposed to a constantly changing routine.

PERCEPTION IS IMPORTANT

Golfers rarely understand the knowledge and skill set required to be a superintendent. The visibility and perception of a superintendent are important at golf facilities. Presenting yourself in a professional manner and interacting often with the golfers and course staff helps dilute any misconceptions about the profession. Although it is easy to maintain your visibility when things are going well, it is even more beneficial to keep up appearances when times are challenging. When golfers are aware of your efforts, they will be more understanding of the challenges faced at the course and not jump to improper conclusions.

AVOID THE “US VS. THEM” MENTALITY

Golf course maintenance is a unique industry because the employers (golfers) often have very little knowledge of what goes on behind the scenes to keep the course looking good on a daily basis. This gap in understanding can create an “us” (course maintenance department) vs. “them” (golfers) mentality, especially when the golf calendar trumps agronomic practices. Regularly inform golfers about the maintenance practices that are necessary at the facility. If golfers have a better understanding of the importance of these practices, it should make it easier to accomplish them.

BUILD A SUPPORT SYSTEM

A support system is always helpful, especially when environmental stress occurs. An extra set of eyes often can spot things that may otherwise be overlooked. Green Section agronomists, neighboring superintendents, university

faculty, and local associations can be great sounding boards for ideas, questions, or concerns.

CONTINUE LEARNING

It is easy to become complacent once you find a system that works. Turf research and new maintenance technology are focused on trying to improve course conditions, protect the environment, and reduce expenditures. Having reservations about new technology or research is reasonable, but don't be resistant to change. For example, consider the newest wave of hand-held or in-ground moisture sensors. Pulling a soil core and examining the moisture content is still an excellent method for determining soil moisture status, but when you can add an objective value with a moisture meter, the accuracy and consistency are greatly improved, especially among several employees. Not all advancements will prove useful,

but many have the potential to improve turf conditions, so keep an open mind and continue learning.

CONCLUSION

Good judgment, unfortunately, often comes from bad experiences. We have all made mistakes, and it's likely we will all make a few more in our careers. However, identifying what lesson can be learned from each experience, good or bad, will prove invaluable in the long run.

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Creating a golf course maintenance website has become popular as a platform for communicating and educating golfers about course conditions and recently performed or upcoming maintenance programs.