TEN LESSONS

What I learned while serving on the green committee.

BY JOHN RYDELL

Allowing club members to change the design of a course can have many pitfalls. Green committees should carefully consider if proposed changes are appropriate for the course.

This year marked the end of my involvement with the green committee at Mission Viejo Country Club in California. For the past eight years I have been involved with the green committee in various capacities. Throughout the years, my experience has ranged from being a brand-new committee member eight years ago to leading the green committee for numerous years. During my time working with the green committee, there were many ups and downs, two different superintendents, and two different general managers. We also were fortunate enough to oversee a $6-million course infrastructure and renovation project.

At the end of my eight years, I was asked to reflect back on what advice I would offer to other green committee members based on my experience. Below is my personal top-10 list of things that green committees should keep in mind.

LESSON 1

Members should not be golf course architects.

Every course should have a golf course architect or consultant they rely on before making any significant changes to their course. The green committee should be encouraged to come up with ideas and concepts to propose to an architect, but they should not be able to make substantial changes on their own. It is way too easy to want to make changes based on personal bias. For example, if you always find yourself behind a particular tree, it is easy to start recommending its removal. However, would removing that tree be the appropriate action for the course, or would it primarily benefit your golf game?

In addition, golf course architects have themes that are important to

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Green Section Record Vol. 52 (20)
October 3, 2014
TGIF Record Number 248110

maintain from the standpoint of continuity. At Mission Viejo we were fortunate to work with Bruce Charlton, of the Robert Trent Jones Company, who helped keep our decisions consistent with the original course design created by Robert Trent Jones Sr.

LESSON 2

Focus your efforts "inside the ropes."

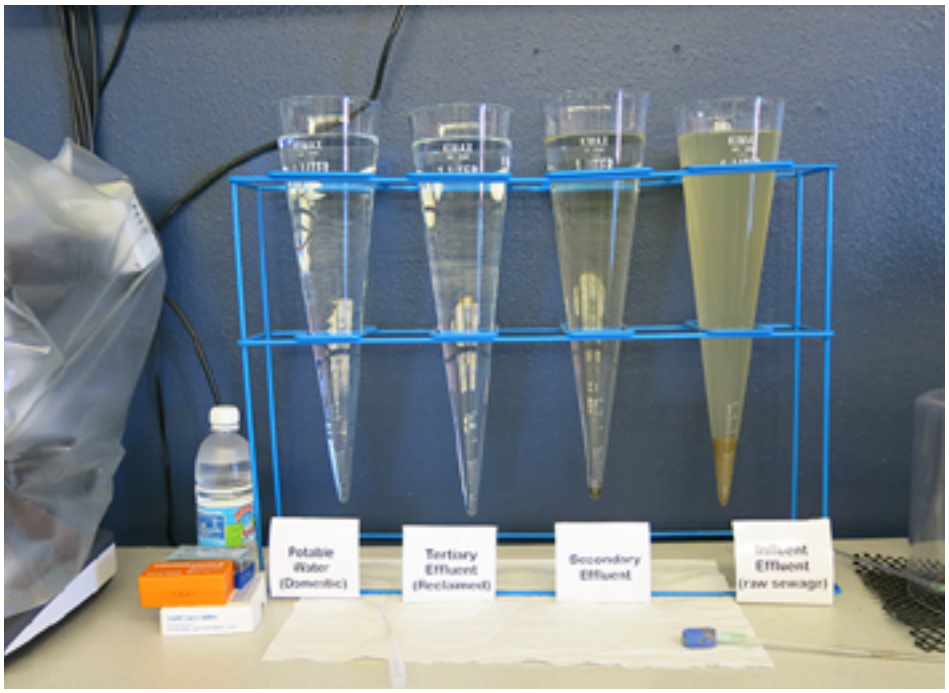
The most important parts of your golf course are inside the ropes. Imagine yourself watching a PGA Tour event on TV or in person. There are ropes that keep the spectators off the core of the golf course. The places where the players play are the most important. Greens, fairways, teeing grounds, bunkers, and a few yards of rough are the most critical pieces of your course.

LESSON 3

Water quality.

There is nothing more important than the quality of the water used to irrigate your course. Some courses are extremely fortunate and get plentiful rainfall throughout the year, while others are blessed with fresh well water. However, if your facility is one of the vast majority of courses that are less fortunate, make sure your facility has short-term and long-term plans in place to ensure access to affordable, high-quality water.

Golf courses must be good stewards of the land and natural resources. Many courses are among the biggest customers of local water districts. The use of recycled water is often critical to course? Could your course use more recycled water if the salt content was slightly lower? What is going to happen to the water supply during a drought? Start talking to your water suppliers today to make sure that your course is receiving the quality and quantity of water you need at the right balance for the local community.



Whether your course uses recycled water or has access to plentiful potable water, it is important for the green committee to take the necessary actions to ensure an affordable and dependable supply of water for the golf course.

Focus as much of your money and your resources on these areas. There are times when green committees start to focus their efforts on pretty flower beds, slopes, or areas that fall outside the core of the course. There are times when you need to work on projects outside of the ropes, but spend less time and money on those projects until everything inside the ropes is as good as possible.

LESSON 4

Give your golf course staff the time they need to do their job.

There is always a balance that must be found between the superintendent and the course officials in charge of revenue. In order to produce great results, superintendents and their teams need adequate time to complete their jobs every day. In addition, they occasionally need time to work without golfers in their way. There are often large projects that are critical to the long-term success of a course that must be done on days when golfers aren't present. At Mission Viejo, Mondays were generally closed to golf so the staff could work on the course. However, Mondays can also be good days for charity golf tournaments. During the spring in Southern California, there is huge demand for Monday tournaments. However, superintendents can't go weeks in a row without having time to accomplish important maintenance projects.

I offer three simple suggestions for how to handle this:

1. Set up a calendar in advance that ensures the superintendent will get some work days every few weeks no matter what.
2. Find some Mondays when the superintendent and his staff can work early in the day but let a tournament show up and play in the afternoon.
3. Most important, make sure that the golf course staff and the people in charge of revenue are talking openly about their needs. The superintendent can't reasonably claim that he needs the course closed for one day every week. Likewise, the course officials who book events can't be unreasonable and claim that closing the course is never practical.

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Winter overseeding has a significant downside, including the difficult transition process in early summer.

LESSON 5

The less you overseed, the happier you will be.

This item on the list obviously varies from course to course and from climate to climate. But overseeding is expensive and can have a long-term negative impact on course conditions.

Years ago Mission Viejo used to overseed the entire course every fall. That meant we had to close the course for 10 days and spend a ton of time and money planting cool-season grasses. Afterward, we had to keep carts off the course for another few weeks. A few months later our course would look very green and visually appealing, but the process was massively disruptive and the playability of the overseeded fairways was mediocre. Furthermore, the transition back to warm-season grasses in summer was difficult in our climate.

Eventually, we stopped overseeding at Mission Viejo. At first, we took baby steps by doing less fairway overseeding. Then we stopped overseeding the fairways altogether. Now, none of the playing surfaces at Mission Viejo are overseeded and the course goes off-color for roughly 10 weeks. Initially, we thought the members would hate seeing the yellowish-brown color. However, the members are happy to see an off-color course because, through proper education, they now understand that better playing conditions can be achieved throughout the rest of the year by eliminating fall overseeding.

I think an increasing number of courses are going down this road. It is a good trend. Educate your members on the benefits and reduce the amount of overseeding at your facility. You'll be glad you did.

LESSON 6

Look at the lifetime cost of every project.

Calculate the initial costs any time you are about to embark on a new course project, but do not forget to calculate the additional costs of the project over time as well. For example, people often want to plant beautiful flowers to make the course more

Projects like installing a new flower bed can add beauty to the golf course, but it's essential that the long-term financial impact of such projects be taken into account by the green committee.

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visually appealing, and they can justify the cost of the planting in the current budget. However, nobody asks what the flower bed will cost long term. It is certainly possible that the actual cost of a $5,000 flower bed could be $5,000 the first year and an additional $5,000 each year thereafter if you account for water, maintenance, and replacement of plants over time. Please be kind to future budgets and implement projects that do not have a negative financial impact on future green committees.

LESSON 7

Not everyone will be completely satisfied with the course.

We live in a world where people have extremely high expectations of their golf course. Golfers expect a course to look beautiful all year and every lie to be perfect. What we see on TV is part of the problem. Just like supermodels who are airbrushed to look even better, the golf courses you see on TV have a number of things going for them. First, they are usually absolutely great courses. Second, they usually have additional funds available because they are hosting a televised event. Third, they are usually being played during the season that is best for their course. Finally, the TV cameras are actually designed to make golf courses appear more green and more beautiful than they are in person.

No golf course can be perfect all year, so don't judge your course on its average day against another course on its best day. With that said, set the bar high for your course. Have high standards and continue to strive to be the best that you can be. Try to help golfers understand this so that their expectations are reasonable.

LESSON 8

Be honest about your budget.

Most golf courses have a budget that includes capital expenditures, like equipment, and a separate budget for the operational expenses of the course. Find a good financial solution that helps you truly understand and account for all costs. In certain situations, leasing equipment can be a very good solution because leasing can give management a very clear understanding of the true annual cost to own and operate equipment. Without a clear understanding of the costs at your

The green committee must have a good financial solution to address capital expenditures like purchasing or leasing maintenance equipment.

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Questions and dialog with the superintendent are important for committee members; however, every hour spent asking questions or second-guessing decisions is one hour less the superintendent is able to focus on leading his team and making the golf course great.

facility, the superintendent may be forced to use antiquated equipment or spend excessive amounts of time and money on repairs because budgetary issues prevent the purchase of newer equipment. Whether you lease your equipment or choose to put together good financial models, figure out the annual costs of operating your course and plan appropriately. Don't make poor financial decisions that leave budget issues for future committees.

LESSON 9

Don't micromanage.

Hire the best superintendent you can for your course. Hold the superintendent accountable but don't micromanage. The responsibility of the green committee is to work with the staff to come up with a set of reasonable expectations for the course as well as short-term and long-term goals. Provide the superintendent with the resources and encouragement to meet the expectations and achieve the set goals.

Just remember that every hour someone on the green committee spends asking questions, second-guessing decisions or just nosing around, is one hour that the superintendent wasn't able to focus on the core responsibilities of leading the maintenance staff and making the course great. I obviously encourage dialogue and questions. However, if every member of a seven-person green committee plus a handful of board members each occupies 30 minutes of the superintendent's time per week, the superintendent can lose 20 percent of his time talking to the club leadership rather than maintaining the course. Furthermore, the lost time doesn't include time spent with the bosses or the time spent in monthly green committee meetings.

LESSON 10

Have fun.

You play golf because it is fun. You likely got involved with your green committee because you wanted to be involved, learn more about the golf course, and give back to your course. It might feel serious to be responsible for a course, and I encourage you to take your responsibility seriously. But never forget that golf is a game and a leisure activity. Treat your fellow golfers, green committee members, and staff with the utmost respect, even when you disagree. But keep a smile on your face and be thankful for the joy that comes when you help make the game of golf better for those who come after you.

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