

Isn't It Time For A Second Opinion?

Use the USGA's Green Section Turf Advisory Service (TAS) for all it's worth!

BY MACK SAUNDERS AND MATT SHAFFER



Mack Saunders, Glen Oak Green Committee Advisor. What happens to a long-tenured Green Committee Member after he retires? He becomes a Green Committee

Advisor. Mack Saunders gives advice to Glen Oak CC, his course in the north, as well as to his winter course in the south. In this article, he will also give YOU advice on how to make your course better by seeking (and using) good advice.

Did you ever think of asking for a second opinion on a medical problem or some other issue you were facing? The obvious answer is "yes." In today's world of business, consultants are used every day and in any number of ways. Many who are reading this article are probably "consultants" in some form or another. It therefore makes sense to use consultants on your golf course. Where does one go for the best consulting services?

Guess what? Such an expert opinion is available for your golf course turfgrass maintenance and management problems from the USGA, the governing body of golf. The USGA is a non-profit organization that exists for the good of the game of golf. When it comes to most issues associated with the game, the final word is usually from the USGA. The USGA, among other roles, has been supporting an on-course agronomic consulting service for nearly 60 years. This service is known as the Turf Advisory Service (TAS) and is provided by the USGA Green Section. The Green Section has professional agronomists on staff who cover the entire country, plus Canada

and Mexico, and can be scheduled for either a half-day or full-day on-site visit to your golf course. Merion Golf Course Superintendent Matt Shaffer and USGA Green Section Committee-man Mack Saunders have used the USGA Turf Advisory Service for years and highlight the following key benefits they and their golf courses have received.

1. EXPERIENCE

Since each USGA agronomist visits approximately 100 golf courses annually, they all have broad-based knowledge of turfgrass conditions within their region and can provide

helpful information on a timely basis. It is important to know how other golf courses deal with similar problems, and this includes knowing which programs, products, and procedures are working to solve a problem and which ones are not. This information can save time, money, and anguish.

2. COMMUNICATIONS

Green Section visits and reports provide a major assist in terms of helping your green committee, other course officials, and staff to better understand the superintendent's challenges and options that exist. The USGA affiliation brings a tremendous level of credibility



Mack Saunders at work. Communication within the club is an important element in effectively managing any operation but especially one like golf courses where you are dealing with the vagaries of the weather and living organisms (grass). Simple and understandable communications work best.



Matt Shaffer, Director of Golf Course Operations at Merion Golf Club, a course rated in the Top Ten "Best" Golf Courses in the U.S. and site of the 2013 U.S. Open Championship. Matt and Mack have combined their talents to offer good advice to you.

and comfort to golf course personnel and course officials. It is important to know what needs to be continued and, equally, what needs to be changed in a careful and thoughtful manner.

3. CANDOR

USGA agronomists provide factual and candid advice, telling golf course superintendents, club professionals, general managers, committee members, and facility administrators what they need to hear and not necessarily what they would like to hear about their course conditions.

The USGA has nothing to sell. In fact, the fees charged for a Green Section visit only cover a fraction of the actual cost. The goal is to provide current, honest, and candid advice without bias or any commercial agendas.

4. TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Green Section agronomists provide current industry updates on chemical/pesticide combinations, application intervals, and application rates. The USGA has access to the latest research results, which oftentimes are not as

quickly available to a golf course superintendent and definitely not available to the average golfer/member. Increasingly, golf course superintendents just do not have time to stay as current with the latest research results and they rely on the Green Section for that information. This agronomic support is an important aspect of the TAS.

5. CUTTING COSTS . . .

. . . or using your available resources wisely. The focus of Green Section visits can be on reducing costs, containing operating cost increases, and generally how best to use the budget dollars available. Oftentimes, a few suggestions can save the course more money than the cost of a Green Section on-site visit. Every golf course is different, and every visit has different goals and objectives. Simply tell the USGA agronomist what you want to accomplish, and a visit can be built around your objectives.

6. THE GREEN SECTION TAS REPORT

This report is an historical document. Oftentimes, there is no better way to

look back to determine factually what has or has not happened on a golf course than by simply reviewing past TAS reports. These reports provide a written, detailed summary of recommendations after the TAS visit, which not only reference turfgrass matters discussed during the visit, but also include reference materials and other supporting documents that address the same matters. These materials are actually made available within the TAS report.

Green Section reports are available electronically, so some or all of these reports can be forwarded to interested golfers, members, or administrators. Not everyone can attend a Green Section visit, and these reports (and necessary follow-ups) are a tremendous asset to achieve better communications and education for golfers and club officials.

In addition, the USGA agronomist who conducted the TAS visit is available to provide additional support to make sure the superintendent is able to implement the recommendations of the TAS visit report. This feature alone is invaluable to the golf course and course officials.

7. EDUCATION

On occasion, other golf course staff members are present for the TAS visit. This is an excellent educational opportunity provided to the staff, all part of the training and education of today's golf course personnel.

On a case-by-case basis, USGA agronomists can assist with conducting a class for turfgrass interns and golf course maintenance staff members, including an open forum. I have found that my interns always rate this time as a highlight of their internship experience at Merion Golf Club.

8. TOURNAMENT PREPARATION

Green Section agronomists are actively involved with preparing golf courses to host USGA championships. This experience can provide tips related to preparing your course for important member-member or member-guest events, including state and regional tournaments.

9. LONG-RANGE PLANNING

USGA agronomists can provide advice to assist the superintendent and staff in making important decisions and presentations — for example, on selling the benefits of a new irrigation system, regrassing greens, building a new maintenance facility, acquiring new equipment, drainage, tree removal, and general course improvements like new tees for added length, improvements to the practice facility, etc. In addition, if new trees are required, planting the correct species in the proper location while balancing golf course sustainability and playability are just a few more benefits worth mentioning.

10. STRESS MANAGEMENT — PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL

A little-known aspect of a long-term relationship between a golf course and

the USGA Green Section agronomists is the development of personal and professional relationships. This is a “people business” as well as being highly technical and involving basic golf course maintenance and management. This relationship can assist with addressing the personal stress that goes with the superintendent’s job. A USGA agronomist can provide an honest opinion on a matter, something that is hard to come by in any other way.

11. A COMPETITIVE EDGE

Finally, a TAS visit by a USGA agronomist gives the golf course superintendent an edge in a very competitive environment. What makes one golf course better maintained than another? It is the condition of the grass, how it looks and plays. The TAS can make for a better golf course. Isn’t that one of our main objectives in doing what we do?

In summary, if you are a golf course superintendent, please review this article with your green chairman and other course officials who are in a position to budget for and schedule a TAS visit. If you are a course official, please review this article with your golf course superintendent. In any case, your course is certain to get an unbiased, non-commercial, professional evaluation with a written visit report that is sure to improve your turfgrass maintenance practices and make your golf course even more playable.

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MATT SHAFFER is director of Golf Course Operations at Merion G.C. in Ardmore, Pennsylvania.



Most golf courses today are functionally small businesses. It takes a team to run a golf course or, in the case of Merion, two courses. The team at Merion, from left: Matt Shaffer, Director of Golf Course Operations; Arron McCurdy, Superintendent, East Course; and Brian Palmer, Superintendent, West Course.