

Adding Value — It Comes In All Sizes

Ongoing economic challenges facing the game require creative ideas to reduce expenses by focusing on main playing areas.

BY SCOTT STAMBAUGH



“T-Rex” may be a dinosaur by name, but this lightweight mower setup created by golf course equipment manager Rex Patton will not go extinct because of its ability to mow golf course roughs through wet winters in the Pacific Northwest.

The phrase “adding value” has grown into somewhat of an iconic catchphrase in the golf world in recent years. It has become an increasingly difficult task for many golf facilities to remain attractive to their current members, prospective members, and the community in general. Management teams, especially those responsible for the golf course, are being tasked to find ways to add value to a membership or green fee without the luxury of any additional funds. Doing what we have always done is not a viable option anymore. At Overlake Golf and Country Club, we are fortunate to have several resources to turn to in regard to adding value:

- We have a core group of staff members with a shared, common-sense approach to golf course maintenance. We continually strive to find ways to make things happen and are always brainstorming for ideas to elevate the golfing experience.
 - The course maintenance history is well documented in more than 40 years of USGA Turf Advisory Service visits and reports.
 - In the Seattle area, there resides a tight-knit group of local superintendents who are always willing to openly discuss and share ideas with each other.
- What follows are a few examples of practices we have implemented and

projects undertaken that we believe add value on many different levels to golfers and the community.

MAINTENANCE DOWN THE MIDDLE

In recent years, many factors have contributed to the challenge of providing a well-conditioned golf course without the benefit of increases in the budget. Budget increases are often necessary to help compensate for the unstable cost of fertilizer and plant protectants, the ever-increasing rise of fuel and delivery costs, expensive repairs to aging equipment fleets, and staff retention via pay increases, to name just a few factors. However,

when operating budgets remain flat or cannot keep pace with rising costs, golf course maintenance becomes a game of compromise. What can be accomplished today and what needs to be deferred? We chose to look at this situation as a reallocation of funds. More specifically, how do we keep improving aspects of the golf course that we deem important without diluting the entire product?

Our solution was to focus on keeping the golf course the best it could be “down the middle.” By minimizing fertilizer and chemical applications as well as limiting irrigation, we are dedicating much less time to mowing and cleaning rough areas. This approach during the season has allowed us to continue business as usual with our programs on the short grass, or primary playing areas from tees to fairways to putting green complexes.

THE “T-REX” LIGHTWEIGHT MOWER

Winter weather in Seattle is quite unpredictable from year to year, but one thing for certain is a 12-month golf season with a few interruptions along the way for frozen and/or snowy conditions. With a shift in demographics, we are now seeing many new members who have younger families and other commitments that keep them around the facility all year. Fewer and fewer of our members are escaping to warmer locales during the winter, so there is a greater expectation than ever before that the golf course be playable year-round.

One area that Overlake G&CC has struggled through the years during the wetter months of the offseason is maintaining the rough. Even with reduced maintenance and inputs during the season, once rains return, so too does the rough. The fairways have been routinely sand topdressed for 25 years, so playability “down the middle” remains decent year-round. For those who venture into the rough, however, it is an entirely different scenario. The golf course was built on a heavy, clay-based site, so wayward shots are not only difficult to locate, they are even more difficult to advance. Compound-

ing this problem was the approach to maintaining the rough. The two choices were to mow it with heavy equipment and damage the course with tire ruts, or do nothing and resume mowing once things dried out. Neither choice was acceptable, so we had to find another way to improve this situation.

One year, while attending the Golf Industry Show, I noticed an interesting piece of equipment that a manufacturer had just unveiled. It was simply three shells of push lawn mowers being towed by a bunker raking machine. Returning home, I inquired about a demonstration unit, which we promptly broke shortly after delivery. We felt the unit had some design flaws and, when told of its sizable price tag, my former equipment manager Rex Patton said he could build one himself. Hence, the origin of the “T-Rex” mower.

This unit is basically three inexpensive push lawn mowers minus the handlebars. They are attached to a custom-designed frame and then towed by a mechanical bunker rake. Total cost of the T-Rex is under \$1,000. Operation is very simple, and if an employee can pull start a lawn mower and sit on a mechanical bunker rake, then that person is qualified to run a T-Rex. We now have two T-Rex units, which allow all rough mowing to be completed in a week. We begin running both units once the rough gets too wet to mow with large mowers, typically around Thanksgiving, and they operate well into the spring. It is hard to fathom, but with the low ground pressure of the mechanical bunker rake and three lawn mowers, these units can actually mow areas that cannot be walked through without sinking to your ankles. For more information and to see the T-Rex in action, watch the webcast [Wet Weather Mowing](#).

SEED PRIMING

It has become a very common sight late in the day to see members elbow to elbow hitting balls on the practice tee before playing a few holes. We are also observing an increased popularity in professional practicing. These golfers put in overtime, carving out a large chunk of real estate from the practice tee in the process, rarely

making it to the first tee to see the dividends of their hard work. Of course, this all takes place on an undersized practice tee, where members are already restricted to synthetic mats on the back of the tee twice per week. Providing quality turf on the practice tee has become a challenge of late, when people seem to have enough time for lengthy practice sessions but not for a round of golf. Use of the practice tee has increased, while the expectation of its condition remains unchanged. How are we to provide a desirable place to hit balls with all this extra traffic and wear?

The concept of seed priming was shared with us during our annual USGA Turf Advisory Service visit. The process had already been successfully utilized at the Monterey Peninsula Country Club and Eugene Country Club. Seed priming speeds seed germination and subsequent healing time on the practice tee. It is an easy, low-impact process with a tremendously high rate of return. We created a simple instruction sheet that any staff member is able to follow:

Soaking

- Fill bucket labeled “SOAK” approximately two-thirds full with seed.
- Fill bucket to the top with water.
- Stir to ensure all seed has been submerged in water.
- Allow the seed to soak for 24 hours.

Draining

- After 24 hours, pour the soaked seed into a bucket with drilled holes. Buckets are individually labeled by the day on which the driving range tee will be repaired.
- Allow 20 minutes for water to drain from the bucket.

Drying

- Place the drained seed bucket in the greenhouse.
- Allow the seed to dry for approximately 48 hours.
- It is important to stir the seed on a daily basis to prevent clumping.

It is as easy as that! This simple process has improved turf recovery on the practice tee, resulting in a better experience for our members.

THE PURPLE TEES

In the summer of 2011, the PGA of America and the USGA introduced [Tee It Forward](#), an initiative that encourages golfers to play from a set of tees according to their average driving distance. For most, this involves moving up a set of tees to play from a shorter distance and, in turn, play faster and have more fun. This program was discussed among members, with some wondering what to do if there is no other set of tees to move up to.

The shortest set of tees (gold) at Overlake G&CC is 5,200 yards. A shorter set of tees had been discussed for years, but for various reasons a decision was never reached. A convincing presentation by a member (with supporting data) was made to the Golf Committee about building a shorter set of tees in the neighborhood of 3,000 yards, which would be more aligned with driving distances of

shorter hitters, juniors, and those new to the game. The word “build” was met with immediate resistance because the course already had four sets of tees. The discussion was tabled and no decision was made.

The next morning, my assistant and I determined that there was a simple solution that required no construction and very few resources to make it happen. Why can't we “build” a set of tees by finding a level area in the fairway and install a plaque to designate this area a “tee”? A call to our state golf association confirmed that it certainly was possible and that a 3,000-yard golf course can receive a course rating as well. Knowing now that it was possible, the next step was to determine appropriate yardages. We began with a simple math equation that ended up working perfectly. We knew we wanted the course from our new set of tees to measure 3,000 yards. Since 3,000 yards was 58 percent of

5,200 yards (the length of our gold tees), we wondered if determining our new tee locations could be as simple as reducing the length of every hole by 58 percent. A morning tour of the golf course included a stop at every proposed yardage and, sure enough, every hole included an ideal spot at the distance desired. This kept the shorter holes (par 3s) short, the mid-length holes (par 4s) medium length, and the longer holes (par 5s) long. Most important, no construction was needed.

Since the colors of the two most forward tees were now purple and gold, it was a natural to call them the “Husky” tees, as these are the school colors of the nearby University of Washington, the alma mater of many Overlake G&CC members. The club president volunteered to pay for the cost of the 6-inch x 6-inch purple plaques designating the teeing area at each hole. Scorecards were designed



Simple in-ground tee markers offer a great short course for children beginning the game and those who have lost a few yards in driving distance over the years.



The golf course serves as a perfect classroom setting for local schoolchildren to learn about nature and how golf courses can improve the environment.

and created in-house at minimal cost. Other than the in-ground plaques being edged every other week by a staff member, there are no other costs for implementing or maintaining the new tees. After its short debut, there are already some great highlights:

- With over 140 children, Overlake's junior program is one of the largest in Washington. This year, children in the 3-hole and 6-hole programs played from the purple tees, giving them a greater sense of belonging and accomplishment versus just telling them to pick a spot at the 150-yard marker.
- The women's division just completed its second annual "Purple Tee Party" golf tournament, with many of the competitors being longtime members who had given up the game because they were no longer able to hit the ball the distance required to play from the gold tees.
- For better players, one of the great things revealed when laying out the tees was that, with holes ranging from 51 to 235 yards, the purple tees create a fantastic par-3 course within the course. The men's division is planning to hold a par-3 tournament later this year.

THE NATURE TRAIL

The process of obtaining certification in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (ACSP) for golf facilities includes outreach and education components. Our first effort was connecting with a local high school teacher who had an interest in bringing students to the golf course to observe and learn about environmental stewardship in a real-world situation. Our first group of horticulture students visited the course to take part in the development of a native area restoration project, which is now in the planning stages.

To further expand our efforts, we established an educational partnership with our neighbor, the St. Thomas School, a private school that is literally steps from the golf course maintenance facility. We utilized an area between the maintenance facility and a pond on the golf course to create a "nature trail" that would serve as an off-site home base for their environmental science program. St. Thomas has an impressive science curriculum, and the ability for students to learn outdoors further enhanced their terrific program. Educational opportunities within the nature trail include native plant identification and planting, water testing, and dis-

cussions surrounding wildlife habitat and management. Multiple grade levels from the school will be engaged on the property, resulting in an ongoing project throughout their time at St. Thomas. Documentation of this process was the final component in Overlake G&CC receiving its certification in the ACSP in December 2011.

This initial undertaking with St. Thomas proved to be quite a success. As spring 2012 arrived and use of the trail was on the school's agenda once again, they were interested in expanding their program to include actual design and construction. Students created all designs for the trail expansion project, including preserving specific plants and trees in the area, identifying areas for benches (made from logs), and incorporating a butterfly garden. Students created six different designs and selected one winner. When school resumes, they will continue with completing construction of the expanded nature trail. Aside from assistance by staff members in between visits, the students will be performing much of the work themselves.

THE GOATS

Overlake G&CC has approximately 10 acres of natural area that serve a very functional role as a watershed for a large portion of the golf course and surrounding neighborhoods. Drainage on 13 of the 18 holes ultimately ends up in this area or passes through it on its way to Lake Washington. The area also serves as valuable open space in an otherwise densely populated urban environment.

In recent years, attempts have been made to control the most invasive of all undesirable weeds in this area (and possibly all of western Washington) — the evergreen blackberry. Many labor hours have been dedicated to blackberry removal in the past, including cutting, hauling, and applying herbicides to prevent regrowth. For the most part, areas we have focused on have turned out well. Because this process is labor intensive and time consuming, we brainstormed ideas for a better and more efficient way to accomplish the task.

In summer 2011, we introduced a herd of goats into the open space in hope of obtaining a more natural appearance by ridding this area of blackberry and other undesirable weeds. We documented the following benefits of using goats instead of manual labor:

- Goats are significantly cheaper than using manual labor.
- Reduced chemical use.
- No damage or noise from heavy equipment.
- Goats consume and break down plant material, whereas staff would have to remove, haul, and chip it.
- Prevention of seed production because plants may still go to seed below the cutting level of a mower.
- Prime example of a “green” effort at the facility in that there is less fuel used and little impact to the area.
- Finally, it proved to be good publicity.

This inaugural “green” effort was deemed a success on all fronts. The project generated positive talk among the membership as well as nearby residents. The steady flow of curious onlookers throughout the week was quite a sight. Most of all, the amount of brush and weeds the goats tackled during their stay was remarkable. In six days, the goats ate their way through at least one month’s work of manual labor by a small crew, plus the elimination of any additional costs of hauling the debris away. Ten-foot walls of blackberry brush were reduced to something that was easily mowed and treated.

We brought back the goats again in 2012. Knowing this endeavor was quite the hit the previous summer, it was heavily promoted and, once again, crowds were steady. This year, we even added a viewing station on a nearby teeing ground, complete with snacks and drinks, where onlookers could observe the herd of hungry herbivores. Ridding the property of its undesirable vegetation has never been so exciting.

CONCLUSION

Adding value can come in all shapes and sizes, and it doesn’t necessarily require a big checkbook. Overlake Golf and Country Club has been successful



When the dinner bell rang, the herd of over 200 goats loved everything that was green.

in adding value by carefully evaluating the needs of our members and customers. The key to our success has been creativity, listening to our members, and a willingness to make some changes to our normal way of doing business. In the process, we have found that small, inexpensive changes have provided significant value to our members. Divot repair, efficient rough mowing, and the Husky tees provide a direct benefit to our members, while

the nature trail and use of goats for brush control benefit our neighbors and community as well. In the end, we have found the challenge of doing more with less created an opportunity for adding value in ways we never before thought possible.

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