



Alternate greens (foreground) on several Milwaukee County courses are kept in excellent playing condition for use when the regular greens are being aerated, topdressed, sprayed, or mowed. Efficient labor use and uninterrupted golf make the cost of maintaining the extra area worthwhile.

Government Golf — Keeping Up With the Competition

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GOVERNMENT-OWNED courses (city, county, state, or federal) are in better condition than ever, thanks to competition. For years, golfers who play these courses have been subjected to cavalier treatment by some parks and recreation commissions, their administrative staffs, or both, who rationalized that since there was no other public facility nearby, golfers would accept anything, provided it was cheap.

Early private operators had to meet the price of these courses, because theirs were little better. Not anymore. Golf businessmen have demonstrated that good golf courses can be merchandised at an affordable cost. Although they

aren't cheap, they are nevertheless affordable to a majority of public course players on a regular-play basis. These privately owned public courses are providing competition, and the smart park/recreation administrators are doing something about it, even if it means raising green fees. Most government budgets are strapped for funds, so the users have to do more to support the institution, and rightly so.

Government courses have failed to compete with private operations in only a few categories, namely the quality of greens, tees, and fairways. Many have failed to understand that a lot of green grass doesn't make a good golf course.

Greens are often overwatered and overfertilized. Putting quality is often an unknown term. It is amazing how well some of these greens respond to aeration and topdressing operations that have been properly programmed. Improved fertilization and irrigation techniques put the icing on the cake. Eventually some greens must be totally rebuilt, but rehabilitation can prolong their usefulness.

Some fairways have never seen an aerifier. The poor things were just mowed and perhaps fertilized every spring just like the lawn at city hall. When golfers complained about cuppy lies, the mowing height was lowered. Now, though, fairways are being reclaimed through inten-

sive aeration, properly timed fertilization, interplanting with new, vigorous turf cultivars, and a measure of traffic control and path development.

The tees? Well, those old postage stamps under trees with a crabgrass-*Poa annua* crop rotation are being enlarged to accommodate play. Using the rule of thumb calling for 100 square feet of level surface per 1,000 rounds of golf per year, the tees on par-4 and par-5 holes have grown significantly. Par-3 tees, which should be twice the size of the others, have not come that far, but they are much larger than they have been in the past. Tee quality has also been improved by intensive cultivation and planned tee marker placement. Bentgrass is not an uncommon surface on some Great Lakes region courses, and closely cut perennial ryegrass plantings are doing quite well, too.

Unfortunately, weed control and other pesticide work has become politicized in some areas. The policy setters in parks departments are quite sensitive to environmental groups that strive to make all things natural. Geese are more important than golf, but take off your shoes before you come into the house.

Public course golfers have become more mobile, and have had access to a growing number of fine privately owned daily-fee courses whose owners' liveli-

hoods depend on the products they sell: well-maintained turf, an interesting design, and courteous, obliging employees. Sports-oriented resorts in the North and the South are providing vacationers with these conditions, too, and the memory carries over when golfers return to their home base. Public links players aren't without income; check the cars in the parking lots. Many of these golfers are beginning to growl and ask some rather pointed questions about public course operations.

"Why can't we have better playing conditions?" or "The income from 70,000 rounds of golf should provide us with a better course! Who is responsible for this mess?"

The answers to these questions are often embarrassing to the chiefs who may play golf but show greater concern with softball diamonds, soccer fields, swimming pools, and bike trails. The user fees for public recreation are curiosities in themselves, and few operations are self-supporting.

Non-revenue producers are often subsidized by money siphoned from golf income but attributed to the largesse of the department. Maybe golfers should follow the truckers' lead about road taxes and post a sign at the courses stating: "This golf course supports two swimming pools, eight softball diamonds, and the toboggan run."

User fees on golf courses are called green fees, and can have the most imaginative structure ever devised. There are resident, non-resident, senior, junior, regular, annual, ad infinitum. There are golf car rentals and trail fees for personally owned cars, and storage fees for those who don't want to tow their golf cars every day. When they are parlayed properly, all of these can make for awfully cheap golf. There's nothing illegal to it, but when golf on a well-maintained course costs a frequent player 75¢ or 91¢ a round, that golfer isn't paying his way. Those numbers, incidentally, are real. The game costs less than the refreshments.

Because of labor costs, budgets in most government operations are much higher than one would expect. Fringe benefits and wage scales, union or not, push the staff cost-per-person much higher than at clubs or privately owned fee courses. The hourly cost for a beginner can be \$10 to \$12 per hour, straight time. The value received, however, is another matter, because these people are usually protected by rigid grievance procedures.

Outright discharge of incompetent or unwilling workers is rare. Oral and written warnings precede layoffs, which precede outright discharge, and even then appeals are possible. These steps require the full attention and time of the supervisor, so running government golf operations gets into a serious amount of record

During the Drought of '88, greens are everything at unirrigated Milwaukee County courses. The Brown Deer Golf Course (below) has hosted three USGA Public Links Championships. Dretzka Golf Course (facing page) is another challenging course, recently fitted with fairway irrigation.



keeping and time away from the job at hand.

Purchasing by government golf operations is difficult because of low-bid requirements and often inadequate specifications. For example, topdressing material and fertilizer are two of the most important components in high-traffic golf operations, but they amount to only small percentages of the budget.

There is little reason, then, to be satisfied with anything but the best quality, but unless tight specifications are written, the courses are given inferior products. It takes a lot of intestinal fortitude sometimes to defend the purchase of special topdressing sand that costs \$25 a ton when someone offers washed masonry sand for \$5, and the purchasing agent has no earthly idea why either is necessary.

Golf course superintendents on government golf courses come with a variety of abilities, depending upon individual systems. Some are college trained and operate their courses better than private organizations because of their ability to function despite rigid rules. Their success is fostered by progressive departmental management.

These individuals have the ear of a responsible administration, and they work within the system to establish good relationships with willing workers. They prepare and have a strong voice in the presentation of realistic budgets to meet the needs of the golf course.

Other superintendents have come up through the ranks to become excellent managers. They have the interest and the ability to observe and learn from every source of information at hand.

These folks really work at turf conferences and superintendents association meetings to improve their knowledge of golf turf and the people who play the game.

Then there are the others, who have simply been there longer than anyone, and assumed the position by divine right. They become bosses, and may even grow pretty grass, but it is a far cry from golf turf, simply because they don't care to learn how their course plays, much less how it compares with others. They have job security, and they take their vacation any time of the year they wish. It is heartening to know that this is a vanishing breed, even if only through attrition.

Too often the structure means that pay raises for a superintendent at the top of the scale must be accompanied by a promotion that takes them out of golf completely. It is, therefore, impossible to retain topnotch people on golf courses and keep them in the positions where they can continue to produce good results and train other employees to become skilled supervisors.

Until this sinkhole of talent is plugged, these superintendents will be lost to golf forever, or they will leave public service for private operations. A move of this

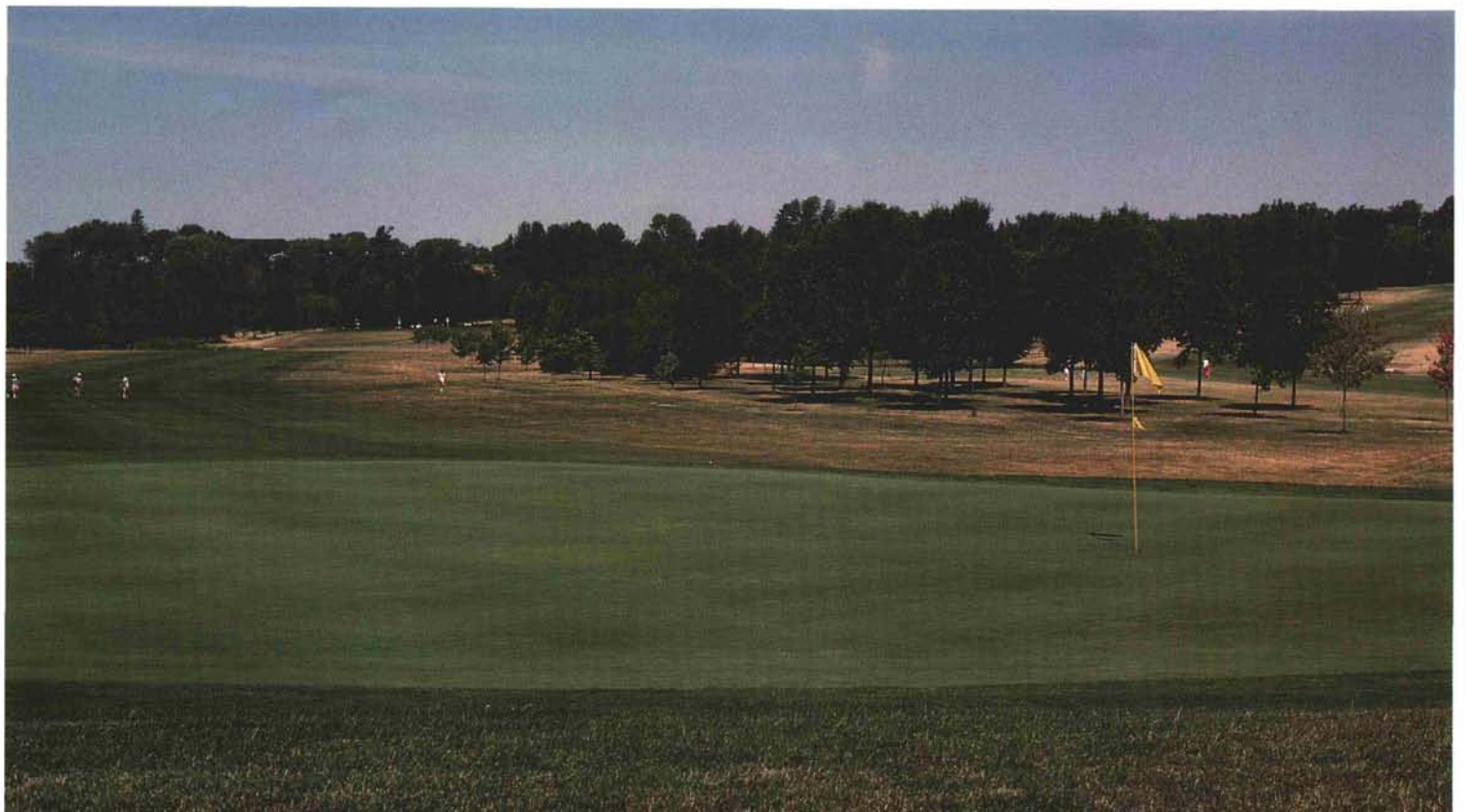
kind is questionable for a person with 15 or 20 years of tenure. Either way, government golf will lose another skilled superintendent.

To improve their skills, many greenkeepers (the normal term for golf course superintendents in public operations) must use vacation time and their own funds to attend superintendents association meetings, so it is difficult for them to participate in the continuing education provided by the wide variety of speakers at these sessions.

Associations in which the clubs pay for the superintendents' memberships and meeting costs can easily price themselves out of the range of these individuals. Those departments that now classify meetings of this sort as training are helping themselves, even though the fiscal unit may gasp at the cost of some of the dinners.

The enlightened departments who see the round of golf the superintendent may play during an association meeting as education are providing goals toward which their people can strive and the knowledge with which to attain them. These meetings are the "only source of supply," in bid language.

The budget sometimes gets in the way of attempts to translate good operational procedures at a classic private club into useful practices at a public course, but grass grows the same way at both places,



and the budget/traffic differences may have less influence than one might imagine.

WHEN a decision is made to upgrade or rehabilitate these courses, things happen, although slowly, because organizational rigidity prevents crash programs. This is not necessarily bad, provided the time lag is not simply reluctance to act.

An assessment should be made of the entire maintenance operation, literally from the ground up. Soil conditions, drainage, and turf status are the basic points of need. Irrigation and other equipment need to be evaluated for their capability to perform the operations necessary for higher-quality turf. Past maintenance practices must also be examined to determine their effectiveness.

Whenever possible, an assessment of this type should be made by an agronomist from outside the organization who is knowledgeable in the development and care of golf turf. Should architectural changes be necessary, a qualified golf course architect rather than a landscaper should be brought in.

Construction work is usually done better and faster by contractors with golf course experience than by departments within the organization, unless they, too, have the experience. When all costs are figured in, the outsiders are probably less expensive. Master plans offer the best overall approach to general rehabilitation.

People like to see action, so while the long-term, less obvious operations are getting underway, the more visible improvements should begin — weed control, trimming, policing the entire area, especially the entrances, to show that something good is happening.

If a significant amount of work is to be done on greens or tees, temporary greens and tees should be prepared well in advance to develop the sites into very playable turf through aeration, topdressing to smooth the surface, overseeding, and fertilization. Play can then be transferred at a later date without the threat of insurrection.

Properly located, these temporaries can become alternates for future use while the regular greens are being tended, perhaps while they're being mowed. They are especially helpful during aeration, topdressing, and pesticide applications, and they can save putting quality when they're put to use after storms, or during transition periods in the fall or spring, when the regular greens should not be played.

The Milwaukee County courses have done this successfully for many years. These permanent temporaries may add 15 or 20 percent more surface to maintain, but they pay that back in job efficiency.

The key personnel in the upgrading process are the golf course superintendents and the administrators. Superintendents must be enthusiastic about the plans, or all the work to be done will accomplish nothing.

The administrators must see that the material, equipment, and personnel needs are provided and are protected in future budgets. These people must be kept on track and on top of the work schedule if the fiscal and physical progress is to remain intact.

The golfers must be kept informed of what is going to happen, when it is going to happen, and why it is necessary. They understand construction and spraying, but not all those aeration holes in the ground or all that mud or sand on the turf surface. Grass eradication or suppression prior to replanting is always questioned because the turf surface is the wrong color. Let's not kid ourselves, green *is* a primary color to all golfers.

Player complaints or observations can be a real help in identifying problems and setting priorities. Associations at government courses are most critical of putting surface trueness and shot receptivity but not necessarily speed, unless the greens are shaggy or extra-fast.

Poor drainage anywhere on the course is unpleasant, particularly to walkers. Thin turf on fairways brings on perpetual winter rules, which makes handicaps questionable.

Poor turf on tees is a gripe, even though pegs are used to support the ball. Too many tees are so rough that only a small portion is level enough to use, and that becomes a water-holding dish when the ground is worn bare.

Those of us who do not reach the greens in regulation consider the approaches to be the second most important pieces of turf on any golf course. They are usually too wet, rutted, compacted, and the terrain too uneven to hit a little chip shot at the hole.

Hearing and heeding criticisms is certainly a part of marketing. Governments must begin to do this if they are to gain public support. These *are* the hands that feed the kitty from two directions — green fees and taxes.

Analytical administrators begin to see the light when the lowest play days are Saturday and Sunday. The city golfers are outward bound. The heavy-play/poor-quality dodge doesn't work any-

more, since the private operators handle 300 to 400 or so 18-hole golfers a day in 4½-hour rounds, and on good turf, too. Competition is a strong lever in any business; it can be quite keen in the field of recreation, where price and performance go hand in hand.

Golfer's associations can, and some do, become friends and encourage elected officials to think kindly enough of the courses to redirect funds toward their continual upgrading. Poor turf and/or slow play literally drives golfers away from government courses. Some will drive an hour or more to a good private daily-fee course, have an enjoyable round, and be home before they could finish a round on a ratty local facility.

It is unlikely that a government could or would change its entrenched policies on personnel or purchasing procedures, but this means only that the plans have to be more long-range, with set performance dates. The municipality might, however, let the golf courses become a private enterprise operation that retains its income and assumes responsibility for all debts.

Even where operating budgets come from the general fund, adequate financing is not impossible when public golf is shown to be a valuable lure to commerce and tourism as well as an asset to residents.

Some public officials believe contract maintenance or leasing their courses is a cop-out on their obligations to the people. Others, however, feel that these are fiscally sound means of handling an operation in which administrators have neither the will nor the skill to manage.

In a few instances golf associations have taken over the fiscal responsibilities and operate as a sort of semi-private club/non-profit corporation. Few golfers care how a course is managed as long as it is playable.

Leases of any kind or term must have some owner protection built into the document to insure that the lessee maintains or even improves the property during the term of the contract. Performance inspections by an unbiased, authoritative agency are usually sought by both parties. The Turf Advisory Service of the USGA Green Section is often used in this capacity throughout the country.

Money is the rooting medium for good golf turf. The quantity depends on the dollar stretch provided by good management. There are no free rides. If golfers want better playing conditions, they will have to demand more funds from tax revenues and be willing to pay higher green fees, amend some of the deals, such



(Above) Milwaukee's Dretzka Park. Large, level, grassy tees are a must if government golf courses are to keep pace with the quality presented by privately owned daily-fee operations.

(Left) Flowers are used throughout the Dwan Golf Club at Bloomington, Minnesota, to complement the excellent turf quality, including bentgrass tees. This bandbox course on 97 acres hosts 64,000 players every year during the short northern season.



Photograph by DEAN REITSMAN

as season tickets, special age fees, or accept surcharges in some form.

From the turf's viewpoint, every golfer contributes to soil compaction and wear, whether he is a resident or a non-resident, old or young.

Junior golfers should certainly be encouraged, through reduced rates, because they are the future of the game. Rate setting at other levels is strictly a local affair, but perhaps this is another place where government golf should take a page from its counterparts in the private sector.

Any way you cut it, dirt-cheap green fees equate to dirt-poor greens. Privately owned daily-fee courses (not just the supercourses) are growing, because they present affordable, pleasant, well-maintained playing conditions. In them, government golf operations have a pattern for efficiency and effectiveness that can be translated to fit their needs. It is being done today, to the delight of public-play golfers.