

Restoring a Gem

Communication and careful planning and organization pay off.

BY DAVID KUYPERS



Corroded old pipes were no longer capable of providing adequate hydraulic flow, so coverage and turf performance suffered.

In 1929 construction began on Cutten Fields in Guelph, Ontario. Arthur Cutten was a Guelph native who had amassed a sizable fortune through various enterprises in Chicago, Illinois. Cutten envisioned creating a world-class recreational resort for his hometown, and he planned to donate it to the city once it was built.

He enlisted his friend, Chick Evans, a very accomplished amateur player, to design the golf course. Evans was the first player to hold the U.S. Amateur and U.S. Open titles in the same year, 1916. Unfortunately, like many, Cutten's fortune vanished in the stock market crash of 1929, and by the time Cutten Fields opened in 1931, there were serious financial difficulties. The club had a series of different stewards through the years, including golf course architect Stanley Thompson, who assisted in the design. Eventually the club, now known as the Cutten Club, became wholly owned by the University of Guelph, whose property is adjacent to the club. In 2005 the

membership leased the land and all the assets back from the University to operate independently as a member-owned and operated private club. The membership had a strong desire to make significant capital improvements to the golf course and the facilities, an investment that the University had no interest in funding.

In 2005 the club hired David Kuypers to be the golf course superintendent and charged him with developing a plan to move forward with the capital improvements and to improve the overall conditioning level of the golf course.

THE PROBLEMS

Most of the challenges stemmed from years of under-funding the maintenance of the golf course. This left an aging infrastructure, dated design styles, and extremely poor growing environments. The irrigation system was a steel, center-row system, with block systems around the greens dating to the 1950s. The pipe was undersized,

terribly corroded, and in poor repair. It was simply incapable of delivering water with the necessary control, consistency, or volume to sustain turf effectively. The golf course had been renovated in the early 1990s in an effort to reduce maintenance costs, and some of its best and most dramatic features, a signature of Thompson designs, were eliminated. Worse yet, an extensive tree planting program was implemented through the 1980s and 1990s. Coupled with strong golfer resistance to removal, the trees were literally choking the golf course and hiding its best asset, the topography. The tree plantings also had created growing environments that were incapable of supporting reasonable quality and reliable playing surfaces.

Clearly, the course needed a tremendous amount of work, and a plan was needed to deal with the fundamental infrastructure flaws and the growing environments. These problems had to be corrected before any restoration work could be undertaken. The dete-



Too many sprinklers on one line spell insufficient pressure and poor coverage.

rioration of the course was so severe that very aggressive solutions were necessary, and nothing short of a major project would have the desired effect. However, membership approval was required before anything major could be undertaken.

On the plus side, all but one of the original greens were intact, and while they had shrunk to a fraction of their original size, their original shapes were obvious and the green complexes had great character. Clearly, the original design was classic and interesting, but it took some imagination to see it. The design was well worth restoring, so the idea of “preserving and enhancing” was adopted as a theme.

THE TEAM

With such varied problems, a team of experts from different disciplines was needed to provide the input needed to develop the plan. A second team was needed to present the project to the membership for approval. The agro-



With a zone or block system, the low sprinkler heads in each zone can weep, creating obvious problems.

conomic side of the team consisted of Golf Course Architect Ian Andrew, Dave Smith of DCS Agronomics, Tim Fredericks of Fredericks McGuire Irrigation Consulting. Dave Oatis of the USGA was brought in for a Turf Advisory Service consultation with a follow-up visit by Dr. Jim Baird to review tree plantings with the club's arborist. This team was coordinated through David Kuypers, golf course superintendent. A plan was eventually

THE PLAN

The operational plan called for a comprehensive tree management program in year 1, followed by the installation of a new irrigation system in years 2 and 3. The irrigation system installation was complicated since the system had to be designed around features that were not yet constructed. Finally, the golf course renovations, including tee and bunker construction, would be undertaken in the latter half of year 3.

The plan could be delayed or accelerated depending on the financial performance of the operation. The strategic plan was intended to be both broad in its vision for the club and its future; however, it also detailed the steps needed to fulfill this vision along with the dues increases and capital assessments needed to fund the projects. This full disclosure allowed the membership to understand what they were being asked to approve and how much it would cost them.

THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

The first approval hurdle was the irrigation system. A decision was made to start communicating the rationale and protocol of the tree management plan at the same time. There often is a strong emotional side to tree management programs, and the plan was to start the communication process slowly to allow members to come to grips with it. The initial communication was done as a presentation to the entire membership and to specific groups of the membership. The problems resulting from the awful growing environments and the antiquated irrigation system were clearly enumerated along with the proposed solutions. In addition to these membership presentations, there were numerous articles written for the club newsletter. The USGA Turf Advisory Service Report, which also clearly identified the issues on the golf course, was made available through the club Web site, and there were even some demonstrations on the golf course. Once the strategic plan was finalized, it was presented in conjunction with the operational plan to illustrate the financial implications of the project. Grant Robinson, architect of the strategic plan, presented it to the membership while Superintendent Kuypers presented the operational plans. As the vote drew near, the need for these initiatives was boiled down to five simple talking points that were then communicated to the various com-



Years of sand being blasted out of bunkers created a droughty, infertile soil that was not capable of supporting healthy turf.

developed that addressed all of the key problems, but it then had to be approved by the Golf Course and Grounds Committee, the Finance Committee, the Board of Directors, and ultimately the membership. The golf course superintendent acted as the principal information agent as the plan worked its way through these committees. Once the plan had been approved at the board level, another team was required for the purposes of gaining membership approval.

In order to put the operational plan in the proper context to be communicated to the membership, a strategic plan was developed for the club as a whole. The strategic plan examined the business environment that the club competes in and the club's relative strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. It also considered threats that the club faced in the marketplace. The plan was projected out over five years and would be reviewed each year as the economic environment changed.

mittees and key members for the purpose of spreading accurate information in membership circles. The efforts proved successful, and phase 1 of the project passed with no opposition.

The communication strategy for phase 2 of the project was different in tone than in phase 1. There were fewer agronomic reasons to renovate bunkers, tees, and cart paths because the decision hinged more on what type of golf course the members wanted. Since most members liked the course to start with, the idea of restoring and enhancing the original, classic design was very appealing. There were three parts to the communication strategy of phase 2:

1. The strategic plan, which had been updated after year 1, was presented by the treasurer to communicate the vision of the club.

2. The methodology behind the renovation work was presented by the golf course architect. The goals were to restore the original design intentions and shot values of the golf course, increase the amount of teeing area (particularly forward teeing grounds), and improve a dilapidated cart path system.

3. The progress of phase 1 also was a key component of the communication of phase 2. Initially, weather issues in fall 2006 had slowed progress, but the spring of 2007 allowed much of that lost time to be made up. More importantly, phase 1 was on budget through the duration of the project.

Again, the efforts at communication proved successful. Phase 2 passed by a wide margin and was undertaken in the fall of 2007.

While the projects were underway, there were many avenues through which members could be updated on the progress of the project. The Web site was updated daily with progress reports, pictures, and the area of the golf course that was being worked on that day, especially if it involved the closing of all or part of a hole. There was also a large project board in the

main lobby of the club that noted which holes were finished, which were next, and the estimated date of completion. Finally, the golf shop was given daily updates on the work in progress. The golf shop staff is the first and sometimes only contact for the players, and it was important for them to be able to give accurate information.

THE EPILOGUE

The communication efforts certainly added to the overall workload of the senior management team and the members who volunteer to sit on various committees. The investment of time and talent by these individuals made for a smooth approval process

and generated significant goodwill from the membership toward a well-executed plan. Most important, the extensive planning and organization efforts that took so much time and energy paid off in the end. The course was improved immeasurably, and seemingly insurmountable problems were overcome in the process of the step-by-step solution. Not surprisingly, the golfers at Cutten are happy to see the end of the projects and are looking forward to enjoying the golf course in 2008.

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