Let's Be Realistic!

The relationship between golfers' expectations and real world golf course management.

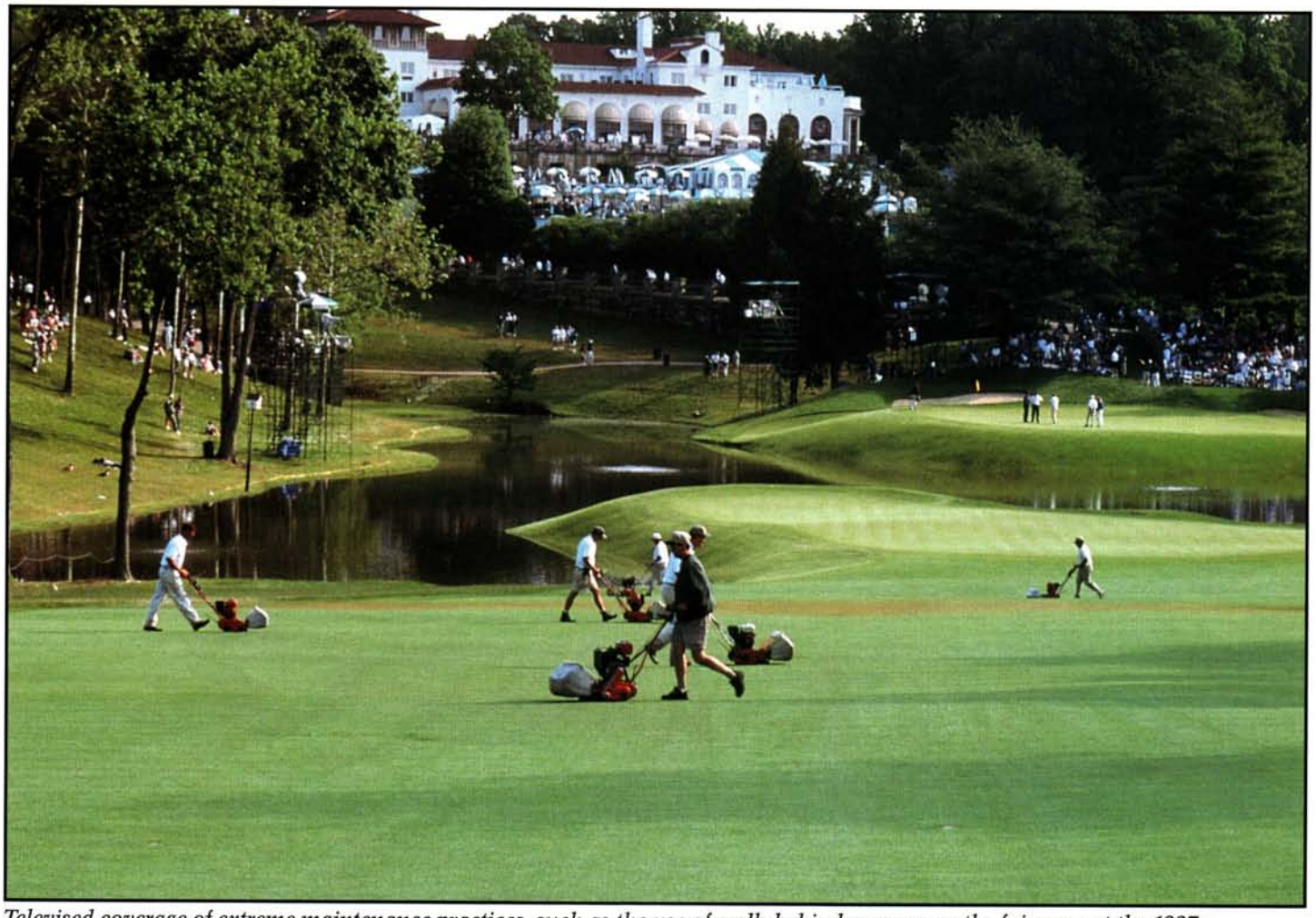
by BRIAN MALOY

THE FIRST ROUND of the U.S. Open is about to begin. In Hometown, USA, a group of golfers is crowded around the clubhouse television set in anticipation. As the camera pans slowly, giving the television audience a glimpse of the course, one golfer says to another, "Why doesn't our course look like that?" Sound familiar?

In the case of the U.S. Open played at Congressional Country Club in 1997, 50 employees and 70 volunteer golf course superintendents from the Mid-Atlantic area worked from sunup to sundown manicuring the course. This extraordinary labor force accomplished what no other had even thought of attempting — they used walk-behind putting green mowers to cut the fairways during the entire championship. While spectacular from an aesthetic viewpoint, this effort undeniably created unrealistic expectations in the minds of many golfers.

Duplicating course preparation feats seen on television has long been a sore topic of discussion between superintendents and golfers. Following major championships, such as the U.S. Open and the Masters, superintendents have to explain to golfers that the courses seen on television prepare months, if not years, in advance to host a four-day event for professional players. Furthermore, they have to explain that it is impossible to produce championship conditions on a daily basis because of environmental and budgetary restrictions.

Environmental quality has become a serious public concern and will likely be a major campaign issue during the next presidential election. The threat of global warming, the gradual disappearance of the South American rainforests, toxic waste disposal, and endangered species protection are all topics discussed at the dinner table. The public's interest in environmental issues and, specifically, pesticide usage, will affect



Televised coverage of extreme maintenance practices, such as the use of walk-behind mowers on the fairways at the 1997 U.S. Open, create unrealistic expectations for day-to-day course conditioning.

superintendents and their ability to produce perfect turf conditions.

Unless golf course superintendents adopt a proactive approach and voluntarily reduce the frequency and amount of both pesticide and fertilizer applications, new governmental regulations probably will force them to do so. In fact, a number of chemicals have already been banned for use on golf courses because of public concern. The most notable example is the insecticide Diazinon, which no longer can be applied to golf courses but is, ironically, still sold to homeowners for use on lawns and ornamental gardens. Mandatory restrictions may well affect the condition of golf courses by limiting the superintendent's ability to control certain weeds, insects, and disease pathogens.

The best way for superintendents to respond to growing environmental concerns is to develop and implement an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program. The focus of an IPM program is to reduce pesticide and fertilizer usage by establishing maintenance practices that produce healthy turf, which is more resistant to weed, insect, and disease incidence.

Adopting certain IPM programs can conflict with golfers' expectations, as they may involve raising the cutting height on greens during the summer months and/or allowing the appearance of the course to wane slightly with minor weed and insect invasions and disease infections. To many golfers, slower greens and insignificant pest outbreaks are perceived as being unacceptable. Some even go so far as to believe that superintendents who do not make multiple pesticide and fertilizer applications are simply unwilling to do their job.

To protect the environment for all citizens, golfers need to learn and accept that some degree of weed, insect, and disease incidence is acceptable. They must realize that the playing condition of the course will vary from time to time based on the prevailing weather, and that championship conditions are temporary.

Matching golfers' expectations with the bottom line of the maintenance budget is another area where superintendents have difficulty communicating with golfers. Most expect their course to be in great condition but rarely understand how much must be spent to achieve such a goal. According to the accounting firm of Pannell, Kerr and Forster (PKF), many of America's most prestigious 18-hole courses spend more than $1 million annually on routine maintenance (Pannell, Kerr, Forster. 1997. *Clubs in Town & Country*). This is a staggering figure considering the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) reports that the average annual maintenance budget, including payroll, is only $459,500 (GCSAA. 1998. *1998 Compensation and Benefits Report*). Being that the average budget is only half of what it actually takes to maintain a golf course in superior condition, it should come as no surprise that superintendents are often unfairly criticized for not keeping pace with golfers' expectations.

The largest expense in a golf course maintenance budget is payroll. Employee salaries normally account for one-half to two-thirds of a maintenance budget. A common trap set by golfers who scrutinize maintenance budgets is to compare their own course's expenses with the average payroll expense reported by the GCSAA. Average payroll figures are very misleading, however, since the length of the playing season and the hourly rate for employees varies considerably across the country.

In addition to the length of the playing season and hourly wages, labor costs also vary according to factors such as acreage, course design, staff efficiency, and equipment inventory. Acreage variations from one course to the next can be as much as double. On the flip side, courses with average total acreage can have exceptionally large greens, tees, and/or fairways that require larger staffs to maintain.

The architectural theme of a course is a factor in budget determination, as certain features, such as bunker design and layout, can add to the length of time it takes to complete routine maintenance tasks. For example, courses with more than 50 bunkers and/or with layouts stretched through a housing development take more man-hours to maintain than those with fewer bunkers laid out on a square plot of land. Not only does it take longer to get from one hole to the next, but there is simply more work that needs to be done.

The efficiency with which tasks are completed on a golf course is another factor that determines how much labor is required for proper maintenance. Staff efficiency is seldom discussed until it is necessary to justify additional employees to keep pace with golfers' expectations. Staff efficiency is most commonly affected by heavy play that forces employees to stand idle while golfers play through.

To improve staff efficiency, many courses choose to remain closed one day per week. This gives the staff a chance to complete important practices, such as applying topdressing and treating the turf with plant protectants, that cannot be completed ahead of early morning golfers. When possible, courses also start golfers off of one tee, as opposed to two, to give employees a chance to perform their morning duties without interruptions.

To provide the playing conditions expected by golfers, superintendents must have a complete equipment inventory. Moreover, the inventory must be in good mechanical condition and technologically up to date. As a point of reference, most maintenance facilities house more than $600,000 worth of equipment to properly care for the course. Assuming that the average life expectancy of each inventory item is 8.5 years, an annual replacement expense of more than $70,000 is required to keep the equipment in sound mechanical condition.

Many courses find it difficult to replace equipment based on life expectancy and, in fact, the GCSAA reports that the average annual amount spent on replacement equipment is only $50,000 for 18-hole facilities. Consequently, most golf courses are maintained with equipment that is mechanically unreliable or technologically obsolete. When the equipment inventory is not turned over based on life expectancy, meeting golfers' expectations becomes impossible.

In conclusion, superintendents are faced with bridging the gap between golfers' expectations and what can actually be accomplished given their particular circumstances. This task is made difficult by environmental pressures that demand good environmental stewardship and budgetary shortfalls that limit available manpower and equipment. On the other hand, if golfers just played golf on the weekends instead of sitting in front of the television set viewing immaculately groomed courses, everything would probably look a whole lot better.

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