

Visual Improvement Program

Photos help communicate and evaluate grounds department activities and have proven successful in increasing staff performance and membership satisfaction.

BY JOHN EKSTROM



The VIP showcase in the maintenance facility contains photos, maintenance standards and ratings for easy viewing.

Soon after entering the golf business, I realized that the performance of each golf facility is largely a direct result of what occurs (or doesn't occur) in golf course maintenance. Although very few golf facilities use statistical methods to track grounds staff efforts, superintendents perform quality control every day, whether they realize it or not. For instance, when sending mowers to mow putting greens in the morning, the superintendent has a pretty good idea of how long it should take to complete

the task. If the mowers come in too early, one might ask, "Are you sure nothing was missed?" Or, if they come in later than expected, the question might be, "Why the delay?" This is a means of quality control, and it is true for every task performed on the golf course.

VISUAL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM (VIP) AT HINSDALE GOLF CLUB

Whereas knowing the time required to complete golf course maintenance

tasks is one aspect of quality control in its most basic form, a formal measure of quality control has been in place at Hinsdale Golf Club in Clarendon Hills, Illinois, since 2005.

In 2003, there had been discussions about performing a complete bunker renovation. The project morphed into what would become a complete re-establishment of the greens with Penn A-4 creeping bentgrass, combined with newly reconstructed bunkers and teeing grounds. The renovation would close the course for the better part of

nine months and bring with it a price tag of more than \$1.5 million. The Club has been in existence since 1898 and it had never seen a project of this magnitude. So, to ensure the perpetuity of the members' investment, the Visual Improvement Program (VIP) was born.

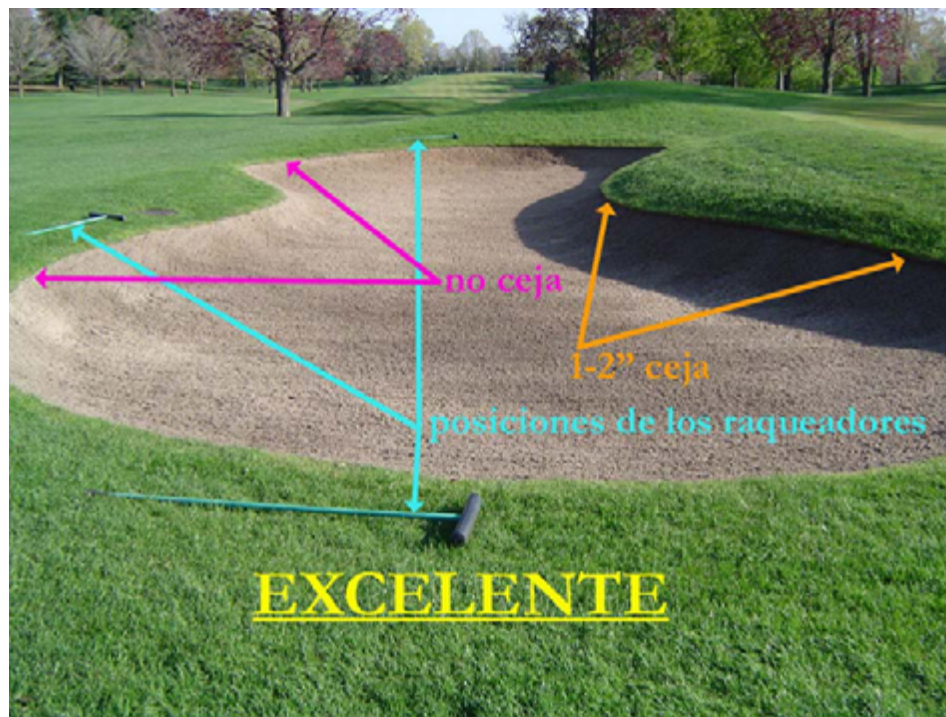
Bob Maibusch, CGCS, MG, and the Grounds Committee Chairman at that time, plus former Assistant Superintendent Chad Kempf, put together a comprehensive program that would standardize, rate, and communicate daily golf course tasks. Knowing that maintenance expectations would be exceptionally high after the renovation project, they also knew there were no plans to increase the maintenance budget to account for the additional maintenance activities or the heightened expectations. The VIP would have to assist with these concepts.

The first task in formulating the VIP was to create standards for 12 areas of maintenance. The management team worked together to develop written standards for each of the following areas:

- Greens mowing
- Tee and collar mowing
- Fairway mowing
- Bunker raking
- Hole and tee marker changing
- Banks and surrounds mowing
- Equipment care
- Maintenance facility care
- Lakes and ponds
- Landscaping
- Cartpaths and footpaths
- Practice facility

These standards outline expectations required to complete each task. As you will see, the hope is to educate, communicate, and train everyone involved with the VIP. Showing standards in both paragraph and outline form will help those who learn differently as well. That includes ALL club staff and members who choose to be engaged. As you can see, the standards for Hinsdale Golf Club specify items like mowing straight lines or spreading grass clippings in an out-of-play area that is a significant distance from the green.

In an effort to get everyone on board with the VIP, the team requested input from the crew to help develop the stan-



Bunker maintenance, including proper rake placement, can be effectively communicated when clarified using images and placed in the VIP showcase.

dards. What better source of information is there than the people who perform the tasks daily? Additionally, because our crew is primarily Hispanic, it made sense to translate the standards into Spanish. These written standards eliminate any misinterpretation or confusion as to the minimum expectations upon completion of a task, and they could also be used as a training tool for new employees.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Next, to make this program work, we needed to measure our level of success and shortcomings. We used the standards to create a list of criteria. This list was used as a basis to measure, on a scale of 1-10, how well each task was completed. Members of the management team review the course weekly and complete internal ratings. Ratings are compiled into a spreadsheet to tally weekly averages. These findings are then posted in the form of bar charts in the maintenance facility to show the level of maintenance achieved for the 12 maintenance areas each week.

Ratings are the most important part of the program because they provide

a measurement of how we are doing and specifically if there is a particular item within a task that is not meeting expectations. These ratings also allow us to create a visual representation of our progress through the bar charts. Our goal the first year was to have continual improvement throughout the summer.

With improvement being a focus, the individual weekly ratings are not as important as the overall goal of achieving an upward trend in ratings. There are weeks where one or several maintenance criteria are down from the week prior. Such hiccups in ratings are okay because, again, the overall goal is to keep improving and develop an upward trend in scores. We also rate our staff weekly, which admittedly can be difficult, given the emotion and subjectivity involved.

ACCEPTANCE

With these tools in place, we brought the crew together to discuss VIP, how we planned to use it to increase our maintenance level, and to talk about goals. Because this is a visual improvement process, we set up glass-encased poster boards on the

When in doubt, photos of tasks left incomplete or performed poorly are an effective method for training.



wall where everyone on the crew could monitor the level of our progress, as well as anyone who enters the maintenance facility.

Additionally, we added photos to the poster boards. Pictures were taken of work completed correctly as well as incorrectly to emphasize expectations. This created a simple, easy, and effective way of communicating to the crew what needed correcting as well as tasks performed correctly. Also, simple phrases or graphics were added to clarify what the photo was showing. An effort to post new pictures

weekly helped to keep the crew interested in our progress.

RESULTS AND BENEFITS

The program took a bit of training and adjustment on the part of the management team as well as the crew and members, but the results have been positive. Most important, the membership has noticed a difference in the level of maintenance we have been able to achieve. The program also has become an invaluable tool for the management staff for several of reasons.

1. First, it is an effective yet simple way to communicate to our staff. The grounds staff understands expectations, and they can visually check if they have been able to maintain or exceed them.

2. Second, it helps us understand the areas in which we need to focus more attention. If the grounds department struggles with a particular task, lower ratings will identify this so that it is clear what needs to be done differently to increase ratings.

3. Third, it is a tool for the Board of Directors, Grounds Committee, and membership to visually see how we measure and evaluate our own efforts. In this industry we are oftentimes guilty of being perfectionists, so it is not surprising when most of the membership feels you are doing better than you think you are doing.

4. Finally, at Hinsdale Golf Club, a byproduct of the VIP has resulted in reduced staff turnover (average tenure for staff at Hinsdale Golf Club has risen to 12.4 years). This saves money, minimizes “rookie” mistakes, and reduces time in training and retraining.

The renovation at Hinsdale Golf Club was a large undertaking, but creating and implementing the VIP beforehand was truly a success. Once golfers returned to play the course, we all knew expectations would be very high. This program allowed us to increase our maintenance standards

PUTTING GREEN STANDARDS

MOWING

The mowers will be checked for proper oil and gas levels before use. All greens will be mowed daily throughout the season, varying the direction with each mowing. Before mowing, the flag will be removed and all debris will be removed from the green to avoid any damage to the mower. Mowing lines across the green will be straight using minimal overlap and avoiding any misses. Turns will be made outside of the collar where possible and caution will be used not to scalp any grass during turns and when setting mower down on the green. One to two passes will be made around the edge of the green using caution to not make them any larger or smaller. Any grass clippings left on the green will be cleaned. The flag will be placed in the cup upon completion of mowing. All grass clippings will be dispersed in a rough area away from normal golfer traffic in such a manner in which the grass clippings are not easily seen. Care will be taken to avoid golfer traffic as much as possible, but when necessary proper etiquette will be used. The east half of the nursery will be mowed in the same manner. All equipment will be cleaned, machines will be refueled, and everything put away in designated areas immediately following completion of the task.

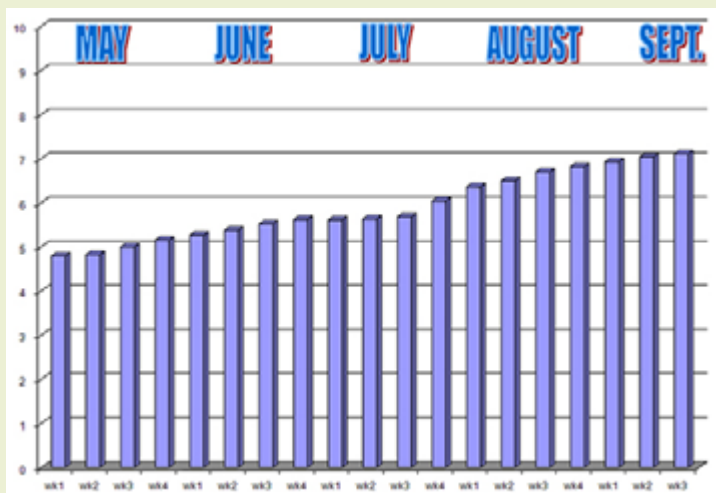
Written maintenance standards, in this case putting green mowing, are important to develop a comprehensive VIP.

Criterio del Corte de Verdes		Green Mowing Criteria	
4	Movió escombros antes de cortar	Debris removed before mowing	
5	Cortó los verdes en la misma dirección	Greens mowed in same direction	
6	Cortó las líneas derechas	Mowing lines straight	
7	Encontró las líneas lo menos que pudo sin dejar espacios sin cortar	Overlap minimal without missing	
8	Dió vueltas apropiadamente	Turns properly made off collar or on mat	
9	No escalpó ó peló el verde ó el zafate grande	No scalping on greens or roughs	
10	Cortó alrededor del verde apropiadamente	Clean-up pass(es) proper	
11	Bandejas en las copas sin ningún daño	Flags in cups w/out damage	
12	Recortes de zafate no visibles en el verde	Grass clippings not noticeable	
13	La nursery la cortó apropiadamente	Nursery mowed properly	
14	Todo equipo limpio, tanque de gasolina lleno y guardado correctamente	Equipment clean, fueled, and stored	
15	Artículo adicional	Additional item	
16	La calificación rata:	Rating scores:	
19	10 = Excelente, no se puede hacer mejor	10 = Excellent, could not be done better	
18	7 = Arriba de lo requerido - se salió del camino para hacer buen trabajo	7 = Above average, went out of way to do a good job	
20	5 = Bueno, hizo el trabajo requerido	5 = Average, did minimum work to get job done	
21	3 = Abajo de lo requerido, no cumplió la tarea ó hizo un trabajo malo	3 = Below average, did not complete task or did sloppy work	
22	1 = Pobre, ó no hizo el trabajo, ó no intento hacerlo	1 = Poor, either did not do task or gave no effort to task	

Microsoft Excel spreadsheets work great for organizing tasks that can be tied to a corresponding rating system.

	MAY AVG5		JUNE AVG5		JULY AVG5		AUG AVG5		SEPT AVG5		AVG5					
1	Greens Mowing															
2	wk1	wk2	wk3	wk4	wk1	wk2	wk3	wk4	wk1	wk2	wk3	wk4				
3	5.00	5.00	5.25	5.25	5.38	5.50	5.50	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.50	7.00	7.00	7.25	5.98	
4	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.25	5.50	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.90	6.25	6.75	7.25	7.50	6.08	
5	4.50	4.63	4.75	5.00	5.38	5.75	5.50	5.68	5.50	5.50	5.75	6.00	6.50	6.75	5.78	
6	4.50	4.63	4.75	5.00	5.25	5.50	5.50	5.68	5.50	5.50	5.75	6.00	6.50	6.75	5.83	
7	4.50	4.63	4.75	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.50	5.75	5.50	5.50	5.40	6.00	6.25	6.50	5.80	
8	4.75	4.75	5.25	5.25	5.38	5.50	5.75	5.50	5.50	5.40	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.75	5.87	
9	4.75	4.75	5.00	5.25	5.25	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.75	5.40	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.75	5.81	
10	4.75	5.00	5.00	5.25	5.17	5.38	5.50	5.50	5.75	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.25	6.50	5.92	
11	5.00	5.00	4.75	5.00	5.38	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.80	5.50	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.75	5.80	
12	5.00	4.63	4.75	5.00	5.00	5.38	5.50	5.50	5.75	5.75	5.90	6.25	6.75	7.00	5.87	
13	5.00	5.00	5.25	5.25	5.38	5.50	5.50	5.75	5.75	5.80	5.75	6.00	6.25	6.75	5.94	
14	Additional item											#DIV/0!				
15	Additional item											#DIV/0!				
16	4.80	4.83	5.00	5.16	5.27	5.38	5.52	5.61	5.64	5.68	5.68	5.82	6.02	6.93	7.11	5.90

Ratings collected for every task are entered into a spreadsheet database.



Charts like this are easily generated when ratings are entered into a spreadsheet. This is a great way to track and view weekly ratings for any task.

more efficiently, effectively, and consistently without increasing the budget. It has been an important tool for management to sustain a high level of maintenance performance and identify where remedial efforts are needed. Furthermore, it helped develop a way in which to measure our maintenance standards and improved the quality of our work. The membership noticed.

CREATING YOUR OWN VIP

Interested in starting your own Visual Improvement Program? Briefly, a few items to consider include the following:

1. Start small. Do not create all of these items and programs if there are areas of course maintenance in which those at your golf facility lack interest. Since matters of importance will be different at each golf facility, the VIP for each will not be the same. At Hinsdale Golf Club there are 12 areas of interest, but there could be more or less at your facility.

2. Begin by simply utilizing pictures. If you do nothing else, take photos of positive results and those that need revisiting. Post pictures by the employee time clock for easy viewing. You might be surprised at the power of photos to communicate and reinforce high-quality results.

3. At the very least, use this as a training tool for your staff. Standards and expectations clarify to your staff what is desired from them.

4. Eventually, and through collaboration with course officials, a rating system can be developed and applied to written maintenance standards. (Note: To learn more about written maintenance standards, view the article "Setting Standards" by Todd Lowe.)

JOHN EKSTROM is the assistant superintendent at Hinsdale Golf Club. Through collaborative efforts among course officials and the grounds department, he has seen the Visual Improvement Program improve the quality of work and performance of the grounds department while also increasing membership satisfaction with course conditioning.