

A “New” Normal for Golf Course Maintenance

Given a soft economy, recent adjustments may not necessarily be temporary.

BY TY McCLELLAN

“We’ll get back to (insert any maintenance practice or budget line item cut in recent years) as soon as things return to normal.” Sound familiar? At face value, this comment suggests that, while the business of golf is down, the situation is only temporary and operations and staffing levels will return to normal. So, what exactly is normal? For many, normal is the general state of golf that existed prior to 2008.

The 1990s and early 2000s can certainly be referred to as the good ol’ days when golf was bursting at the seams with optimism in every sense of the word. There were an increasing number of golfers, new course construction, and strong revenue streams at golf facilities of all types. Positions for superintendents and assistants were being created faster than turf students could finish their education. In an atmosphere of pure optimism, golf courses were also being designed for the best of times and maintained to achieve the wow factor. This meant extravagance at many levels, including more bunkers with high faces, more tees, more yardage, and more acres of manicured turf. None of this came cheap, and courses became more expensive to maintain with unsustainable business models.

In response to the recent economic recession and fewer rounds, golf facilities needed to reduce expenses. As a result, golf course budgets have generally decreased, and important cultural practices have been scaled back. Central to cost-saving plans were fewer staff and less overtime, which consequently meant less detail work on the golf course, use of inferior products, and fewer capital improvements. Many, if not most, of these cost-cutting measures have at least some adverse effects over time, and some even have detrimental effects with costly future implications. Educating



golfers about the difference between frugal spending and harmful cost cutting is a whole other topic of great importance to the Green Section.

While the economy will eventually stabilize and create greater financial security, I believe there may be a “new” normal for golf course maintenance and golf operations. Many of the same management and operational philosophies that worked in the good ol’ days simply won’t cut it any longer. For those who consider 2009 and 2010 to be years during which maintenance operations, staffing levels, and budget cuts were only temporary, the “new” normal for golf course maintenance is more likely to include a sustained focus on efficient operations. At first glance this view may appear gloomy, but this is not necessarily the case. Sure, the number of golf courses (supply) must be further reduced to better align with play (demand), and this adjustment will be painful at times. But golf course superintendents have always proven to be innovative and resourceful, and now is their time to shine.

To help close the gap between limited resources and high expectations, research will also continue to produce more effective products that meet stringent regulatory policies. Equipment, tools, and irrigation systems will continue to become more specialized, more accurate, and more efficient, given the need for fewer inputs and

greater environmental awareness. In time it will be commonplace to recycle grass clippings, food waste, and other kitchen byproducts into bio-fuels that can then be reused as electricity, natural gas, or equipment fuel. Golf course superintendents will continue to become better educated and more fiscally savvy. Again, science and innovation will help lead the way, and golf will survive. Will it return to normal as it once was? That’s a different question altogether.

What we do know is that maintaining golf courses during the last golf boom was reflective of the times — somewhat extravagant and rarely sustainable. This should not be viewed as normal. Many of the adjustments that were necessary during the past few years may not be as temporary as some would like to believe. There may be a “new” normal in golf course maintenance, and it will likely resemble the philosophies, budgets, and practices in place today. So, rather than playing the waiting game for a return to normal, start planning for the future by finding ways to get things accomplished.

TY McCLELLAN is an agronomist in the Green Section’s Mid-Continent Region. He has seen significant changes to maintenance operations in response to economic challenges during his visits to golf facilities in Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska.