

The Things I Wish My Green Committee Understood . . .

A superintendents' perspective for a successful green committee.

BY JIM SKORULSKI



An active and well informed green committee that maintains a strong working relationship with their superintendent is a huge asset for any golf course maintenance program.

The role of the green committee is essential for the long-term success of a maintenance operation. Being a good committee member can be a demanding job, and it requires a significant investment of time and energy to be a successful. It seems that fewer members are willing or able to make that commitment, and the committee suffers and sometimes even fails in its role. This can be costly

in many ways, especially in a period when private golf courses simply cannot afford to make mistakes and expect to remain viable.

I was asked to make a presentation about the qualities that superintendents and green committee members believe are necessary for a successful relationship and an effective green committee. The information I used in that presentation was derived from a survey of

superintendents and past and present green chairmen and committee members from a wide range of private golf courses, asking the question, "What are the things you wished your green committee understood, and what are the things you wish your superintendent knew?" The responses from both parties were interesting, to say the least, but for the purpose of this article I chose to focus on the responses from



One of the responsibilities of the superintendent and green committee is to protect and maintain the golf course for the entire membership. This can lead to some unpopular decisions that will require the green committee support and respect.

golf course superintendents and some past green committee members about the qualities they felt were essential for a successful green committee.

UNDERSTAND THEIR ROLE ON THE COMMITTEE

Many respondents to the survey discovered the need for committee members to understand their role and responsibilities on the green committee. Successful green committee members are strong advocates for the maintenance operation, understand and respect the existing mission statement and long-range maintenance objectives, set achievable goals and guidelines, and help procure the resources required to be successful. In short, committee members need to work

closely with their superintendent to develop a course of action and then forge ahead. The committee has an important advisory role but should allow the professionals to do their job. In a way, it is their responsibility to protect the golf course from the golfers. The golfers' complaints can be considered, but they should always be put into writing.

BASIC KNOWLEDGE OF MAINTENANCE AND BUDGET

The most successful committees are stable. It takes time for committee members to fully understand their role and gain an understanding of the maintenance operation and budget. In reality, the tenure for most committee members is too short, and the orien-

tation process for new members is limited at best. This can be very frustrating to superintendents and general managers, who are faced with indoctrinating the new committee members while trying to fulfill their own responsibilities. Committee members should be carefully recruited and should be able to devote the time necessary to participate in meetings and show a willingness to learn. The chair of the green committee should always originate from the committee so that he or she has experience with how the operation works and what is expected.

Those who are serious about their role on the committee have a responsibility to learn about the operation, its long-range goals and objectives, and the people who are responsible for

making it happen. Readily accessible information is available to help new committee members gain a better understanding of their role and the requirements for maintaining a high-quality golf course. The USGA website is a great place to start, with guides and other resources that provide basic information on agronomy, maintenance procedures, golf course equipment, construction, and budgeting.

Develop an orientation packet for new green committee members if one is not in place. The packet should provide copies of the maintenance standards, maintenance objectives, long-range plans, budget information, glossary of terms, staff biographies, and other resources that prepare the new members for their work on the committee. A Turf Advisory Service field visit offers an excellent learning opportunity for new committee members. A visit with a Green Section agronomist can assist the committee in identifying obtainable maintenance goals and the programs that are necessary to reach those goals.

BUDGET IMPACTS

Many respondents expressed frustration over the seeming disconnect between course conditioning and the money required to provide those conditions. Perhaps this is due to the limited exposure that most new committee members have with the maintenance operation. The green committee plays a large role in allocating funds for maintaining the golf course. Committee members need to be aware of the costs of conditioning and be able to help prioritize and set realistic expectations. Maintenance standards can be very helpful in this regard, especially for new committee members. Superintendents rely on committee members who are aware of the budget and its limitations to educate other members and refrain from unrealistic comparisons with other golf courses. Maintenance programs can be altered or refocused to achieve different goals and objectives, but to do so in the middle of the season is difficult on the staff and usually means that time will be taken away from doing something else.

COMMUNICATION AND TRUST

The importance superintendents placed on the committee's role in communication was no surprise. Strong two-way communication that fosters confidence and trust between the superintendent and committee is essential. Electronic communication is good, but it does not replace face-to-face meetings and personal interaction on the golf course. It is difficult to build a trusting relationship with an absentee green chair. Working with co-chairs can be equally difficult. Superintendents also commented on the importance of trust in the line of communication. What is said in the office stays in the office. However, all communication should be open and above board. Secrets and secret agendas break down trust and ultimately lead to failure on the golf course.

Superintendents rely on the committee to be their portal to the membership and board of directors. They are counted on to explain why certain maintenance procedures are being done or the reasoning behind a particular practice or program. The ideal committee members are well-informed, resolute but tactful in supporting the operations, convincing and always passionate about the golf course. They should be ambassadors of goodwill for the superintendent and maintenance department.

THE WEATHER

Those of us who work in the field with living systems take this for granted, and it is understandable that members overlook weather's impacts, but it does affect superintendents' ability to maintain high-quality turf and playing conditions. Weather effects are both direct and indirect on the turf and the maintenance operations. There are also seasonal weather changes to contend with. A good green committee will adhere to and support its superintendent's judgment when it comes to decisions on course closure or cart use, or when maintenance practices have to be adjusted due to inclement weather. A healthy realization that the golf course is a living system, where the turf and playing surfaces are

subject to the whims of nature, is an invaluable trait for the committee member. Variability in the playing field is one of golf's charms.

PLAYING SKILLS DO NOT RELATE

Being an accomplished player alone has nothing to do with how to establish good playing conditions or mastering golf course architecture. Understanding what good playing conditions are can be advantageous, but it is also essential to be realistic with regard to course conditioning. Course conditions change day to day and week to week despite the maintenance goals and objectives. The green committee is supposed to represent the entire membership, and decisions should always be made in the best interest of the golf course. One superintendent summed it up well with his response: "A good green committee member should be able to look past strengths and weaknesses of one's own game." Leave the maintenance details and golf course architecture to the professionals and provide them the support and tools to do their job.

AVOID COMPARISONS

It is easy to compare conditions and maintenance practices with neighboring golf courses. But an informed committee will discount those comparisons, realizing that golf courses vary too widely to make most comparisons meaningful. The committee should remain patient and focused on the programs that have been developed to produce the playing standards for its golf course. The programs do need to be reevaluated from time to time, and a good set of maintenance standards can be useful in that regard and help stem the unfair comparisons.

RESPECT

Being a golf course superintendent has always been challenging. Golf course superintendents are expected to satisfy a demanding group of golfers while trying to deal with the challenges of the weather. They maintain a valuable piece of property and oversee a significant budget. Demands are placed on their time, both on and off

the golf course. They and their core staff usually are a highly dedicated group who deserve appreciation and respect for the job they do. And, as badly or disappointed you may feel when things go wrong, the superintendent and his staff often feel much worse. Simple things like learning the names and backgrounds of key staff members, being polite, and recognizing the staff for what they do will go a long way to building a trustful relationship. The committee should make it known that the superintendent is a professional, and his decisions should be fully supported by the committee. Similarly, good green chairmen do not micromanage. They understand that their role is an advisory one, and they let their superintendents do the managing. A good committee should

also keep in mind that their superintendent does not work traditional hours. Scheduling evening or weekend meetings, though convenient for committee members, can be a real burden to the superintendent.

NOTHING GOOD IS EVER EASY

Being on the green committee is a challenging and often thankless job. However, the experience can be rewarding, knowing that you are doing your role to help manage the operation's most important asset — the golf course. Good committee members will understand the importance of their role and invest the time to familiarize themselves with the operation and forge a strong working relationship with the superintendent. No, it is not easy being

a good green committee member, but few things that are good are easy.

USEFUL LINKS

[The Ten Most Common Green Committee Mistakes, Oatis Green Section Record September/October 2003.](#)

[The Green Committee Chairman: Are You Up To the Challenge? Moore, GSR S/O 94.](#)

[The Guide for Green Committee Members.](#)

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The green committee and superintendent have to work together to formulate realistic long range maintenance objectives, which may include some unpopular but much needed programs such as tree removal work. The committee then works to gain resources and support to implement those programs and projects.