

PRO2PRO BEST PRACTICES "GROUNDS MAINTENANCE"

BY: ROBERT M. BALDWIN



PGA Professionals responsible for course maintenance certainly have their hands full. Those of you already involved in this area of expertise at your facilities know all too well that the demands, expectations, wishes, etc. of those to whom you answer, whether committee chairman, board member, regular member, or even the daily fee player are greater today than ever before. What's more, due to the inordinate amount of information available to everyone via technological and social media advances, amped up scrutiny from all directions is simply a reality and will inevitably come your way.

Having been responsible for Grounds Maintenance for 41 years at my respective jobs, I offer a smattering of thoughts and insights to anyone currently in, or possibly considering taking on that responsibility.

1. Undertaking this role in addition to maintaining your position as PGA Professional is not for the faint hearted. Whereby the "normal" PGA Professional might have a little down time between Thanksgiving and March 1, this role needs your attention virtually 365 days a year—perhaps even on Christmas Day. Mark it down--off season "down time" is minimized.
2. Knowing how to "play" the weather is a never ending must. You must always play the future as well as the present. Having a game plan or plans in place 10-14 days in advance is, by and large, an automatic.
3. Course Maintenance and surprises go hand in hand, and as a result, resiliency and the ability to modify at a moment's notice needs to become second nature. As the golf professional, it is one thing to delay the start of an event due to weather, but since the "buck stops with you" on the course end as well, you better have a plan in your back pocket that brings it all together in timely fashion.
4. Be ready and eager to accept challenges and surprises, because as fickle as Mother Nature and the environment are, they'll always be part of the deal. As you weave your way through the process, stay positive, sincere, outgoing, and yes, approachable when answering questions—they'll come at you from all angles and at times, when you least expect them.
5. Flat out know your stuff! The more you know about your equipment and how it is used, the vast spectrum of general and specific maintenance procedures that take place during the calendar year, and your course and its many seasonal nuances, the better the chance you'll have to keep it all going "your way." The better your handle on your programs and the techniques and products (chemicals) that make them work, the smoother it will all play out.
6. Remember this above all else—it all starts with the GREENS! They are priority # 1, hands down! The rest of the course can be a bit scraggly, but if you have good greens you're every bit of halfway home.

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Every shot the golfer plays until he reaches the green is a means to an end. When he reaches the green, he is virtually at the end. Regardless of what he endured to get there, he's finally there—and just wants the best chance he can get to finish—after all, don't we "putt for dough?" The quality putting surface will afford him that chance, and in the process, tend to temper whatever frustration might have built up from tee to green, (especially if he knocks in his putt)! Coddle the heck out of the greens! In times of strife they can be your savior. Then follow with the tees, fairways, and roughs.

7. Lean on your sales representatives—big time! While their job is to sell you products, the good ones are in it for the long haul and can really have your back. You'll find out who you can trust in short order. They'll help set up your programs, give you the "skinny" on whether that new, can't miss product is for real, help you get the best bang for the buck, help identify that mystery disease, etc. They've seen a lot, know a lot and can help a lot.

8. Know your watering system inside out—it's the lifeblood of the entire facility. With miles of underground pipe that is completely pressurized for over seven months at 80-140 psi, your system is only as strong as the weakest link. Leaks and power outages are inevitable—the better you know your system the easier it will be to fix. And given its importance, having a well detailed, documented back up of the staff's collective knowledge of the system is imperative.

9. The old adage "timing is everything" can't be overstated. Nor can diligence or remaining vigilant. Want to have to face and deal with the embarrassment of losing significant amounts of turf in a flash? Just drop your guard for one July afternoon. Want to lose a green overnight? Miss a pythium (disease) diagnosis one day, leave it untreated and see what's left the next morning. Want to lose part of a green or fringe? Skip the midafternoon syringe cooling during the heat and stress of summer and see what's left the next morning.

10. Know your people (staff) inside out. They're the conduit to making it all work and everybody looking good. They all need to be on your wave length, and vice versa. The more solid the staples—rapport, working together as a team, sharing the credit, etc.—the better the chance to make it all work.

11. You may or may not actually be part of the maintenance work force, but from personal experience, the more you work as part of the staff the better your handle on the whole operation will be. Your "hands on" experience will resonate more than you know from both your point of view and your staff's, and make the team a tighter knit unit.

12. The mechanic and the spray technician are the two "must haves" on your staff. Without them on board full time, you'll have virtually no

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shot to keep it maintained day to day at the level you want. The world of turf management is simply too volatile. The greens mower can't wait a full day to be fixed. It can wait an hour, however, and be camouflaged to your patrons as a mere delay. The blight (disease) you just noticed cannot wait until tomorrow for treatment. There may be no green left tomorrow! It needs to be checked right away!

Build the rest of your staff around those two musts, and ideally, do so with personnel who know and have played the game. As golfers they have already developed an insight and understanding as to why things are being groomed and maintained the way they are.

13. Based on the acreage alone, Grounds Maintenance responsibilities should be a little easier to handle at a smaller facility (say, a nine hole versus 18, or executive length or par three versus highly played, full length 18). Either way, however, it's still a hell of a gulp to swallow! In effect, it's two jobs in one regardless of the number of acres in play that will spread you thin and test you to the hilt, especially at crunch time. Assume control of Grounds Maintenance and expect to take ownership of it even more than you do your golf shop. Why? Because when you do you virtually gain total control over the "Golden Egg" in the whole deal—the golf course itself. Suddenly, given the parameters in which you have to work, it will be yours, and in effect, yours alone to make as good as you can. It only follows that the better you can make it, the better the play will be, as well as the pro shop sales, grill sales, guest fees, cart fees, greens fees, lesson revenue, etc. Isn't an opportunity like that what we're all striving to have in this business?

Taking over the Grounds Maintenance is doable—very doable. Yet on a cautionary note, don't even think about it unless you're going all in. And I mean "ALL IN!" By accepting the risk and doing the job, your reward will be the well-earned opportunity to take it as far as YOU choose. Depending on the situation (at your facility), it just might be that the sky's the limit from there.

Respectfully submitted,

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