

Say thanks to your greenkeeper!

Understanding the problems faced by your club's greenkeeper can go a long way to achieving better results on the course ... to everyone's advantage.

by DALE WESSELMAN

As you stand on the first tee at your local golf club gazing out over the nicely contoured fairways and the neatly groomed greens and bunkers, have you ever stopped to consider what it takes to obtain such manicured conditions?

Few golfers think of what is actually involved in maintaining their golf course to the highest standards possible. Today, satellite television allows viewers around the globe to watch the best golfers in the world play on immaculately manicured golf courses.

As a result, club golfers are now coming to expect, and even demand, these championship-calibre conditions at their clubs on a daily basis.

Little do these golfers know there are many factors that must be considered before these excellent conditions can be realised at their home courses.

Some of the factors include employing a greenkeeper knowledgeable in turfgrass management; having adequate finances; owning the specialised equipment; and having access to the necessary fertilisers and pesticides. If your club is lacking in one of these areas, it is probably next to impossible to attain the ideal conditions you would like to have.

First, the individual with the unenviable task of overseeing the golf course operations is the head greenkeeper, or golf course manager. In the United States, and many other countries, they are referred to as golf course superintendents.

The greenkeeper represents a major capital investment for the golf club or golf course at which they are employed. A knowledgeable and experienced greenkeeper can be a valuable asset to clubs that have a limited budget for

course maintenance.

While growing grass is the most important priority of the greenkeeper, it is often the easiest part of the job. Most people do not realise the many and diverse roles and responsibilities that come with the position.

For example, besides knowing how to properly care for turfgrass, a qualified golf course manager is also a horticulturist (maintaining flower beds), a plumber (repairing irrigation systems), a mechanic (keeping the machinery in working order), an engineer (heading up construction projects), a personnel manager (managing the crew), an accountant (responsible for the budget), and a Rules of Golf official (marking the golf course).

Since this is only a partial list of the responsibilities of a greenkeeper, clearly this is a position that is crucial to the upkeep of a golf course.

An ample budget allows clubs to hire a well-qualified greenkeeper who, in turn, can save the club money by making more informed decisions. A good greenkeeper can

allocate the available funds to the areas he feels need the most attention.

Whether the funds are used for the purchase of a new mower, the repair of a present machine, or for pesticides and fertilisers, the judgement of the greenkeeper on budgetary items should be respected.

Second, a club needs adequate financial resources to maintain the golf course at the degree of conditioning that has been decided by the Management Board, Greens Committee, or General Manager. In addition, the golfing members should be informed about the conditioning of the golf course given the amount of money that is available. Informed golfers are then less likely to expect to see the

course manicured like Leopard Rock or Royal Harare or Chapman, when the club only has a tenth of the budget of these bigger clubs.

The clubs with larger budgets naturally have the luxury of having access to the most modern equipment. Furthermore, these clubs are better able to hire a mechanic who can keep specialised machines running and cutting smoothly.

Nevertheless, having the biggest and best equipment does not necessarily mean the best golf course. During my two tours of Zimbabwe I came across several lovely small golf courses that were very well-manicured. I was then amazed when I peeked into the machine shop and saw only two or three mowers available to mow the entire course.

What did not surprise me, however, was meeting the greenkeepers at these clubs. These were most often older gentlemen with years of experience dealing with minuscule maintenance budgets and a greenkeeping crew of two or three.

This example again demonstrates the importance of a knowledgeable golf course manager. No matter how much money the greenkeepers have to spend, they know what are the priorities, and the members should understand and appreciate what they are doing with the available resources.

If a greenkeeper is going to consistently maintain a golf course at acceptable levels it is essential that the machines at his disposal should be dependable. If not, the greenkeeper should not be held responsible for poor conditions.

At a bare minimum, a working greens mower, a tee mower and a fairways mower should be available for the greenkeeping staff to properly do their job.

Other areas that need to be considered include the availability of an adequate water supply at your club. For instance, there should be water available at the time it is needed. Moreover, the irrigation system should be reliable.

There should also be consideration of the types of grass growing on the greens, tees, and fairways. I have seen world-class kikuyu tees and fairways but I have never seen a world-class kikuyu putting green. This does not mean that kikuyu cannot be used on the greens. Many times the kikuyu turf is the difference between having grass and no grass on the greens. For very low-budget golf courses, it serves a very useful purpose.

I also believe an experienced greenkeeper with the necessary equipment can have acceptable putting surfaces of kikuyu.

Just as bent grass and bermuda grass surfaces are only as good as the people taking care of them, a greenkeeper's inexperience with bent grass greens can result in terrible putting surfaces. Putting-green maintenance has become an art and a science, so if you want good greens do not hire an amateur.

Finally, the membership at your golf club should support those who are in charge of the golf course. This means the Greens Committee and Management Board should comprise individuals who can make wise decisions and be willing to defend their positions.

There is nothing worse than blaming the greenkeeper for something that went wrong, when he is simply following the orders of the Greens Committee Chairman or the Club President. Think about all this before next complaining about the conditions at your local golf club.

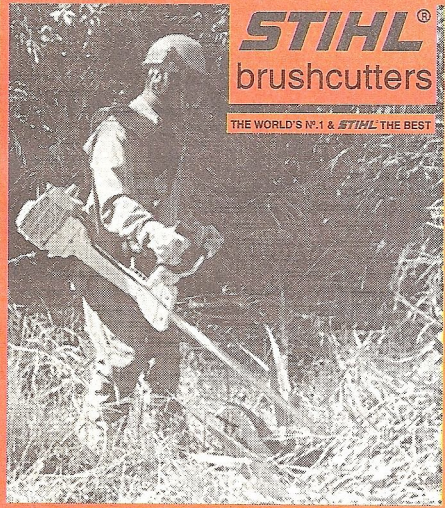
A golf course is dynamic because it is living and forever changing. As a result, informed decisions about the conditions of a golf course sometimes need to be made on an hourly basis.

Furthermore, it is impossible to compare golf courses, even if they are across the street from one another. There are too many variables that determine the maintenance practices used at different clubs. One must realise that not every course can be an Augusta National, a St Andrews, or a Sun City.

So stop the next time you pass your greenkeeper on the golf course and let him know you appreciate his efforts in maintaining your playground.

He is doing the best he can with what he has been given to work with!

I urge all golfers and companies nationwide to help support the newly formed Zimbabwe Greenkeepers' Association. Working together with fellow greenkeepers is one of the best ways of progressing in the field of turf management. Those interested should contact the secretary of the association at PO Box 456, Masvingo.



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