

Turf

Why Superintendents Should Play Golf "Should the chef taste the soup?"

by Gordon Witteveen

Recently I watched three amateurs who had paid thousands of dollars to play with Tom Watson, tee off on the first hole of a pro-am tournament in Toronto. A gallery of more than a thousand avid golfers surrounded the tee at the Board of Trade course.

Watson's experienced drive was less than perfect and ended up on an adjacent fairway. The next two players hit respectable shots. But the last amateur, understandably nervous in such exalted company and under the eyes of the expectant gallery, heeled not one but two drives out of bounds. Totally humiliated he walked off the tee. On the very next hole, however, the very same golfer drove his tee shot straight down the middle within reach of the green.

Golf is that way: it can be most awful when we want it so badly to be good. And when we least expect it, good shots return inexplicably and make rank amateurs look like pros. Those fleeting moments of perfection fuel our fixation with the game. To have loved and lost is better than not to have loved at all. To golf and fail is still much better than not to golf at all. Pity the poor souls who lack the strength of character to overcome their failures at golf and quit the game in disgust.

Pity also the poor misguided souls who make lame excuses for not playing the game while spending a lifetime tending the playing fields of golf. For them it's just a job but a job without passion. Once a superintendent has experienced the ecstasy and despair of golf, a character transformation takes place. Normally docile and dedicated superintendents turn into fanatics and perfectionists when they acquire not just a love but a lust for golf. Many will spend all their waking hours trying to create another Augusta. They work 100-hour weeks and sleep at night with an ear to an open window, trying to catch the first sound of a fresh breeze that will spell a change in the weather.

We are all familiar with the three priorities of life: HEALTH, FAMILY & WORK and in that order. But many superintendents I have known turn that around for the duration of the golfing season. The work they love comes first, their families are a distant second and health regains its importance only with the start of the hockey season.

The Golfing Super

Catch a superintendent with a putter or a 7-iron strutting over his course during the spring and you have got a dedicated professional determined to bring the

course back to life. A few months later, in the midst of summer that same individual now holding one of these new fangled tight lie clubs, will bend down and take a tuft of grass to examine it for fungus disease. Again in the fall, you will see him kick leaves, not to look for balls, but to examine the grass and worry about how it will survive the coming winter. Superintendents who play the game and love it are the most dedicated group of individuals that I know of. Those who only work on golf courses lack an important ingredient in their psychological make up. Secretly we pity them. Openly we accept their weak excuses that they are too tired after a long days' hard work or that they need to spend time with their loved ones.

If not for the love of golf, why should superintendents play the game? One might well ask: Should a chef taste the soup? The answer to both questions is similar since it is almost impossible to create perfection without sampling the soup or the golf course. How else to experience devilish pin placements, slanted tees and grainy greens but by participating in the game. Somewhere in the development of superintendents they must be taught to have sympathy for the trials and tribulations of the poor golfers. I remember once playing in a tournament of superintendents that had been set up so difficult by our misguided colleague that even our best golfers had trouble shooting a respectable score. Afterwards, it was suggested that the host superintendent who had set the pins and the markers be condemned to play his own course and that his score be posted not only at his club but in our trade magazine. Word must have gotten to the culprit and he has been "golfer- friendly" ever since.

Most supers will agree that playing golf is essential to their job, even 18 handicappers. If one does not play golf, life eventually becomes a rut, a routine of all work and no pleasure. We have seen it happen to pro's in the proshop and managers in the club house. They work hard and long hours and make excuses of not having the time to play. Eventually their game suffers so badly, that they no longer want to play. A few years later they are replaced with golfers. Playing golf allows superintendents to relate to the players: The sand is too hard or too soft. Teeing areas are not level, cups have been cut improperly. It's the little things that will drive you nuts and spoil your game, if you let them. It is work to play your own course, but work well done. You also see a lot more if you go out there, especially if you walk.

Some find it difficult to concentrate on golf at their own course. They see too many things that need doing and once the concentration goes, the game goes and no one likes to play golf poorly. Obviously moderation is required. You remember the old story that if a man is successful at business he's ignoring his golf game; but if he's a good golfer he is ignoring his job. "If you break 100 watch your golf. If you break 80 watch your business."

Super Golfer, Good Superintendent?

Does being a low handicap golfer make you a better superintendent? Not necessarily. But low handicap golfers seem to enjoy a degree of prestige that is totally unjustified. Superintendents with a single digit handicap easily fall into trap of working on their game more than on their job. Playing golf two or three times week and practicing on the range must be at the expense of one's primary responsibilities. And that is taking care of the course first and playing on it later. Being too good a golfer can be harmful to ones career. We have all heard of Supers who have lost their positions because they played too much, won too many tournaments, were away too much. Their love affair with golf became an obsession at the expense of their jobs. It happens to salesmen, to lawyers, to dentists and superintendents are not immune.

If you aspire to be a good superintendent the odds will be in your favour if you play the game well according to Bruce Williams, superintendent at the Los Angeles Country Club who himself confesses to a 21 index. The perfect scenario according to Bruce is "to be a good Superintendent who enjoys the game and plays it well." Some supers just love golf and doing maintenance is the price they pay to be around golf all day.

Paul Latchaw who looks after the Congressional Country Club near Washington D.C. and has also helped out the Riviera Country Club in Los Angeles at the same time. For a while he flew from coast to coast on a regular basis and maintained two outstanding golf courses while hosting major tournaments. His income from both sources was rumoured to be in excess of \$400,000, yet Paul Latchaw does not play golf! Nor does Pete Dye draw the holes he designs and Irving Berlin the great composer could not read music. Yet all three men reached the pinnacle of their respective professions.

A superintendent from Tenerife, Spain who works at a resort course bluntly states: "The tourists could not give a rosy red rodent's posterior how much I play". A point well taken because tourists come and go and their rate of return is far more dependent on the condition of the golf course then the super's ability to play golf.

As we all know golf can have a debilitating effect on the persona of some golfers. Some absolutely lose all common sense when adversity strikes on the course during their game. They throw clubs over missed shots, take divots from greens over missed puts and I have even heard of golfers tearing phones of the wall at the halfway house when they could not reach the manager. Unfortunately, a lifetime of greenkeeping can have the same debilitating effect. Longtime greenkeepers, through years of hard work, often become morose, cynical and even obstreperous. A longtime superintendent from Mississippi laments: "I would rather have a good personality than a good golf game. Too bad I have neither".

Many supers play with as many different members as possible. They view these occasions as opportunities to educate the golfers about this business of being

the superintendent. Golf pros have an obligation to play with different golfers to stimulate sales and for the sake of member happiness. The obligations of Superintendents are not nearly as far reaching when it comes to golf and I have personally selected my playing companions very carefully and I have my favourites. They stick with me and I with them until someone cheats or dies. Golf after all is a game of a lifetime.

My favourite golfing companions by far and away are other superintendents. We have a common bond and a degree of mutual understanding that makes it special to play in the company of other supers. When all is said and done after a lifetime of greenkeeping we leave a much improved piece of land covered with green grass, dotted with sand and water and interspersed with trees. It is an enviable legacy and to have played golf there is icing on the cake. Who was it that said: "You could not have your cake and eat it?" Superintendents do it all the time!