

Lesley McMahon

Lesley is the general manager of Balmoral Golf Course in Red Deer, Alberta, which has been owned and operated by her family for three generations. She is the NGCOA Canada - Alberta chapter president and National Board member. Contact Lesley at (403) 343-3170 or mcmahon@telusplanet.net.



Marshals are likely the most neglected employees at your operation. We often fail to recognize that they likely have the most contact with our customers when they are at our facilities. Unfortunately, this contact is often negative in matters of speed of play or enforcement of the rules of the course. With that thought in mind, are we giving this position the respect and attention it deserves? Are we properly supporting the people we ask to take on this responsibility with adequate training and policies at our courses?

UNDERSTAND THEIR ROLE

The first step is to break down what marshals do at our courses and analyse if we are supporting them in these activities. You may envision them as a friendly player ambassador, spreading joy and

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The Marshal's True Role

happiness over your patrons and property. If this is realistic at your operation, good for you, I'm jealous! I'm willing to bet your marshal is required to do much more than this.

If you asked players what the marshal's purpose is, most would say they manage the speed of play. As operators, we know that they are our eyes and ears on the course and not only manage the flow of the course, but to enforce liquor laws, make sure players are safe, and not damaging your property. When you combine humans, competition, motorized vehicles, and alcohol, you could have a recipe for trouble. We expect our marshals to deal with most of it.

I am the first to admit to my own neglect of this position in the past, but I am determined to improve this part of my operation for everyone's benefit. At my course, marshalling is not for the faint of heart. It takes confidence, wit, and an ability to empathize with your patrons and operators' sides of any discussion. It takes a certain personality and adept skills in conflict resolution. Many golfers have developed an aversion to marshals because they think that all they

are there for is to tell them to hurry up and smarten up. We need to find a way to overcome this negative perception, and find a balance somewhere between Walmart greeter and night club bouncer.

How are we going to maximize this position and create a better situation? I believe that general managers (or whoever is supervising the marshals), should spend a few shifts completing this job, and every position on the course for that matter. This is the idea behind the TV show Undercover Boss, but why go undercover? You will gain so much insight into what you are asking that person to do that you can't help but improve that job, and your entire business.

Once you have a better idea of what they do, you need to make sure that you are supporting them in the job. At our course, all of the marshals are paid wages, like every other employee. I expect a lot from the marshals and give them so much responsibility, I can't imagine asking them to do all that just in exchange for playing privileges. The rest of the support comes in the form of training and policies.



“Put great thought into your policies. Train your employees not only as to what the policy is but empower them by explaining the reason behind the policy.”

FOUR RESPONSIBILITIES

Our marshals have four major responsibilities. The first is pace of play. One of the phrases I use in training marshals is that we have ‘a responsibility for every player’s enjoyment during their round.’ They are expected to treat every player with respect and do what they can to make them comfortable. This is a much different concept than keeping everyone to a four hour round.

We talk at length at conferences about attracting new players to the game, especially women, but when we finally get them to try the game we chase them around the course telling them to speed up. I really do not care if it takes a group six hours to complete eighteen holes, as long as they are not holding any other groups up. It is our policy to never ask anyone to skip a hole (unless it is because of darkness). I think that is a humiliating request. Can you imagine being asked to stay off a ski hill because you don’t ski fast enough? This requires diplomacy on the part of the marshal to make

everyone comfortable, asking groups to let faster players through, and managing the flow of the players.

The second responsibility is to make sure people don’t destroy your property. Sometimes it’s just a matter of ‘showing the colours’. When the players see the marshal driving around that is often enough incentive to keep things under control, but some customers need extra attention. I operate in central Alberta and when the oil fields are booming, we have an increase of a rougher clientele. It is just a reality of the location. All players who rent a power cart must provide a credit card imprint, have a valid driver’s licence, be the age of majority, and sign a short contract.

This policy makes the cart operator feel responsible for the care of the cart. We do not profile our customers by asking only the young or ‘suspect’ customers for these requirements. Inconsistency is asking for trouble. By requiring all of this at the pro shop, the tone is already set that we expect our players to respect our property. This may not be an appropriate solution at all operations but it has helped my marshals by decreasing issues on the course. You have to do what is the right fit at your operation.

“Can you imagine being asked to stay off a ski hill because you don’t ski fast enough?”

The next responsibility is to enforce the liquor laws. I have heard a couple operators say that as long as customers buy some from the course, or as long as they don’t get out of hand, it’s okay if they have some of their own alcohol. I believe in following the laws as written. There is a structured set of rules around liquor service in each province and these laws were not developed to be approached theoretically. If all golf courses followed the liquor laws consistently, marshals and operators would encounter less problems because customers would know the rules, have the same consequences at all golf courses they go to, and hopefully stop trying to break the liquor laws.

The fourth and most important responsibility that the marshals have is to be the face of your golf

course. We must maximize this opportunity to interact with the players on the course. One way that we have found to increase the positive interactions between the players and the marshals is something we call a ‘nice one’ card. When the marshals are driving around and they see a player sink a long putt or a new golfer raking a bunker, or any positive moment, they can give the player a little card that is good for a beverage that day. This increases the positive contact they have with the players and has worked well at our course.

SUPPORT YOUR MARSHALS

So now that we have identified what we want marshals to do, how are we supporting them through our training and policies? I was interviewing a young lady for a pro shop position and she began telling me why she left her last job at a big department store. She worked at the returns counter and the corporate policy was that undergarments could not be returned for any reason. A customer was denied a request to return such items and made a scene and her manager was called into the conversation. He ‘defused’ the situation by giving the customer her money back. The young lady quit on the spot. Why have policies if you are not willing to enforce them consistently?

If my employees follow what I have asked them to do regarding a policy, I will defend them to the end of the earth. Put great thought into your policies. Train your employees not only as to what the policy is but empower them by explaining the reason behind the policy. If employees understand why they are doing something and know that they will have your support if they follow those policies, they will have the confidence to enforce them.

The role that marshals play at different courses varies almost as much as the courses themselves and, depending on the time of day and the makeup of your players at any given time course needs are continually evolving. As operators, we have to be very conscious of what our marshals are doing out on our courses, and what foundation we have given them to succeed in that position.

Give marshals the training, and pay that they deserve and support them with clear, consistent policies. Follow the liquor laws like you are supposed to so that there is consistency between all the courses in your province to make the marshal’s job easier. If everyone knows the rules of the game, everyone can play, and will have a better time doing it.

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