

Course superintendent is no longer a thankless job

Survey by Golf Digest shows that 48 per cent of 500 subscribers consider position to be the most important at club

BY RANDY PHILLIPS, THE GAZETTE MAY 13, 2010

"In this day and age, a golf-course superintendent must be an educator, scientist, agronomist, economist and a good people manager. If you put all this together with a love for a piece of earth, then you've got a good golf- course superintendent."

- Tom Watson

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There was a time when the most overlooked individual at a golf club was the course superintendent.

He would be up before dawn virtually seven days a week to mobilize and assign a crew to myriad tasks before the first of the day's golfers arrived. After a round, some golfers would be known to complain that the condition of the course wasn't up to par - especially after a bad round. And it made no difference if the fickle hand of Mother Nature had been responsible for spoiling things more than anything else.

But times have changed. A course superintendent's life, in most instances, is no longer a thankless existence because of the acknowledgement of their importance to the care and well being of Tom Watson's "piece of earth."

A survey by Golf Digest in 1997 showed 48 per cent of 500 subscribers to the magazine listed the course superintendent as the most important person at a golf facility. Twenty-five per cent said it was the club's head professional, while 14 per cent gave the nod to the club's manager and 11 per cent to the person in the beverage cart or at the canteen after the ninth hole.

"Thankless job? It's not the case anymore," said Doug Meyer, course superintendent at Beaconsfield Golf Club in Pointe Claire. "At Beaconsfield, I've never been more respected. The membership basically handed the golf course over to me to look after it and provide the best conditions possible. If the good conditions are there, the respect is there. If things are falling apart, well ... that can be another issue."

Meyer has spent nearly 40 years as a course superintendent and has been at the 106-year-old, 18-hole private club since 2001. He's one of a few hundred such trained professionals at clubs across the province and thousands throughout the country whose day-to-day duties combine science and art.

In addition to being a turf manager, turf pathologist and agronomist, a superintendent also might be called upon as a personnel manager, business manager, strategic planner, accounting officer, promotional officer, as well as "politician and communicator," according to the Australian Golf Course Superintendents' Association in its outline of what might be expected of the position today.

"Communication is probably one of the biggest downfalls of a superintendent," Meyer said. "The inability to communicate and to say what's going on with the course."

"I don't spend as much time on paperwork as I did before," he added. "I spend more time with members. Beaconsfield is much more demanding in that factor, so that's what I do ... I listen to what they want.

"But you also have to be able to explain what's going on on the course and why certain things are done. Most golfers don't know what it is exactly we do or have to deal with, but the more you can explain to them the better. If you run away from them, you've got problems with them and, eventually, the club's board of directors."

A superintendent's primary responsibility is making sure all areas of the course are maintained according to standards set by management of the club.

The condition of the course is the most important aspect, because a club's greatest expense is course maintenance.

Golfers, in particular those at private clubs with high membership fees, can be very demanding, especially when they see courses like Augusta National during television coverage of the Masters each spring. They expect almost the same thing at their clubs.

An 18-hole private club could have more than 20 people involved in day-to-day maintenance of the course. A public course might be able to get by with a dozen, if not slightly fewer.

For the 58-year-old Meyer and his crew, a typical day at Beaconsfield begins at 6 a.m. and can continue until 3 p.m. Staff size usually is reduced during the course of the day as grass cutting, the biggest part of the daily operation, is completed.

"We cut our greens every day, fairways are done five to six times a week, and the tees four times," Meyer said. "Greens take three hours, the fairways four hours with three machines, and it's about four hours to do the tees."

A lot of attention is paid to bunkers, too ... and a lot more than in the past.

"The maintenance of bunkers is about 35 per cent of our labour costs," Meyer said. "If you get rain and they get washed out, you got to shovel them up. In the morning, you get animal tracks, and late in the afternoon, well, a lot of people just don't rake them.

"People want bunkers to be perfect. They want the perfect lie in the bunker."

A native of Lachute, Meyer studied turf management at the University of Guelph as well as the effects of herbicides and fungicides on turfgrass. He is a past president of the Quebec Golf Superintendents Association and Canadian Golf Superintendents Association. He remains a member of both groups, as well as the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America.

In 2004, on Beaconsfield's 100th anniversary, Meyer was named superintendent of the year in Canada. In 2008, he received the QGSA Distinguished Service Award, the association's highest honour.

Beaconsfield is one of about a dozen courses in Quebec that are part of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program, an education and certification program that helps courses protect the environment,

preserve natural heritage and enhance important natural areas and wildlife habitats found on courses. It's one more area of responsibility for a course superintendent.

"It's an extremely important aspect of what we do at Beaconsfield," Meyer said. "My wife (Lynn) basically oversees it, puts in about four hours a day in the Audubon program alone. The paperwork is incredible. Any pesticide that goes down on the course has to be recorded. Fertilizers, insecticides, everything has to be recorded. We've also got bird houses, nesting boxes and a recycling program that's all part of Audubon.

"A lot goes into maintaining a course," Meyer added. "Things are a lot better than they once were because of it and because we have the technology and the knowledge."

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