

Murray Dist

How Greenkeepers Keep Up Golf Courses

BY BRADLEY S. KLEIN

For most golfers, the work of a course superintendent remains wrapped in mystery—and of little interest. If they think about golf superintendents at all, they imagine them to be like the demented greenkeeper, Carl Spackler, played by Bill Murray in the popular 1980 comedy “Caddyshack.”

But that’s a mistake. Knowing how superintendents operate—the work they do, the challenges they face—offers insight into a world that every golfer should be aware of. At the least, you can say this: Without good superintendents, golf courses wouldn’t be playable. They wouldn’t even be golf courses.

So to help unravel the mystery, here are five things that shed light on exactly what superintendents do.

1. Where are they, anyway?

There are reasons that superintendents remain elusive to the everyday golfer: They are generally out of sight. Unlike the golf pro, whose shop is close to the first tee, the greenskeeper’s yard is usually at the far end of the golf course.

In fact, if you want to reach the superintendent, more likely than not you won’t even find the position in the golf course’s phone tree.

It doesn’t help their professional profile that most superintendents, by nature, are more comfortable on their hands and knees staring at turf grass or analyzing soil pathology than chatting with a golfer about green speeds or fairway firmness. They tend to avoid lunch in the clubhouse or playing golf with members out of concern they’ll be open to criticism for shirking their work.

2. Their focus is underground

During a round, golfers interact with surface features: tees, fairways, roughs, bunkers and greens. That is how they assess the course, and by extension, the superintendent.

But what players don’t understand is that surface conditions depend largely on the performance and efficiency of the 90% of infrastructure that is below ground and therefore invisible. This includes the miles of irrigation pipe, thousands of spray nozzles that deliver water to the course, and electrical wiring that allows all those parts to communicate with one another. Superintendents have to make sure it’s all working—no leaky heads, faulty pipe connections or overmatched pump systems.

Then there’s the subsurface drainage network of outlet pipes undergirding fairways, bunkers and greens, some of which will clog up with debris over the years. If those subterranean networks aren’t working properly, neither is the course.

3. Uncertainty is the only certainty

John Cunningham, a longtime superintendent and now the general manager of Grandfather Golf & Country Club in Linville, N.C., says that for all the professional training in turf-grass science that greenkeepers have, “most of the work takes place under conditions of extreme variance and unpredictability.”

He is referring to everything from weather that changes daily to sudden attacks from diseases and insects to the rising costs of products and equipment. Another vital, uncontrollable factor is the labor market—affected by the availability of immigrant laborers, the declining enrollments in turf-grass schools, and the resulting shortage of applicants for jobs as assistants, interns and technicians.

4. TV expectations

What's called "the Augusta National syndrome" refers to unrealistic expectations about conditions at one's home course, based on comparison with what a golfer sees each April on the televised Masters golf championship.

Of course, few if any courses come close to the maintenance budget of Augusta National Golf Club—or have all those volunteers on staff for the week or the extra equipment donated by manufacturers. Golfers also don't understand what's involved in getting a course to championship standards. For one thing, it's only achievable a few weeks a year, and even then only intermittently. Even turf grass needs a rest, especially amid heat, foot traffic and high humidity levels.

And yet the tolerances that many golfers have for "the right conditions" and "fast enough putting speeds" often don't allow for variance. Greens mowed down to 1/10th of an inch in height might seem perfect. At 1/12th of an inch they are likely to wilt and die under the merest stress. At 1/8th of an inch they will feel slow in surface speed and produce unhappy golfers. That leaves very little wiggle room in which greenkeepers can operate.

5. Robotics are coming

One trend golfers will certainly notice is the growing reliance upon unmanned mower units on golf courses. They save on the costliest aspect of current operations—labor.

They just need to be charged up and can operate anytime, day or night. With prices falling, the technology is being more widely adopted, and soon their presence will be commonplace on golf courses. All of which will make the superintendent's job a little easier and course conditions more consistent and less expensive.



WARNER BROTHERS/ EVERETT No, real life supervising a golf course isn't quite 'Caddyshack.'

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