

# Playing is part of the job

by Bradley S. Klein

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Golf courses would do well to encourage their superintendents to play golf occasionally, if not regularly. That's because course setup benefits when greenkeepers develop an eye for details—the kinds of things a non-player will miss. And superintendents who don't play are hurting themselves professionally, to the point where they are at a vocational disadvantage when it comes to doing the best possible job and advancing their own careers.

It's not a matter of playing well, it is a matter of experiencing the golf holes from the perspective of an everyday golfer.

Case in point: Last fall, I got an early peek at a recently grown-in new design in California that was three weeks shy of its gala grand opening. The course designer was my host for the round, and he had asked the superintendent to set the course up for the occasion. Evidently, the superintendent thought it would be good to try to impress this out-of-town visitor because he placed 16 of the 18 pins that day on the edge of doom—seven of them right up front, and nine of them on the very back edges of the greens. With the wind howling all day, the only impression the greenkeeper made was that he wasn't very knowledgeable about course setup.

Not only does it make for an unnecessarily difficult round, it also suggest that the superintendent bears close supervision when it comes to other details—like making sure that all four par 3s aren't set up to play in the same 175— to 185-yard range, or that the approach areas into low-lying greens are kept properly firm and not soaked to the point where they won't accommodate a run-up.

Again, it's not necessary for the superintendent to be a scratch golfer. All it takes is an occasional round. Obviously, it's not easy for a greenkeeper to relax and play a round at his or her home course in ease

and comfort. Maybe it's even better to think of the round as part of the job description and to expect that it won't be entirely enjoyable.

For all the walking and riding around on the utility vehicle that the average superintendent does, there's no replacement for playing an impossible recovery shot from a bunker face where the turf was so gnarly that the ball didn't release down into the sand. Or to hit one's ball just over the green and see it come to rest in the pile of clippings that the crew has been regularly tossing there.

Not that playing the occasional round will guarantee improved maintenance. But it does provide an opportunity for an enhanced perspective. Obviously, some superintendents are reluctant to be seen playing by the membership and other golfers. It looks like goofing off or freeloading. But in fact, it's something clubs ought to encourage by making it clear that the superintendent is welcome to tee it up with regulars—even (cherish the thought) on a Saturday morning.

When superintendents don't play on their home courses, it becomes all too easy to take an "ease of maintenance" approach that sacrifices nuance and give priority to simplicity.

That's what almost happened at one Midwest club with a modest practice range and target greens at 125, 175 and 225 yards out. When a few range rats suggested



*Jared Datema sharpens his skill and his eye at Cider Ridge*

another target green at 75 yards out for the wedge play, the superintendent, a nongolfer, initially resisted the request under the pretext that there was no irrigation head in proximity. Luckily, the golfers persisted, and it turned out that the cost of extending irrigation heads from the existing line was less than \$1,000. It's now the most heavily targeted green on the range, something that a golf-savvy superintendent would have anticipated.

Regardless of how dedicated a superintendent is to putting in hours and examining the course, a love of the game and a willingness to play, even if only occasionally, will sharpen one's skills and eyes.

A golfing superintendent not only looks at his own course with an eye toward playability, he's also more likely to travel to neighboring courses and to faraway destinations and thereby see how other courses compare. That's education that leads to improved maintenance.