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# Setting Playing Standards for Golf Courses

## INTRODUCTION

Significant advances in both technology and resources have in the last 30+ years resulted in golf courses making substantial 'leaps' in both playability and presentation. Along with these advances and which is typical of human nature, members expectations have also increased. This has now reached the point in some situations, whereby playing conditions that were considered 'tournament condition' a few years ago are now deemed to be 'normal day to day playing conditions'.

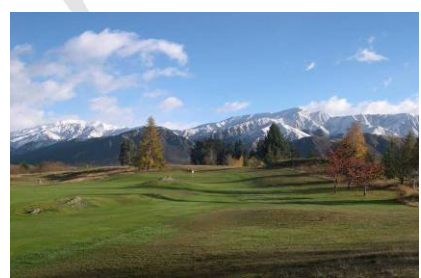
This gradual 'ratchetting up' of playing standards over time comes at a cost. Such improvements are desirable providing the improvement is both financially and environmentally affordable for the foreseeable future and can be funded from club revenue rather than being reliant on Charity funding.

When making improvements in playing quality on a golf course, it needs to be remembered that substantial inputs are typically required to achieve small gains in quality.

*For example: Increasing greens mowing frequency from 3 to 5 times /week to gain speed (generally 1 foot at best) costs:*

- *Increase in labour (approximately 6 hours/week or 312 hours/year).*
- *40% (approx) increase in fuel, repairs and maintenance for the greens mower.*
- *Mower will require replacing (approximately) every 3-4 years rather than ever 6-7 years.*

With the ever increasing pressure on club's finances it is timely for clubs to take more control of their playing standards and adopt a course presentation (maintenance) model that best fits *their* financial and resource base. In other words take a more planned or controlled approach towards course improvement and endeavour to avoid (as illustrated above) unexpected costs.



***All three of the golfing models above will allow the game to be played and enjoyed. However they each require very different financial and resource inputs.***

## CHARITY FUNDING

Club's should be looking to provide the best playing conditions in accordance with *their budget and resources* and not necessarily copying the club up the road. Furthermore a new or developing and worrying trend within the industry, which needs to be changed, is that the better course standards (demanded by golfers) are increasingly being based on Charity grants and not the clubs revenue stream. This may seem a great way to make a course improvement in the short term, but what happens when your funding is cut or worst still you miss out. In most cases in turf, once you adopt a more costly improvement strategy, such as sand topdressing there is no turning back – the improvement strategy must be resourced for the foreseeable future.

## COMPARING CLUBS

Although clubs in close proximity will inevitably compete for green fees and members, it isn't necessary that you raise your standards beyond your means to keep up with the club down the road.

Golf is unique and there are other contributing factors that can provide a point of difference, namely:

- i. Each golf course is unique given its topography, climate, soil type, course layout (links or parkland-type) as well as budget and resources (staff and equipment). With this range of variables it is very difficult to draw a comparison with another Club. Yet, too often this is the 'driving force' for change as opposed to what is the best direction for *your* club.
- ii. The game of golf is unique in the world of sport.

The playing surface is dimensionless. There are some guidelines (e.g. for length of holes) but there are no set dimensions for size (area) like there are for rugby, soccer league or cricket etc.

Additionally course conditioning/set up in golf is often commensurate with the skills of those who will play the course. Thus the playing conditions one often sees on television (professional tours and our NZ Open) are there to test the elite players in the sport. Such standards/conditions are totally unsuitable for the everyday Club golfer where there is often a wide range in handicaps. A sensible middle ground must be found.

Thus as golfers and management we should be celebrating/marketing the individual uniqueness and differences of each golf course.



*Celebrating the uniqueness of golf courses*

Instead of as in many cases striving for the unattainable, members should look at their *own course* and assess its strengths and weakness, their resource base and in the process set realistic playing standards that the club can sustain long term. In golf there is nothing wrong with being different!

## **COURSE STANDARDS**

Developing course standards allows Golf Clubs to:

- Preserve the club/courses uniqueness.
- Ensure that the club/course stay on its intended path, matching course playability with their resources (financial & staff). Staff and members are transient, but the course cannot be picked up and moved! Inappropriate changes undertaken now may not only have a significant financial cost, but inappropriate decisions take may take many years to reverse.
- Avoid wastage and additional unexpected costs associated with unplanned course improvements or changes that the club cannot effectively manage for the long term.
- Avoid clubs implementing playing standards beyond their means. This situation often happens when Charity funding is used for capital improvements (construction of a significant number of bunkers, installation of fairway watering system etc) but the on going, long term maintenance costs must be met from the existing budget.
- Reduce conflict within the club by keeping members informed as to what they will receive.

### ***Setting appropriate course standards***

The development of a Course Policy document is a mechanism that clearly identifies and documents the playing standards that are both appropriate for and will be provided by the club. Given the transient nature of committees and staff, the document provides focus, informs the members, provides for continuity and clarity that what is been done is approved by the membership.

### ***Changing Standards***

Inevitably human nature demands ongoing improvements. It is important that clubs don't stifle this but rather take more control than allowing improvements/ changes to occur in an adhoc manner. This should involve thoroughly investigating the potential benefits provided to members relative to the present situation and the financial (direct and indirect), agronomic and potential environmental costs of such change.

## **SUMMARY**

In summary, the standards adopted by your club are the major determinant of the cost to run your golf club. As we enter an era where both the financial ability and environmental acceptability of present practices are under pressure, it is important that greater control is taken by the club in determining the standards that they will provide members. Key considerations will include:

- Golf courses are meant to be different so it is important to preserve each courses uniqueness.
- Playing standards should fairly challenge members. Televised golf courses should not be equated with daily club playing conditions.
- Adopt a playing standard that the club can afford for the long term that matches their available resources (budget & staff).

- Ensure course operation and the standards adopted can be funded from the clubs revenue stream, rather than being reliant on Charity funding.
- Changing course standards should be a managed process. Thereby ensuring the club is fully aware of and can meet both the direct and indirect costs associated with the proposed. A Course Policy document is recommended for all golf clubs as a mechanism for managing standards and member expectations.

| NZSTI SPORTS TURF ADVISORS – CONTACT DETAILS   |  |  |   |
|--|--|--|---|
| Alex Glasgow<br>09 529 5064<br>027 496 2486<br><a href="mailto:alexg@nzsti.org.nz">alexg@nzsti.org.nz</a>                    | Everett Darlington<br>09 529 486<br>027 232 4545<br><a href="mailto:edarlington@nzsti.org.nz">edarlington@nzsti.org.nz</a> | David Ormsby<br>07 846 7698<br>027 442 8053<br><a href="mailto:davido@nzsti.org.nz">davido@nzsti.org.nz</a>      | Megan Cushnahan<br>06 355 7021<br>027 220 9957<br><a href="mailto:mcushnahan@nzsti.org.nz">mcushnahan@nzsti.org.nz</a>  |
| Andrew Mitchell<br>06 356 8090 ext 722<br>027 662 0148<br><a href="mailto:amitchell@nzsti.org.nz">amitchell@nzsti.org.nz</a> | Brendan Hannan<br>06 355 7024<br>027 442 8046<br><a href="mailto:bhannan@nzsti.org.nz">bhannan@nzsti.org.nz</a>            | Chris Gribben<br>06 355 7026<br>027 552 4488<br><a href="mailto:cgribben@nzsti.org.nz">cgribben@nzsti.org.nz</a> | Jaymie Batchelor<br>03 323 8010<br>027 446 2874<br><a href="mailto:jbatchelor@nzsti.org.nz">jbatchelor@nzsti.org.nz</a> |
| David Howard<br>03 477 7333<br>027 446 2875<br><a href="mailto:dhoward@nzsti.org.nz">dhoward@nzsti.org.nz</a>                | <b>www.nzsti.org.nz</b>  |  |   |

