

Eight signs of a dysfunctional golf club

It's not hard to tell when a golf course has it right or wrong. There are certain telltale signs at any club that suggest the management understands the basics of architecture and presentation and that members, or at least the golfers, share in that common pride.

At too many facilities, however, personalities, politics and tradition conspire to drag the place into oblivion. In an increasingly competitive golf market, with clubs scrambling to define their identity and to upgrade their heritage, it helps to have an insider's guide into the symptoms of golf pathology. Think of it as golf course therapy. Here are eight signs that all hell is about to break loose.

▶ **Foursomes with four cars:** This tells any observer all he needs to know about what the members think of each other, about themselves, and about their course. At one nominally exclusive Chicago club I have even seen fivesomes with five cars. The members are into themselves, not into friendship with fellow members. And they also couldn't care less about the ensuing car traffic damage to their course. It's the attitude of a renter, not of a loving proprietor.

▶ **Signage and accessories everywhere:** Ball washers, garbage pails, engraved hole maps that look like cemetery stones. Where does the intrusion on a golf course end? Maybe one set of such accessories per hole, but when you see each forward tee outfitted with its own ball washer, you know the course has a serious clutter problem.

▶ **Over-quantification:** The one thing worse than the decision years ago to plant conifers as 150-yard markers (on both sides of the fairway) is keeping those trees today. Sprinkler heads indicating distance to the center of the green are innocuous enough. You're really at an over-reaching club when the plates show yardage to the front, center and back of each green, plus the yardage to each major layup feature. Bonus points for clubs that post Stimpmeter reads – of fairways. As for a club having a traditional flag, that's out the window with the optional red-white-blue arrangement for each green depending on the day's hole location. Whatever happened to judgment on a course?

▶ **Rules that are flaunted:** The same "exclusive" club previously mentioned had an

absolutely strict "no cell phone" rule posted throughout the clubhouse and immediate grounds. No sooner did we head off to play (I broke ranks and shared a car, as a sixth) than the cell phones came out, and not only were they calling their offices, but also phoning drink orders back to the clubhouse, with the bar staff dutifully shuttling the drinks out onto the course. Cell phones aside, the "rules don't apply" syndrome at pathological clubs extends to brazen disregard of guest play limitations, taking carts onto bunker banks and environmental "no-go" areas, and hitting drivers at the "irons only" practice ground.

▶ **Soaking wet golf course:** When's the last time a superintendent got fired for a course that was too lush? That's why they call you "greenkeepers." It's a clever way to cling to one's job, and who can blame a veteran superintendent for wanting to hang on another five years until his children get through college? Besides, most veteran superintendents have had their fill of the annual green chairman switcheroo and have learned to placate membership by keeping everything soaked and green. It makes for bad agronomy and poor playing conditions, but it looks good for members showcasing the course to their bosses and reduces the likelihood of turf loss.



▶ **Memorial trees:** Frankly, if you really love someone, you should donate \$100 and have a spruce tree removed in their name. How else to undo years of aggressive tree plantings, usually without a comprehensive tree management plan or any regard for their impact on holes and agronomy? It's bad enough so many courses are littered with junk trees like white pines, silver maples and weeping willows. The real dilemma is when clubs memorialize these plantings with plaques. Makes it all the more difficult for those long-overdue tree management plans that have benefited so many classic courses (Oakmont, Winged Foot, San Francisco GC) lately.

▶ **New money trumping old:** You can see the insidious effects of this everywhere, from new landscaping and night lights around the entrance way to wholesale teardowns and rebuilds of existing clubhouses. Once 10 percent of the membership becomes filthy with new money, the club's priorities seem to tip and rampant spending takes over, swamping the club's traditions and threatening established members with a club they couldn't afford to join and can't afford to pay the monthly fees.

▶ **Fiefdoms:** I love it when clubs undertake plans to move bunkers or add tees at the whim of some egomaniacal green chairman and no one has any idea how to stop it. Beware members who offer their professional services at a bargain, whether the landscape contractor who volunteers to build an annual flower bed or the roofing contractor who can save the club big bucks by putting in that new slate roof "at cost." There's a basic rule of thumb at well-run clubs: Hire only people you can fire or sue. The club that does things in house winds up looking like an outhouse.

You don't have to have a vintage A.W. Tillinghast design or have been host to the 1924 U.S. Open to be worth preserving or enhancing. There are a lot of fine modern courses by less than marquee names that are worth cultivating and improving. All it takes is some careful attention by decision makers, as well as a culture of humility in which members and golfers subordinate themselves to the character and identity of the course. It also helps to spot the early indicators of golf course dysfunctionality. ■