



Summer solution

If golfers can't stand the heat, maybe it's time to close the kitchen.

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With all of the gloom and doom that is no longer economic projection but rather a present-day reality, I find myself pondering the future complexion of the golf industry. Like many others, I am an economic beneficiary of golf and rely on industry-wide success to pay my bills.

As the globe continues to flatten and we discover that we are indebted to the rest of the world, we now realize that the average American citizen has spent money beyond his/her means for the last couple of decades. Now that the average Joe has been forced to instantaneously decrease (or stop) discretionary spending, where does that leave an industry like ours whose bread and butter is discretionary spending by the average Joe?

The past realities of our industry are history, and we may or may not ever see their likes again. To be survivors, we must now embrace new thinking and business models, some perhaps way outside the box to which we are accustomed.

While I scratch my head as economic events take us into uncharted territory, I continue pondering the future complexion of the golf industry in my home area, the Desert Southwest and the South in general. Will golf courses be abandoned? Will superintendent salaries be cut? Will my favorite turf-management consultant no longer find work? Oops, wrong question! One thing is not in question. When revenue no longer equals or exceeds expenses, something will definitely adjust.

Figure 1 - Monthly Financial Results

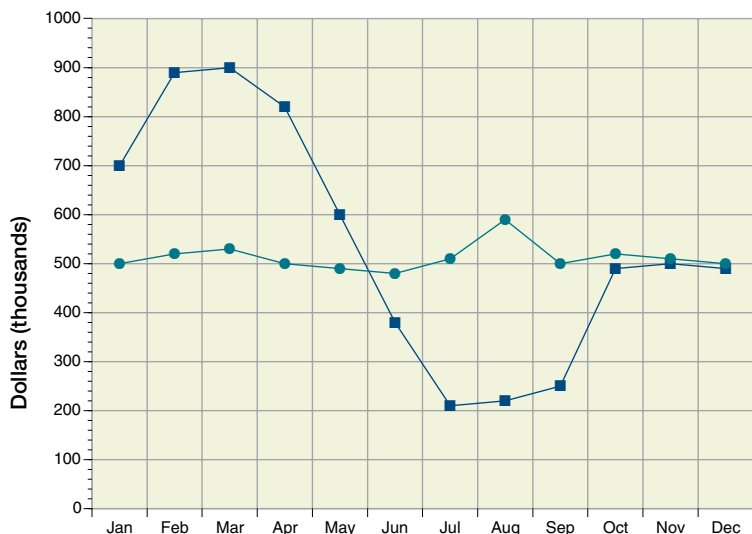
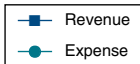


Figure 1. The all-inclusive financial results of a 36-hole golf resort, including clubhouse operations in the Desert Southwest. This facility receives water at an extremely low cost compared with its peers, so the summer expenses of most facilities are even higher.



Analyzing financials

Let's pretend we are accountants performing a cold and clinical analysis of a financial report for a golf course in the Desert Southwest. Two things will jump out, whether or not we have even seen a golf course:

- The majority of our revenue is generated in the cooler months.
- The majority of our expenses are incurred in the warmer months.

Our problem is solved if the same light bulb just went off over all our heads. Obviously, operate the golf course in the winter and abandon it in the summer. During the months that net financial results are in the red, stop the bleeding by closing the facility (see Figure 1).

With this thought haunting me, I spent a day with a client based in the Southwest, reviewing his premier 36-hole daily fee operation. Though the summer fees are heavily discounted, the manager confided to me that there were a total of eight golfers that day. To serve those eight customers, that day's payroll included 55 maintenance workers and a contingent of golf shop/cart employees. Not to mention the other operational maintenance expenses and the consumption of 1.6 million gallons of irrigation water. There is something wrong with this picture that will not escape attention in today's economy.

Figure 2 - Monthly Water Use

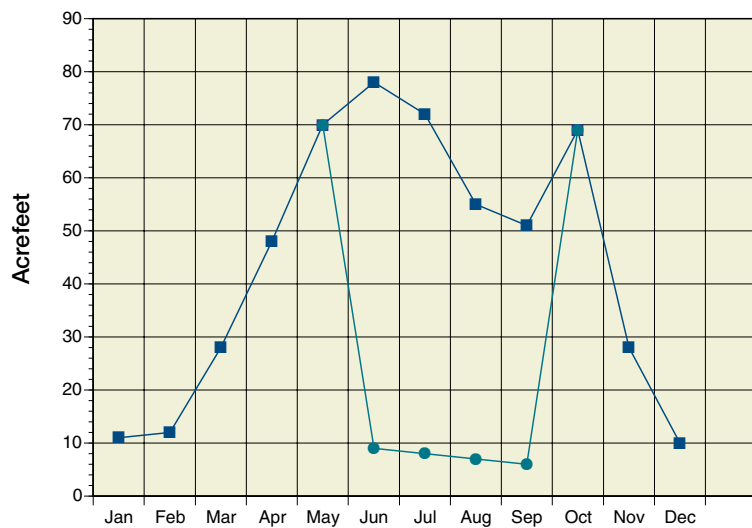
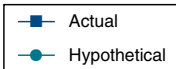


Figure 2. Monthly water use (average of five years) at a club in Scottsdale, Ariz. Annual water use could be theoretically reduced by 48 percent if irrigation were reduced by 90 percent in the summer.



Skeleton crew

Thinking hypothetically, what would an eight-month-per-year golf course look like in the Desert Southwest?

In the winter, it probably wouldn't look much different than a 12-month course. Except for the greens, the turf would be winter ryegrass that had been planted Oct. 1, just like today. Rather than being seeded into bermudagrass, it would be seeded into the dead rye stubble from the previous spring. As long as there was plenty of stubble, the ryegrass on our hypothetical golf course would be even better because the seedlings wouldn't be competing with bermudagrass in October.

In the summer, the course would be a ghost town with brown, dry stubble. Most golf course trees would be an arid species but would still require some water. Bentgrass greens still would be maintained in the summer, although it would be Easy Street for the superintendent compared with keeping them alive in August under "play" conditions. Aside from that, a skeleton crew of a few workers could do sprinkler repair, projects and generally be guardians of the property.

Perhaps the biggest snag to winter-only golf would be the workforce. In 12-month golf, few workers actually are needed in the winter compared with summer (large employee numbers are required to keep up with the extraordinary bermudagrass mowing requirement).

By comparison, winter-only golf would have fewer workers on the payroll even during peak season. Even greater savings would be realized as most of the needed workers would be "seasonal" or "temporary" and wouldn't receive full-time

employee benefits.

But the devil in this detail is that workers aren't a commodity that just shows up one day and is productive. Lack of industry skill and site-specific knowledge would present a productivity problem. However, if the superintendent wanted a larger workforce in the winter to provide meticulous property primping, many employees could be of lesser skill levels than required in the summer.

With every superintendent shopping for an experienced staff on Oct. 1, is it reasonable to think that they all could find adequate workers? The answer for last year would have been, "Absolutely not!" I take no delight in it, but this year there will probably be a line waiting at the gate.

Further, if a genuine "temporary" guest worker program is enacted — which would require that the workers return home for a period each year — then perhaps seven-month winter-only golf would be a perfect fit. That was precisely how production agriculture managed harvest seasons prior to the 1986 amnesty.

Water use

Water is the persistent problem in the Desert Southwest. Government allocation restrictions, high cost, poor quality and usually a combination of these have caused golf turf to suffer increasingly in recent years. For example, I have for years believed that we use so little water per unit area in Ari-

zona that golf agronomy is not sustainable in the long term. Salts have continued to accumulate in recent years to the degree that many courses are severely compromised.

In this regard, winter-only golf may be a blessing. Evapotranspiration consumes little water in the winter compared with summer months. Because of this, with the whole summer allocation unused, superintendents could effectively apply enough leaching water in the cooler months to leach salts to delightfully low levels.

This would also address another persistent issue with domestic effluent in the South. Because there's rarely enough effluent available in the summer to satisfy irrigation demand, facilities consume high-quality water out of necessity. Closure in the summer would conserve that high-quality water.

Figure 2 (Page 70) illustrates the annual water use (average of 2004-2008 data) of a high-profile golf course in Scottsdale, Ariz. As expected, water use is low in cooler months and is extremely high in summer months. The peak use in October coincides with the water used to germinate ryegrass seedlings in the overseeding process.

The water used in June through September represents 48 percent of total water usage. If that water use were eliminated such that the summer water loss from evapotranspiration also was eliminated, plenty of water would be available in other months for excellent salt leaching.

Further, if 48 percent of the water use were eliminated, 48

Putting on
a white coat
doesn't really
make you an
EXPERT.



percent of the purchase cost of the water and the electrical cost for pumping it would also be saved. Some water use, of course, would continue for trees and perhaps greens, but about 90 percent of that summer use could be saved.

Beyond the obvious, there would be many other savings if golf turf were abandoned in summer. Because of the exceptional mowing requirements of summertime bermudagrass, perhaps 60 percent of the annual mowing hours occur June through September. Further, because bermudagrass is tougher than wintertime ryegrass (because of its higher fiber content) and because higher summer temperatures are so hot, one can argue with validity that even more than 60 percent of equipment wear is incurred in the summer. Thus summer closure would save a corresponding equipment depreciation, repair and maintenance expense.

The misery is in the detail

It's naive to presume that summer abandonment of golf turf would be without complications. A few prominent complications come to mind.

First, with overseeded bermudagrass, it's actually the bermudagrass stubble that provides the elevated playing surface and ball support through mid-winter, even though the bermudagrass may be dormant. Prior to mid-winter, the young ryegrass turf is low in fiber content and is not dense, and so provides little mechanical support for the playing surface.

Superintendents often say that through December the game is played on dormant bermudagrass with a splash of ryegrass color.

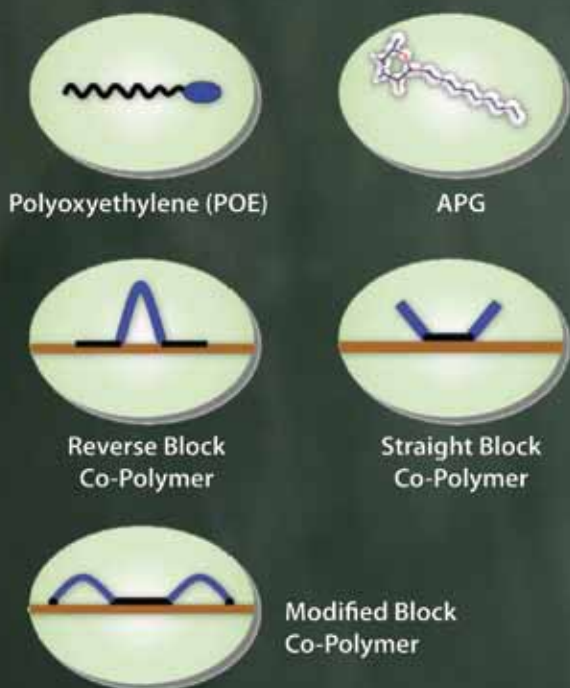
Second, seeding ryegrass onto bare ground is challenging at best. Superintendents often spread mulch over ryegrass seed in bare areas to assist germination and seedling development. If there were no summer bermudagrass crop and the seed were planted into dead ryegrass remains from the previous spring, seedling survival may be reduced. On the other hand, if the ryegrass seedlings didn't have competition from actively growing bermudagrass, the seedlings that survived would likely have an accelerated growth and development. And without competition from bermudagrass, the ryegrass could presumably be planted successfully at an earlier date.

In the case of a development course with residential homes lining each hole, wall-to-wall dead turf would not be endearingly accepted by the neighbors. Even though technical challenges would accompany summer turf abandonment, necessity breeds ingenuity. I have great confidence that after a brief period of experimentation and learning curve, creative superintendents would conquer all obstacles.

Plan B

What if an operator decides that a summer turf abandonment program is a little too extreme for his/her taste? As a compromise, the course could be closed to the public during

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According to Harold F. "Chip" Howard, golf courses in the Desert Southwest may become more profitable by just operating in the winter and closing in the summer. He says that during the months that net financial results are in the red, "stop the bleeding by closing the facility." Photo courtesy of Jim Key/Desert Mountain

the summer months and the maintenance operations could then go into a skeleton survival mode. If a maintenance crew were to grow an "adequate" bermudagrass crop but not configure and prepare the property for play, the facility could gain enormous efficiencies.

Other than tees and greens, the entire property could be mowed at one height with one machine. Not discerning between fairway and rough so that mowing could be done in time-efficient rather than aesthetic patterns could greatly increase efficiency.

Further, if high-production and low-maintenance mowers such as tractor-drawn pull gangs were used in lieu of small hydraulic mowers, the savings would be greatly magnified. Also, mowing bermudagrass for survival rather than play could eliminate approximately half the mowings.

Facilities could recognize similar savings in other aspects. Crews could rake bunkers weekly rather than daily. They could mow greens three rather than seven times per week. All setup tasks would disappear.

For those operators with 36 holes of golf but only enough summer customers for 18 holes or less, Plan B may be particularly appealing, perhaps a no-brainer. After all, why incur the play-ready expense of a superfluous golf course when it doesn't result in revenue enhancement?

Those of us who persist through the paradigm shift in the golf economy will be thinking and acting outside the box. Every day we will ask, or will be asked, "Have I made money for my boss today?" During the off-season when we must answer "No," we must figure out a way to minimize the loss. Those unwilling to adapt will be casualties of change. Count on it!

GCM

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