

One person One purpose

A strong autocrat may serve a golf course better than a team of well-intended committee members | By Jay Blasi

When judging golf courses, people look at the setting, the design and the conditioning. Every hole goes under the microscope.

Another factor also should be considered: Does the ownership or governance structure of a course have a direct impact on how good the course is? The answer – acknowledging there are always exceptions – is yes.

Simply put, when it comes to great golf courses, autocracy works.

When trying to have a government of the people, by the people, for the people, democracy is championed as our best chance for success. But as many examples have shown, when trying to create, maintain or restore the best possible golf course, especially at a private club, there may be a better way.

For more than a century, many private clubs have tried the democracy route. They have organized themselves with a president, board of directors and various leadership committees. And in democratic tradition, these positions change regularly. In many instances the elected leaders serve a few years with their roles changing each year or two, as new faces on a green committee import fresh ideas and plans for change.

And for more than a century, course designers have cringed. The designers built great courses with a vision in mind, and even well-intended changes by green committees can erode their greatness.

Changes are often made for the sake of change. One committee member's playing successes or failures can overtly impact decisions. Trees and flowers are planted where none should be. Holes are rerouted or lengthened without proper considerations of impact, altering the original designer's intent. Some bunkers might be erased, while others are introduced to the great detriment of playing strategy. The list goes on and on.

"Millions and millions of dollars have been spent on golf courses, and millions more in changing them," said Devereux Emmet, notable designer of many famed classic golf courses of the early 1900s. "Most of the mistakes have been made by club committees assisted by golf professionals."

He wasn't alone among famed golden-era designers in that opinion.

"My experience is that golf courses altered by green committees are almost always a failure," famed architect Alister MacKenzie wrote in 1933 in "The Spirit of St. Andrews."

MacKenzie proposed a better way.

"There are occasions where great success can be achieved by a benevolent autocrat who has dominated a committee, but there must be no compromise – the committee must be a one-man show," he wrote.

Could the same hold true today?

Bill Coore and design partner Ben Crenshaw have been fortunate to work with many top private clubs, with tasks ranging from new builds to restorations to championship preparations. Many »

Pictured: Seminole Golf Club in Florida





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of those top clubs feature a version of the one-person approach. Examples include Dick Youngscap at Sand Hills in Nebraska, Ken Bakst at Friars Head in New York, Charles Stevenson at Shinnecock in New York, Jimmy Dunne at Seminole in Florida and Dunlop White III at Old Town Club in North Carolina.

Coore is as polite, humble and non-controversial as they come, but he did not mince words when asked about the value of the autocratic model.

“There is no debate. If you are looking for continuity in the course, the less people involved the better,” Coore said.

Pictured: Augusta National Golf Club, pictured in 1933, was designed by Alister MacKenzie (inset photo) and had an autocratic leader for many years in Clifford Roberts.

“The courses that have gone astray usually have a revolving door. You can see where a committee chair wanted to leave his or her stamp on the course.”

This principle applies to new courses that take time to mature as well as older courses that have been restored. Consistency is best achieved when the people involved from the beginning are allowed to oversee the evolution of the course after the construction work is complete.

A key figure in the equation is the superintendent, the day-to-day steward of the course. His or her work can bring »



Pictured: Sand Hills Golf Club in Nebraska

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out the fine details of the design and enhance the playing experience. Done poorly, it can detract from such. Most superintendents appreciate design and will go to great lengths to showcase the course in the best possible light. While that sounds like a simple goal all clubs should strive for, the committee model often presents unnecessary challenges.

The best way to support a superintendent's goal of presenting the course in the best possible light is to provide clear communication and adequate resources. A single point of contact over a long period of time provides the superintendent with consistency.

The revolving-committee structure muddies those waters. Each committee is filled with members of different backgrounds, priorities, agendas and personalities. This forces the superintendent to reeducate a new group each year, assess the personalities and navigate the political landmines.

What should be a simple task of removing a tree or adjusting a mowing line becomes a cycle of debate and political maneuvering. At the end of the day, the club ends up with accountants and lawyers making decisions about turf and trees.

It's easy to see why the only group

that may favor the longterm, one-person model more than designers are superintendents.

While superintendents aren't in a position to speak out, revolving committees can be a major challenge. The fewer people involved, the better.

This all begs a question: If the professionals who know what is best for a golf course agree that a single leader provides a better chance for success, why don't more clubs adopt such a model?

It is hard to know for sure, as each club is different. The likely answer is politics. Private clubs are filled with power struggles, big egos and more. Think about a private club membership: hundreds of members, each financially successful, most of them Type A's accustomed to leadership positions, each at a different stage in life, each with a different golf game.

It takes a special kind of membership willing to say the course is more important than any one member or traditional governance roles. The key is finding the right long-term steward of the club. As can be imagined, many members probably believe they are the right person for the role. Here are some traits of an ideal candidate:

- Puts the best interest of the course

above all else.

- Has strong understanding of the course and club history.
- Has strong understanding of golf design, traveling to see other top courses.
- Invests time in learning about the technical aspects of courses such as agronomy, drainage and more.
- Is a good communicator with listening, writing and speaking skills.
- Is thick-skinned and can handle other members' criticism.
- Is willing to invest a great deal of time and energy with no compensation.

It is important to note that age, wealth, sex or popularity are not important factors. Ultimately this person needs to work well with the staff (general manager, superintendent, golf pro) and consultants (designer, irrigation experts, agronomists). Members of diverse backgrounds can do that effectively.

Autocracy isn't right for every club. Especially if key members believe the membership is more important than the course, democracy should rule the day. Each club must decide for itself.

But if having the best course possible for the longest period of time is desired, autocracy may be the best chance for success. **Gwk**