

Service drives municipal director

As the golf and recreation turf manager for Milwaukee County Parks Department, Brian Zimmerman is much more than a public golf course superintendent. Zimmerman is in charge of maintaining multiple municipal golf courses, and he also oversees more than 100 athletic fields.

Zimmerman, 35, has worked for the parks department since July 2002, starting as the county's golf manager. Over time, he has taken on more duties as his position evolved. Today, he oversees seven 18-hole facilities, a regulation nine-hole course, three executive tracks and five par-3 layouts. In that group is Brown Deer Park, home to the U.S. Bank Championship in Milwaukee, the city's PGA Tour event.

The region's harsh offseason climate makes some of the older facilities susceptible to what at times can be severe winter damage. And many of the older courses also are heavily treed, causing shade issues on putting surfaces. A thaw-freeze two years ago left Brown Deer covered in 3-4 inches of ice, causing significant winter damage.

"What it boils down to is that some of the courses were built in the 1920s and '30s; some are (former) well-draining farm properties, but some don't drain so well," Zimmerman said. "Some have shade issues, especially at Brown Deer."

Overseeing such expansive municipal facilities, of course, is an exercise in economics. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin with a bachelor's degree in soil science, Zimmerman is in charge of a \$4 million budget. With more than 150 employs in his charge, about half of his budget is dedicated solely to labor. Budget constraints have prohibited him from attending the GCSAA Education and Golf Industry Show each of the past five years, and despite repeated requests for more, funding for a cartpath-renovation project at Brown Deer has come in chunks, meaning the project is being completed in a piecemeal fashion.

Tight funding, however, doesn't mean Zimmerman and his staff receive any latitude regarding conditioning. The park's golf courses turn about 400,000 rounds annually. And although Brown Deer has been a PGA Tour site since 1994, the



COURTESY OF MILWAUKEE COUNTY PARKS

Brian Zimmerman oversees multiple golf facilities and athletic fields for Milwaukee County Parks.

emphasis is on providing customers with value. The county has taken to selling discount cards through kiosks at local malls, allowing golfers to play the PGA Tour venue for less than \$30.

"Our goal is to provide a consistent playing surface," Zimmerman said. "Golf here is value driven. If (golfers) don't get value then we hear it."

And when the county does receive complaints from golfers Zimmerman investigates each one.

"We go back and look at what we did or didn't do. We dissect them," he said. "We go back to the course to see if it's a local issue or regional issue, and whether it's something we need to address."

Although he employs superintendents and assistants at each course, he is hands-on when problems persist or something special needs to be done.

"Brian has experience in operation and administration within the golf industry," wrote parks director Sue Black in her nomination of Zimmerman for TurfNet's 2007 Superintendent of the Year.

"During his career he has worked to better himself and the associations he belongs to."

This year he has taken an extra step in trying to communicate agronomic issues to the county's golfing public.

A local radio personality hosted a golf program each Saturday morning throughout the golf season in which he would speak with various golf officials from the Milwaukee area. The show included a 10-minute segment each week in which Zimmerman and the host would discuss various projects throughout the county's golf portfolio.

– Brian Zimmerman

Communicating directly with the public not only helps Zimmerman and his staff deflect some of the questions and criticisms from golfers, it helps fellow superintendents at other courses as well.

"It was a great success. It really enhances the profession to talk about turfgrass issues," Zimmerman said. "We talked about various diseases and things like that. We tried to keep it as timely as possible."

Other topics included information about renovations and why it is necessary for projects such as refacing bunker lips. The program led to posting tips in county pro shops about how golfers can help preserve conditions.

"We tried to educate the public from the grassroots level," he said.

"If we reach one, 10 or 100 people about what golf courses are doing and why, then we're successful."

Zimmerman says he has called upon his past experiences as an assistant superintendent at Washington County Golf Course in Hartford, Wis., and as superintendent at Chikaming Country Club in Lakeside, Mich., to thrive in his current role in Milwaukee County.

"I worked for and under a lot of superintendents and managers, and I've taken something from each one and thrown it into the mix trying to develop superintendents and golf courses," he said.

Zimmerman also has been active at the chapter level both in Michigan and Wisconsin to help bring additional educational opportunities to fellow superintendents.

"I've tried to be resourceful on that end," he said. "I place a high value on education."

As the man in charge of Milwaukee County's turf management facilities, Zimmerman also oversees 72 "holes" of disc golf at four facilities that served as the site of the 2007 Professional Disc Golf Association Championships, an event that attracted participants from seven countries.

When he's not busy overseeing the county's golf and turf operations, Zimmerman gives back to the community – literally, serving as a volunteer wrestling coach for the YMCA and for Marquette High School.

A former high school wrestler himself, Zimmerman said there are other professional perks to coaching high school students.

"The side benefit is it's a way to find employees," he said.

"More than half of them have worked for the parks in some way, shape or form."

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