Supers combat stress, burnout

Poor delegation skills a cause

By J. BARRY MOTHES

SAN FRANCISCO — A failure to delegate work and soaring expectations are the leading causes of stress among golf course superintendents, according to a psychologist who has worked closely with the subject for several years.

"Golf course superintendents tend to be perfectionists and think, 'If I don't do it, it won't be right,'" said Dr. Bree Hayes, who has led stress management seminars for the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA). Hayes will lead another such seminar during the GCSAA Show and Seminar, in San Francisco.

Survey says: Architects don't agree on very much

By MARK LESLIE

The diversity of golf course architects is matched only by their opinions on such topics as the availability of financing, designing courses with less irrigated acreage, and whether "minimalism" has returned to design.

In an exclusive Golf Course News survey of the country's 260-odd architects, respondents shared some up-close insights into a world that spans irrigation technology, corporate finance and turfgrass research.

The most disparate answers came from the questions on minimalism, whether money spent to build courses is declining, and whether clients are finding it easier to get financing.

As distribution shrinks, firms go factory-direct

By HAL PHILLIPS

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The service-oriented, two-step nature of golf purchasing will never disappear: "You don't just get a Toro Greensmower in a crate," said Chuck Champion, general manager of Champion Turf, located in Colorado Springs, Colo.

New Congress might result in mixed golf bag

By PETER BLAIS

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The swing to a more conservative, Republican-controlled Congress is good news for the golf industry but could lead the Clinton Administration to employ regulatory agencies to institute more liberal policies, according to industry representatives.

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Burnout! Delegating authority one of the stress-relievers for supers

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Conference here later this month.

"Superintendents are not very good at delegating," she continued. "These people tend to be fairly organized and orderly and have a keen sense of aesthetics and how things are supposed to be. Those kinds of people don't trust other people's opinions."

Hayes and several golf course superintendents interviewed say the potential for unhealthy levels of stress has never been higher for golf course superintendents, who are frequently mentioned in surveys of the most stressful jobs.

Unpredictable weather, increasing environmental and labor regulations, and shrinking maintenance budgets push superintendents to 70- and 80-hour work weeks and beyond. That can lead to emotional, psychological and physical illnesses. It can also take its toll on personal and family lives off the golf course.

"I've definitely seen some divorces," said Tim Hiers, a superintendent at Collier's Reserve, a private 18-hole course in Naples, Fla. "And plenty of burnout."

Hayes, who has led several stress management seminars at regional golf course superintendent's association meetings, concurred.

"Golf course superintendents are perfect candidates to get distressed," she said.

"Everything's changing in their field all the time. One of the major causes of stress in anyone's life is a great deal of responsibility and little control. Often the control for golf course superintendents is taken right out of their hands by a board of directors or a green committee."

The encouraging news for superintendents is that, while stress levels are increasing, so are the chances to get help. Hayes, for example, worked with the GCSAA to develop an innovative correspondence course superintendents can take the course for credits, and, hopefully, for a calmer mind and soul.

GCSAA figures show 83 golf course superintendents are taking the course, which was launched in 1993. The program tries to help superintendents understand the differences between good and bad stress, and to assess their personal stress level. It also has exercises to help manage their feelings.

Stress management seminars have become almost a standard offering at regional and national superintendent's conferences, right there with effluent and practical tree management.

"We have traditionally provided a lot of technical training to our members, but we recognize there's a lot more to their lives than the management of turfgrass," said Steve Mona, chief executive officer of the GCSAA. "We're trying to help our members deal with all the different components of a complex job. Dealing with stress is a big part of that."

Chip Fowkes, the superintendent at the 18-hole, public-access Emerald Dunes in Palm Beach, Fla., said it took him a few years to get a better grip on managing his stress.

"I have a family and I have to realize that they're the center of my life," said Fowkes. "It's important for me to be able to go home and spend time with my wife and daughter and not be a time bomb."

Fowkes has worked outside hobbies into his week, like martial arts, riding his motorcycle and surfing. He said he's also become a better manager by learning to delegate.

"I try to have two guys working under me as assistants at all times that are essentially superintendents in training," he said. "That enables me to go away for a weekend once in a while. You can't be an island. If you can't be away for a day from your course, under normal conditions, then I think you need to look at the reasons why and try to fix that."

Not all stress is automatically bad, said Hayes. She breaks stress into two simple categories — bad (distress) and good (eustress) — in line with the principles of Hans Selye, a stress management guru.

"Certain kinds of stress are very important to us," said Hayes. "It's motivating. If we didn't have deadlines and needs for change we wouldn't do anything. But too much stress is distress, and that has the opposite effect. It's paralyzing and potentially very unhealthy."

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Many, varied factors increase stress

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Bad stress has been proven to affect a person’s health, whether it causes anxiety, depression and other emotional disorders; or heart problems, digestive disorders and even, eventually, some forms of cancer.

Looking ahead, superintendents like Fowkes indicate they think people’s expectations about golf course conditions — whether they’re average golfers or more involved green committee members or club officers — must be scaled back. Picture-perfect conditions and lightning-fast greens on national TV every week have helped create the idea that every golf course should be that way, without explaining the cost and time involved, said Fowkes.

“We need to be more practical about golf course conditions,” he said. “I think the expectations will change because those expectations are why the costs are going up for green fees and assessments. People are going to get tired of paying a lot of money just to see a lot of [cross-mowing] stripes.”

Mona said he thinks the current GCSAA-created television show “Par for the Course,” now airing on ESPN, and 40 or more “infommercials” to air during PGA tour events on ESPN, will provide an excellent forum to educate the public about golf course maintenance and superintendents work. Hopefully, this will help reduce unnecessary pressures.

“Maybe through the television exposure,” Mona said, “people will begin to understand that a golf course doesn’t magically stay in championship conditions.”

— Steve Mona
GCSAA executive director