Golf course superintendents never die, they just ...

By MARK LESLIE

Retirement? What retirement? Sherwood Moore, Mel Lucas, Richie Valentine, Dave Fleming and countless others have redefined the word “retired” for golf course superintendents. It seems the career path of the superintendent does not lead everyone to retire and then just hang out.

Talk to Lucas and he is off to Austria or Hungary, advising a golf course builder or sod grower. Talk to Valentine and he’s consulting with some superintendent in Pennsylvania on how to beat the drought. Talk to Fleming and he’s off to Mexico or Costa Rica to design a golf course and advise on both its maintenance and management. Meanwhile, Moore is in Egypt — whose golf courses can be counted on one hand — consulting with developers new to the business of golf.

“Some guys who have stayed in the field are doing super things in retirement,” said John Ebel of Barrington, Ill., who “retired” in 1990 only to spend the next three years overseeing a renovation at his old employer, Barrington Hills Country Club.

“I tried retiring after ’89,” said Valentine, who was superintendent at Merion Golf Club for 40-odd years. “The club gave me a nice party and so did the Philadelphia Golf Course Superintendents Association. And I thought, ‘Is that all there is?’” How much fishing can you do?” he added, explaining why he opened Valentine & Sons Turf and Landscape Supplies & Services. “Some retired superintendents have gone on to very successful consulting businesses here and abroad. Others have taken sales positions with golf-oriented companies. And a few have even started landscape or turf-related businesses. In most cases, they’ve found some way to keep their hand in the golf business.”

Rewarding, exciting and ever-changing experiences have lured Lucas and kept him globe-trotting since “retiring” from his post at The Garden City (N.Y.) Golf Club. “I have met the finest cross-section of people in the world,” said the former president of the National Golf Course Superintendents Association. “And I thought, ‘Is that all there is?’” How much fishing can you do?” he asked, explaining why he opened Valentine & Sons Turf and Landscape Supplies & Services. “Some retired superintendents have gone on to very successful consulting businesses here and abroad. Others have taken sales positions with golf-oriented companies. And a few have even started landscape or turf-related businesses. In most cases, they’ve found some way to keep their hand in the golf business.”

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Superintendent-turned-designer David Fleming on site in Mexico.

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Un-retired superintendents decide not to go fishing

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example. "I didn't want to quit cold, so I phased out," he said. "The club was about to carry out a master plan we had worked on for several years. I told my chairman I was looking forward to retiring but didn't want to miss the exciting things that were to go on. They agreed I could take charge, and it worked out good for both sides."

And others, like Fleming, may use their knowledge to expand into other careers.

Besides course architecture, Fleming designs landscaping and water features as well as wetlands for mitigation banking. "When you come down to it," he said, "the presentation of a golf course is always in the hands of the superintendent. It's been good for me because I've been able to apply my field experience back to the concepts of design. How many designers are certified golf course superintendents or certified pesticide applicators?"

Valentine, who with his father led Merion's greenkeeping duties for most of a century, ascribed superintendents' bent on staying involved in golf as "liking the job and loving the outdoors."

"Building golf courses and making them work is always marvelous," Lucas said. "It's still wonderful to shape and mold and work with the soils that create a golf course."

"It's a love of the land, really," said Fleming, the former superintendent at Singing Hills Country Club in El Cajon, Calif., where he now operates Golf Properties Design, combining his agronomic know-how with course design skills. "You can't beat the first 20 or 25 years of my life. Get up every day and meet the sunshine. It doesn't get any better than that."

"A lot of us grow through that and look for other opportunities, challenges and desires. But our roots are with the ground, golfing operations and the people in golf. Also, golf course superintendents, in particular, are a very close group of people."

Lucas thinks this continued involvement is a generational phenomena that will disappear with the younger superintendents.

"We, in my time, had blinders on and didn't know much but work," Valentine said. "Get up at the crack of dawn and get over to the club. We became creatures of habit. Work was our way of life. I didn't know what to do if I didn't take a week off. Today, I see superintendents vacationing in July. If we had done that, we would have returned only to find our desk and chair out in the parking lot. Twenty years from now, guys will retire and stay retired."

But many may follow Ebel's example. "I didn't want to quit cold, so I phased out," he said. "The club was about to carry out a master plan we had worked on for several years. I told my chairman I was looking forward to retiring but didn't want to miss the exciting things that were to go on. They agreed I could take charge, and it worked out good for both sides."

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