Oh, Canada!

Super of the Year: Stay enthusiastic

B R AMPTON, Ontario, Canada
— Ask Bob Heron about his accomplishments and he first points away from himself, to his many assistants who have gone on to take head superintendent jobs from North America to Loch Lomond, Scotland. Ask about his family and he embelishes about 29-year-old son Scott "whose resume is better than mine." But ask colleagues of Canada's 1998 Superintendent of the Year and they remark about a man who has greatly impacted this career field.

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Indeed, several innovations in golf course maintenance have been pioneered in the Sump household since he was six weeks old. Buddy began accompanying Sump to work almost immediately, riding on the superintendent's cart and quickly developing into a top-flight goose deterrent.

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Heron: Innovator, teacher

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neered by the 56-year-old Heron, a Guelph native, 1964 graduate of Penn State University and 1979 president of the Canadian Golf Superintendents Association.

- Heron performed “some of the early work” with Roundup on eradicating annual bluegrass in fairways.
- In 1981 he was ahead of his time in experimenting with winter covers.
- Last year he undertook his latest experiment, incorporating Georgia pine straw into the Beacon Hall property — a move he feels will reduce maintenance costs over the long term.
- Winter covers, Heron reported, “are not a panacea for growing turf. But if everything else is equal and your management program is adequate, they will solve some problems. I personally prefer perforated versus solid covers.

“Whether the green is in shade or the open makes a big difference to how fast frost comes out of the ground and how fast the turf greens up. But the real trick is when you take them off.”

Leasing equipment, he said, has become “a good way to stay current. And it keeps your maintenance costs down because you’re not repairing old equipment all the time.”

Heron replaces his equipment every four years, or has an option of re-leasing it, or buying it from the lease company and selling it to other golf courses.

“Once the lease is established, we have the freedom of negotiating new equipment deals without having to go to the board of directors or general manager all the time for approvals,” he said. “Once we select equipment, we like to shop around and get the best deal from a lease company.”

“The reason was, our red pine trees don’t produce the same quantity as the loblolly pines down there. So, to enhance the walk, improve the aesthetics and playability, we have spread it in the woods. It makes it easier to find your ball. Maintenance costs are reduced because you don’t have to trim grass around trees. And it improves the health of the trees because of less competition.”

Though the initial cost was high in Canadian dollars, Heron said he thinks it will save money over the long term, even with a minimal replacement cost each year.

In the midst of this innovation, Heron’s crews began an overseeding program last summer to convert the PennLinks bentgrass greens to G6.

“The new G varieties allow you to start off the season with a little tighter height of cut,” he said. “I believe it’s best suited to our climatic conditions. We think it will give us a much tighter turf and allow us to get down tighter earlier in the season. That’s important with our short season, especially at a good golf course because people like the ball to roll at 10 every day.”

Heron expects to overseed two or three times a year for the next three years to accomplish his goal.

“Then I was in school if [the job] was the science, the art and the business,” Heron said. “The business was probably 20 percent, the art, 50 percent, and the science, 30 percent. I think now it’s turned around to the point where business — people management — has become 50 percent of our job; and science and art are maybe 25 percent each.

“It has become a big business, and we have to be fiscally responsible because we’re dealing with a lot of money at private golf clubs. That separates the good superintendents from the...
Bob Heron
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not-so-good superintendents."

Another key ingredient setting superintendents apart is enthusiasm, Heron said.

"The ones who have done the best are those who have had the enthusiasm. If you don't have the enthusiasm in this business, you don't have a chance," he said.

"A lot of us will make a comfortable living looking after golf courses, but never will be millionaires. It's a labor of love, really. I look forward to it every day, even in the wintertime. That becomes more difficult as you get older, but if you can do it..."

Heron has tried to instill that enthusiasm in his assistants and employees as well.

"Enthusiasm and motivation are two very important words in my vocabulary," he said. "We're only as good as our worst employee. Motivating and dealing with the various types of employees is crucial. Turf students, who have an interest in the business, make it easier. But it's important to keep the high school students, or retired people enthused, motivated and focused about what we are trying to do. Positive reinforcement is good. We try to catch them doing something right and make sure they're aware of it. In the golf business we're blessed with being able to pay what other industries do. So it's important to make it enjoyable and also have them understand what is expected."

The assistant superintendents Heron is known for grooming are special to him.

"I've given them as much responsibility as I could, whether delegating on a day-to-day basis, budgeting, overall planning, or purchasing equipment," he said.

"In other words, keep them informed about everything required to do the job."

He suggests that young people aspiring to work in the field enter a university turfgrass program and "be prepared to put in their innings — spend a lot of time working on a golf course. It is becoming more difficult because we have done a good job of providing a good environment for a lot of those types of people."

"And it's no secret that the market at the moment is saturated with good quality young people. The good ones, the cream, will still come to the top, but it's becoming more difficult to get a job, even withstanding the fact that more courses are opening. Some want to run before they walk, but it does take a long time to learn all there is to learn about the business."

Will it pay off for them? For Heron, who started working on a course at the age of 15, it did.

"I don't think there is anything I would prefer to do than look after a golf course," he said. In fact, he laughed, sometimes wife Carolyn, a certified financial planner, says that "if she were to do it all over again she would like to be a superintendent."

Though daughter Cory Whiting is studying for a master's degree at the University of Guelph, son Scott has taken after his father — in a big way. A Penn State alumnus like his father, he has worked at Pebble Beach Golf Links in California, Devil's Pulpit in Caledonia, East Sussex National in England and Capilano Golf and Country Club in Vancouver. He just got his first head superintendent position, building a Doug Carrick-designed course on Bigwin Island in Huntsville.

For father, son and all superintendents, Heron said, the job is a challenge.

"It's a real challenge dealing with adversity," he said. "It's a challenge sometimes dealing with members and their idiosyncrasies. Being a bit of a competitor is important, too, because you're always competing within yourself and other golf courses."

"I think it's important to be competitive in this game. There's not a golf course anywhere, in my opinion, that could not be made better. I think you have to have that philosophy."