School for troubled kids turns them on to golf course maintenance, on their own new layout

By JOEL JOYNER

GLEN MILLS, Pa. — Take one brand-new golf course, 65 troubled kids and a superintendent doubling as a guidance counselor, and what have you got? You have the Glen Mills School here, running one of the most unusual golf course maintenance training programs to be found anywhere.

Most of the kids have been "court referred" to the Glen Mills School, which is dedicated to turning around troubled teens. The student body, 1,000 strong, includes mostly inner-city youths from all over the country, usually aged 15 to 18, who are sent here for offenses ranging from drug dealing and auto theft to manslaughter and gang-related crimes.

The course, designed by Florida-based architect Bobby Weed, is an 18 hole, $6-million layout, set right on campus. Open since September, it provides students a place to learn landscape maintenance, golf course management, agronomy and maintenance mechanics. They'll also learn how to properly apply chemicals on the 235-acre track.

Although the public is welcome at the course, the school built the course specifically to serve as a training ground for the students. "The goal is to turn out technicians who can command good pay on the market," said John Vogts, superintendent, at Glen Mills Golf Course, who was formerly the assistant superintendent at nearby Merion Golf Club. "For most students in the program, to leave here for a well-paid job at a golf course is an accomplishment. We help them into careers where they can start at $30,000 a year."

The groundskeeping program is one of the largest vocational programs at the school, with its own dormitory and classrooms.

Right now, 65 students are in the course-maintenance program, and Vogts plays a key role in their development. "They are basically fine kids who simply need a second chance," said Vogts. "We start them out on small projects like raking bunkers and mowing the grass. Then we proceed to more specialized training as spray technicians and equipment mechanics."

COUCRSE IS CUTTING-EDGE

The construction of the course provided an unexpected learning opportunity. "We had some weather difficulties," said Scott Sherman, senior associate designer at Weed Golf Course Design. "For the first time, we have a testing period on every single day of the year."

Students learn to keep the course in condition and maintain the equipment. "The students are learning about the turf and the planting, about the management of the property," said Vogts.

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Pine bark beetles devastating South  
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They estimated the loss at about $113 million in timber. Here at the Temple Terrace Golf & Country Club, near Tampa, more than 60 trees have been killed by so-called "ips" beetles, causing $25,000 in damage. The ips are second only to the SPBs in their devastation.

"Once a tree is infested, there's no saving it," said Doug Hughes, superintendent at Admiral Golf Club, near Tampa, more than 60 trees 100 or more pines left on his golf course. "We've been spray ing the insecticide Lindane around the base of the pines and trying to cover at least 10 feet up the trunk," said Hughes. "But there's little we can do about the drought and water restrictions. At the moment, I'm only allowed to water my fairways once a week."

Hughes is busy trying to save the other 100 or more pines left on his golf course while systematically removing the 60 dead trees at Temple Terrace. "We've been spraying the insecticide Lindane around the base of the pines and trying to cover at least 10 feet up the trunk," said Hughes. "But there's little we can do about the drought and water restrictions. At the moment, I'm only allowed to water my fairways once a week."

The critical thing is to remove the tree as quickly as possible to keep the infestation from spreading. That's where the cost is adding up.

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The South Carolina Forestry Commission (SCFC) reports over a million dead or dying pines from the SPB and ips, with estimated summer losses exceeding $24 million. The epidemic is described as the second worst on record in South Carolina, with Union County having identified almost 1,000 individual infestations.

According to SCFC entomologist Andy Boone, cool weather will temporarily slow the spread of the beetles for the winter, but the epidemic is expected to last at least through next summer. The SCFC said 13 counties now face serious losses from the insect.

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WIDENING INFESTATION

According to Ron Billings, Ph.D., of the Texas Forest Service, beetle activity continues at record levels in eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, southern Kentucky and— for the first time in 25 years—in southwestern Virginia. In a single year (1998-99), Tennessee experienced a 1,400-percent increase in the number of SPB infestations.

Suburban sprawl is contributing to the damage. Ed Barnard, Ph.D., forest pathologist for the Florida Division of Forestry, explains that "turfgrass and pines are not ideally compatible. Most any urban development in a pine tree surrounding is likely to weaken the trees over time, through root damage or drawing down nearby water levels. Pine bark beetles don't attack healthy pines, but they will destroy a stressed pine tree, and rapidly." The summer drought in central Florida has left thousands of trees victimized by the ips.

Initial symptoms of infestation will usually be pitch tubes in the bark crevices where the adult beetles bore in to the trunk of a pine. The best way to identify a pine bark beetle infestation is to remove sections of bark from pines with fading, yellow foliage and search for winding, "engraved" tunnels or galleries.

Piersol's column

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turf equipment program started is to create student demand. School administrators will start programs that they know they can fill and that result in placements in a lucrative job market.

Many superintendents have never thought about recruiting in the high schools, yet that is where you'll find the raw material to be attracted into the golf industry. Why not recruit high school kids who have not yet made a career choice and who have no idea of the various outstanding careers in the field of golf?

"A CALL TO ARMS"

A high school recruiting effort will give the superintendent the chance to talk about the positive aspects of the industry, allow his company (golf course) to become better known, and could lead to the recruiting of part-time help or full-time employees. High schools are usually thrilled to have industry representatives talk to the students, and building a good relationship with a local high school can pay nice dividends.

The golf course superintendent already has a busy schedule, but getting into one local high school once a year is a realistic service project. I strongly believe this effort should be considered a "national call to arms" for superintendents. After all, they are the ones screaming for skilled equipment technicians.

If superintendents will help to create student demand, existing technician programs are ready to expand and new programs will emerge. Education wants to meet the need for properly trained golf course equipment technicians. Won't you help us help you?

John R. Piersol, M.S., chairs the Division of Golf/Landscape/Forestry at Lake City Community College, Lake City, Fla., where he has taught since 1974.