

## Experienced help

### HIRING RETIREES SUPPORTS OPERATIONS AT THE SHARON GOLF CLUB IN OHIO

by  
JOHN  
WALSH

Labor is considered by many in the golf course maintenance industry one of the most important issues, if not the most important issue, it faces. The seasonal labor pool is shrinking. Management at some courses has responded by hiring immigrant workers, which can bring its own set of challenges. But at The Sharon Golf Club, superintendent Frank Dobie and co-assistant superintendents Norm Renner and David Willmott, don't have labor problems because they turn to a different labor pool – retirees – to staff their crew.

Dobie, who has been the superintendent and general manager at Sharon since 1966, has been hiring retirees since then. He says the number of retirees he has hired throughout the years has increased slowly.

"The labor pool was enormous in the 1960s," he says. "I never had a problem. We had 30 to 40 applicants every spring, and we could pick the cream of the crop. The 1960s were unique, and as the labor pool shrunk, retirees became a more important labor source."

There are 33 people on the golf course maintenance staff at Sharon. Some employees work year round but most are seasonal; and 35,000 man-hours were worked last year, which included 1,100 hours of overtime, according to Dobie. Man-hours include overtime, sick time, and holiday and vacation time. Twenty-two of the golf course maintenance employees are retirees and work 20 to 30 hours a week.

There are numerous reasons why retirees are a good fit for golf course maintenance



Jack Meyer works between 20 and 30 hours a week.

Photo: David Willmott

jobs, Dobie says. For starters, it's a seasonal business. The golf season at Sharon starts April 15 and lasts until Nov. 1.

"The majority of our staff are people who only want to work the season, usually that means students and retirees," Dobie says. "Since students can only work three months out of the year, most of the spring and fall work is done by the retirees."

"The retirees we hire have pension income and health-care coverage, so their primary motivation is staying physically and mentally active," he says.

Dobie likes retirees because they have good common sense that's acquired from years of experience, and retirees are dependable, arriving to work on time. They also pace themselves while working and take very little sick time off. One of the workers is 83 years old and has been at Sharon for the past 17 years. The youngest retired person at Sharon, which is private, is 52.

"There's no horseplay," Dobie says about the retirees. "With young people, you get enthusiasm and strength but not experience. However, we need some young people and students because you need a balance. There is a synergy created by the retirees' common sense and the students' enthusiasm."

"If it's a rainy day, retirees would rather go home, whereas the students, who need money for college, want to get as many hours in as they can," he says.

This year, there are three students working on the maintenance crew.

"Students stay about three years," Willmott says. "After they graduate from college, they move on to their careers."

Norm Renner, who has been at Sharon for 38 years, says retirees average eight to 10 years on the job.

"They seem to require less training time," Renner says. "They also are more cautious with equipment and have fewer accidents."



Photo: David Willmott

From left, Lonnie Porter, Dennis Blackburn, Don Armbrust and Ray Bailey work on a catch basin at The Sharon Golf Club.



Female workers like Betty Wilcox help the staff achieve the synergy it needs.



Retirees like Gene Federinko (left) and Neil Akins come from a variety of careers such as the trades, the military and the professions.

Photos: David Willmott

And they don't get easily bored with routine assignments."

Synergy is achieved by having females on staff, too, according to Dobie.

"We've always had female employees," he says. "There is a large labor pool of female workers when you count retirees, housewives and college students. We have three female employees this year, including a college student, a retiree and a housewife."

"Females tend settle the guys down and even things out," Willmott says. "They are very capable of doing the physical work, too."

Another reason Sharon, which features 18 holes, hires retirees is because they come from the neighboring rural and suburban areas where they have experience with physical, outside work, according to Willmott.

"It is an advantage being in a rural area near small-sized cities," Dobie says. "Most of our staff come from nearby Wadsworth and Medina. None come out of Akron or Cleveland (the two larger cities that are further away from Sharon). It's very important for the retirees to have a short commute to work."

The retirees come from a wide variety of careers such as the trades, the military and the professions. Willmott says the career experience of the retirees is a benefit. For example, one of the crew's spray technicians is a retired chemical engineer.

The military experience that some of the retirees have also helps with the job, partly because it brings discipline, Willmott says.

Willmott, who's been at Sharon for nine years and has aspirations to become a superintendent there, says there needs to be realistic expectations of retired workers' physical abilities.

"Some jobs can be physically challenging for some, so this must be considered in work assignments," he says.

"Occasionally, we hire a retiree that is a good worker but not suited to the jobs in that department," Dobie says. "We give them the option of transferring to another department in the club. This is all done in cooperation with the various department heads."

### The right fit

Throughout the years, Dobie says he has interviewed hundreds of retirees who've implied pay is a secondary consideration.

"Many of the people we hire were bored after they retired," he says. "They want to keep their minds and bodies active as long as possible."

"They're working here for numerous reasons, but most of them just want to get out of the house and interact with others," Willmott says.

Some of the perks for the retired workers are that they can take vacations during the summer and have liberal golf privileges at the club.

"The amount of accessibility for employee golf here – five days a week at restricted times – is a great drawing card," Dobie says.

"Our employee golf privileges are also a big attraction for some," Willmott says.

Another advantage of hiring retired workers is the strong sense of responsibility and pride they have developed from life's experiences, according to Dobie.

Most of the staff is task oriented. For example, once the fairway crew is finished mowing, they go home. The same holds true for those who mow greens, rough, tees, aprons and maintain bunkers.

"The bulk of the routine maintenance is done by noon so golfers aren't interfered with," Dobie says. "We're down to 11 workers in the afternoon: One is the secretary, and two are mechanics. Our efficiency is much better if the maintenance crew is off the course when members are playing."

"Members want fast greens, green fairways and no interruptions," Willmott says. "They don't want to see maintenance staff on the course."

Dobie says having a majority of the course maintenance staff be retirees might not work in other settings, but it has been effective at Sharon. GCN

*John Walsh is the editor of Golf Course News. He can be reached at [jwalsh@gie.net](mailto:jwalsh@gie.net).*



The bulk of the work for employees Tom Kaufman (left) and Carl Jungman is finished before noon.

Photo: David Willmott