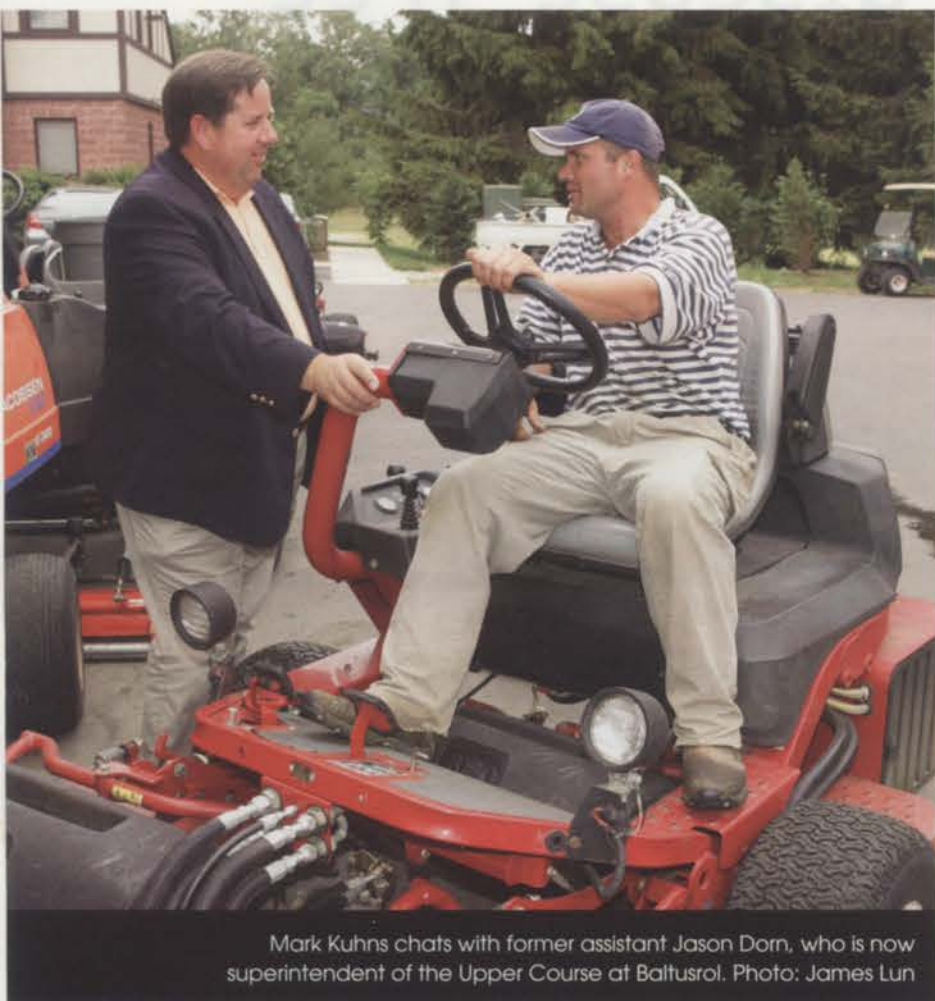


## A teacher's wisdom

SUPERINTENDENTS HELP GUIDE ASSISTANTS TO REACH THE NEXT LEVEL OF THEIR CAREERS



Mark Kuhns chats with former assistant Jason Dorn, who is now superintendent of the Upper Course at Baltusrol. Photo: James Lun

by MICHAEL COLEMAN

Remember your first week on the job as an assistant golf course superintendent? You probably had numerous questions about irrigation, disease prevention and how to best assign work to the crew. Most likely, it was daunting. But, with any luck, you had an experienced superintendent who guided you and kept you in line.

Now, as a golf course superintendent, you're on the other end of that relationship. So how do you successfully mentor the assistant superintendent who looks up to you?

### Follow the leader

First, superintendents need to realize it's a priority. Between calls with vendors, "putting out fires" and planning next year's

budget, superintendents need to set aside time in their daily schedule to coach their assistants. They can help hone their leadership skills and encourage them.

Mentoring includes one-on-one activities in which a superintendent imparts some of the experience and knowledge he has gained throughout his years in the business to help improve his assistant's ability to perform his job better and more efficiently. Providing feedback to an assistant about his job performance is a key to helping him meet the superintendent's standards. For example, a well-planned period of initiation activities can get new assistants off to a good start, says Steve Phillips, golf course superintendent at Sebastian Hills Golf Club in Xenia, Ohio.

"I try to spend a week going through everything," Phillips says. "I meet with them a couple days and check their work after that."

The sooner a superintendent can inspect what an assistant has done, the better his feedback will be. Superintendents should target the tasks that need improvement and use praise generously when the task is accomplished to the specifications, Phillips says.

Any advice superintendents give should involve some specific points, not general comments that might be misinterpreted. For example, if a bunker an assistant just finished repairing isn't 100 percent to a superintendent's satisfaction, he should say exactly what needs to be addressed and not just that it looks bad. But he shouldn't step in and rework a task himself, leaving the assistant out of it. It might be faster, but doing that will rob him of motivation and eliminate the superintendent's best chance of improving the assistant's performance next time.

Phillips advises superintendents make sure a task is done right the first time.

"Get in the ground and show the assistant you're not afraid to get dirty," he says. Let them know your way of fixing something but give them some leeway to try a new

approach. With hands-on work, hands-on mentoring is a good fit – to a point.

As with many aspects of the job, technology provides tools veteran superintendents didn't have access to early in their careers. Videos are an example. With a video, Phillips can go through it, stop it and explain things. If he has any personal touches to add, he can do so then. He also instructs his assistants to take notes while watching videos to help them retain more of the information.

However, getting too focused on the task at hand can impede seeing problems on the course. Mark Kuhns, director of grounds at Baltusrol Golf Club in Springfield, N.J., urges his assistants to see the big picture when they're working.

"Look around, stand in the middle of a green, and look in all directions and pick up on things," he says. "Be the worst curmudgeon the course has."

This kind of deliberate approach to seeing everything helps overcome tunnel vision and allows an assistant to notice flaws.

Dan Kilpatrick, an assistant at Baltusrol's Lower Course, says Kuhns has taught him the key to maintaining a top-quality course is seeing the big picture. Kuhns encourages the whole team to pursue excellence.

"Baltusrol demands a lot," Kilpatrick says. "Mark asks for a lot, and guys give it to him."

The demands are tempered by a great deal of support, Kilpatrick says. With so much experience, there's always some valuable insight from Kuhns that makes a project progress more smoothly. His input gives you more confidence, he says.

### Are you experienced?

Not only should superintendents make sure assistants perform tasks properly and efficiently, they also should be sharing their expertise with them. With 17 people on staff, including a mechanic and one assistant, John Malloy, golf course superintendent at Bearpath Golf Club in Eden Prairie, Minn., has plenty of chances to

share his expertise.

"The best education is showing up to work every day and learning," he says. "The books and the university tests are one thing, but what happens in the field is totally different."

Malloy tells a story about an assistant he worked with years ago who asked Malloy to educate him about the irrigation system. Malloy showed the young man, who aspired to be a head superintendent, how to fix a diabolical leak in the system. After two days of working on the problem and fixing it, the young man came to Malloy exhausted saying, "When I said I need to know about irrigation, I need to know how often you water, when you water. I can hire guys to fix leaks."

But Malloy told him even if he hires someone to do that, he still has to be able to handle it himself, because at some point during a weekend when he's on his own, the problem might arise. Sure enough, years later, the young man saw Malloy at a golf industry trade show and said, "Man, you were dead on," because he was stuck fixing a leak the weekend before.

Malloy also encourages assistants to gain experience at courses in various regions of the country because there are different lessons to be learned at each. He also urges his younger staff to work for a couple different superintendents so they can experience multiple ways of approaching issues and challenges. If an opportunity with a veteran superintendent isn't available, he advises to look for a new course under construction.

"That's where you learn from the bottom up," Malloy says. "You actually see it go in

the ground, come out of the ground and how you grow it in, and your opportunities are 100-percent better to become a superintendent."

### Keeping tabs

Record-keeping is another valuable tip for assistants. Phillips, who started at Sebastian Hills when the grow-in began in 2000, encourages his staff of nine to keep a record of what's accomplished on the course daily, which is something several veteran superintendents say they've done their entire careers.

Malloy has kept a journal every day for most of his 40 years in the business. He tells his crew it's valuable for tracking weather trends and following past activities, such as repairs, on the course. In five minutes, an assistant can capture the kinds of details that slip away in time, such as who was late for work and what tasks were completed.

Malloy's assistant, Greg Christian, is a former superintendent himself. The opportunity to work with Malloy arose about a year ago, and Christian saw it as a good opportunity to get back into the business. The way Malloy deals with people on his staff was attractive to Christian, who has known Malloy many years.

"He's very intuitive, reading people in their state of mind," Christian says about Malloy.

Christian says one reason that makes Malloy a good mentor is his guiding philosophy. Malloy's approach is to manage aspects of the job such as fuel but lead people. He shows trust in those that work for him, Christian says.



Mark Kuhns and former assistant Scott Bosetti, who is now superintendent at White Beeches Golf Club in Haworth, N.J. Photo: James Lun

### Responsibility

The experience an assistant acquires correlates to the responsibility he's given. Malloy wants to have them stretch a bit, but not be overwhelmed. He asks his assistants for input about buying equipment, for example, but doesn't allow them to purchase anything independently.

Many industry veterans say superintendents who give their assistants too much responsibility face a double-edged sword. If the assistant can't handle it, the work suffers and so does the course. That reflects poorly on the superintendent. If the assistant is a go-getter, the superintendent might have an easier time of it, until the owner notices who's handling the responsibilities. At that point he could be replaced with someone younger, cheaper and more in tune with technology.

Finding the balance between boiling

## Mentoring tips

Veteran superintendents have these tips for assistants to remember:

1. Be honest.
2. Communicate about disease trends with other crews in your region.
3. Learn how to calibrate your spraying equipment correctly.
4. Understand you can learn from everyone on your crew.
5. Don't let 14-hour days burn you out.
6. Read trade magazines for the latest information.
7. Make videos interactive by discussing relevance to your course.
8. Use online classes to enhance your knowledge.
9. Be good to your mechanic.
10. Get experience in different climates.
11. Be aware the pressure of being in charge can alter your interactions with people.
12. Work at a course during the construction/grow-in phases.
13. When aerifying, avoid sprinkler heads at all costs.
14. Become a Class A superintendent, then strive for certification.
15. Network with veteran superintendents at industry shows.
16. Be mobile in your career.
17. Talk with your superintendent regularly about your responsibilities.
18. Don't become complacent.
19. Get close to your detractors and learn how to address their concerns.
20. Tell yourself you can accomplish anything, then do it.



over and being boxed in is critical. Richard Spear, golf course superintendent at Piping Rock Club in Locust Valley, N.Y., tempers his assignments based on the assistant's background. If a guy shows up at his course

straight out of school as a second assistant, he doesn't know the program and wouldn't be expected to contribute much right away. That's where coaching comes into play, turning a green graduate into a greens

expert. Spear likes the attitudes he's seen from assistants because most of them want more responsibility. With responsibility comes opportunity, including playing golf. The 20-year veteran sees value in playing various courses.

"I encourage them to play golf so they know what a good course is and what's over the top," Spear says.

Apparently, the lessons paid off for some of his former assistants. Craig Carrier is now the superintendent at Bethpage State Park in New York, host to the 2002 U.S. Open. Dave Pughe is a scratch golfer and runs the crew at the Garden City Golf Club New York.

Spear's staff of 25, including two assistants and a second assistant, completes many in-house and construction projects at the course. Spear focuses his team on taking the work seriously, but not themselves.

"We try to have fun at Piping Rock," he says. "There's very little whipping involved."

### Supervisory role

One key aspect of the job assistants at larger courses struggle with is how to delegate tasks to the crew effectively, says Kuhns, who joined Baltusrol in 1999 and has a staff of about 60 to maintain 36 holes. Kuhns says some assistants in the industry find it difficult to make the transition from someone who accomplishes specific tasks to the person who manages the staff. These assistants tend to be too involved in basic maintenance to the detriment of the staff's effectiveness.

"If they're spending their time hands-on all the time, somebody isn't being supervised properly," he says.

Kuhns says assistants should show the staff what needs to be done and then supervise, not micromanage, a task. Depending on the size of the crew, this challenge might be one the superintendent faces. When assistants are managing junior members of the staff, superintendents should make sure they go back to check the progress and quality of work, as they've been doing for them, Phillips says.

One of Phillips' assistants for the last three years, Todd Bottorff, got a chance to do that while Phillips was out of town. The pair kept in touch, and Phillips coached him on dealing with a sick employee, broken-down equipment and other issues. It was a good learning experience, Bottorff says.

Bottorff comes from a nontraditional background of factory work rather than university instruction. He says the kind of

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one-on-one guidance he gets from Phillips is detailed and professional.

"From day one, he's been very thorough in describing proper agronomic practices," Bottorff says.

For instance, the crew has learned proper irrigation repairs, the best watering strategy, spraying techniques and what to look for regarding disease.

"While I don't have the education, what I learn daily from him is as valuable as the education," Bottorff says.

**Heading to class**

Assistants also can develop their skills by taking advantage of learning opportunities. Kuhns always encourages his staff to attend Golf Course Superintendents Association of America seminars and the Golf Industry Show. The classes and talks from experts and veterans can be great tools for solving tricky problems on a course.

"If you can't find a solution in any of those, then you've missed the big picture," Kuhns says.

Much of the GCSAA training available is geared toward younger members, says Shari Koehler, director of education. Live presentations that are webcast or supplied on-demand to a computer help assistants

learn about subjects when they need it. Koehler gets positive feedback on technical material such as "Using Excel to Enhance Your Operation" and "Ideal Green Speeds for Your Golf Course."

"They're timely, relevant and affordable, so it's really a good fit for assistant superintendents," she says.

Koehler also encourages assistants to pursue softer skills.

"We really feel business communications and leadership skills training are crucial to being successful," she says, noting available seminars such as "Developing Financial Savvy in the Golf Business" and "Communications Skills for a Successful Career."

Considering everything, one fact remains: Assistants are steering their own careers with countless possibilities in front of them. All the advice and training won't mean much if they aren't working hard and striving for success.

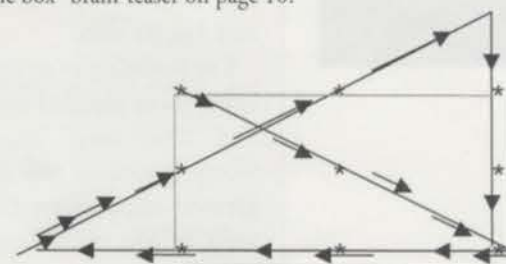
"They set their destiny," Kuhns says. "They make their careers." GCN

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