

# The New Superintendent

By RICK SAWYER, ProTurf Division, O. M. Scott & Sons

There's no way to pin down a date, but somewhere along the line, golf course members and management began to realize that the quality of play on their course was a direct result of the efforts of one man: the golf course superintendent.

As one superintendent pointed out, "You can have a golf course without a clubhouse . . . you can have a golf course without a pro . . . but you can't have a golf course without grass."

And with that strikingly apparent observation, one by one, courses from coast to coast and on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, are beginning to demonstrate a new respect for the superintendent. An attitude of professionalism has come into being where it never existed before. More and more, the superintendent is being appreciated as a manager, a man of science. Gone are the days of coveralls and drafty barns. The superintendent is taking his place alongside the golf pro and the clubhouse manager in sharing the responsibility of running the course.

Of course, this new stature isn't gained overnight. Nor, in fact, has it made inroads in every golf course . . . not by a long shot. But it is happening. And a look at six top superintendents from across the country will give some insight into why the superintendent has gained respect in the eyes of his management and his membership . . . and why he deserves that respect.

Thirty-five miles south of San Francisco, along the rocky northern California coast lies one of the newest, one of the most dramatically scenic golf courses in the country: Half Moon Bay Golf Links.

With a spectacular view of the Pacific Ocean and a layout to rival the most challenging in golf, it isn't too surprising that Half Moon Bay is frequently compared with Pebble Beach, ninety miles or so farther down the coast. Someday, however — probably someday soon — Half Moon Bay will prove itself a great golf course in its own right. And much of what will be said about it in the years to come will be due to the work of Ron Taborski, the golf course superintendent.

Trying to keep a half-century-old course up-to-date is the task that faces superintendent Ward Swanson at Plum Hollow Golf Club in the Detroit suburb of Southfield, Michigan. His nine years at the club have been a continual period of improvement and modernization. In the past year alone, Ward installed a completely new irrigation system using his own men and equipment; and, he rebuilt eight greens.

At Meridan Hills Country Club in Indianapolis, golf course superintendent Steve Frazier feels that "part of any stature I have attained has been due to my association with the golf pro." Working in tandem with the pro, Gary Carle, Frazier has established himself as a top superintendent by keeping his tees, greens and fairways immaculately manicured and conditioned for good play. Steve firmly believes that it's the play that people appreciate most.

In Germantown, Maryland, golf course superintendent Jerry Gerard at the Bretton Woods Recreation Area operates his club under somewhat unique circumstances. Bretton Woods was built by the International Monetary Fund for its

employees on temporary assignment in Washington D.C. As might be expected, applications for membership in private golf clubs were often wait-listed beyond the length of the employee's stay in the States. So the Fund's employees got Bretton Woods . . . and Jerry got himself an everchanging membership. Hired right out of turfgrass school, Jerry originally went to the course as the assistant superintendent. But almost immediately, he was given the course all to himself. He credits a close working relationship with his 6-man crew, most of whom have been with him from the beginning, as the major ingredient in his success in maintaining Bretton Woods' turf in peak condition.

The hurricanes that swept Cape Cod in 1938 and 1954 have left a lasting mark on the Kittansett Club in Marion, Massachusetts. The Kittansett Club is a golf course where they've never heard of a starting time . . . and where superintendent Lennie Blodgett is called on to grow grass in places where soil tests have indicated a salt level too high to grow anything, thanks to periodic submergence in sea water. Yet, Lennie maintains the challenging, rustic course with its narrow fairways and picture-postcard glimpses of the Atlantic Ocean. What's more, he takes care of the course with just a crew of four and the support of Winthrop Baines Wing, the greens chairman, who'll go out of his way to give Lennie any help he can.

At the other end of the Atlantic coast is the JDM Country Club (formerly the PGA National Golf Club), in West Palm Beach, Florida. There, for the past nine years, super-



*Lennie Blodgett, superintendent of the Kittansett Club in Marion, Mass., grows grass in places where soil tests have indicated a salt level too high to grow anything. He credits televised golf tournaments for improving the image of the superintendent.*



*Ron Taborski, the golf course superintendent at Half Moon Bay, heads every phase of the golf course operation, including the activities of the pro and pro shop. Ron figures he spends only 20 percent of his time in the actual business of growing grass.*

intendent Carl McKinney has held probably the most demanding position in the profession; up until January of this year, the three courses at the PGA were the winter stomping grounds of the leading touring pros. Carl didn't just have to tune up his turf for the season or an occasional tournament, he has had to satisfy the world's most intense golfers day in and day out.

Why have these superintendents gained the respect they now enjoy?

To a man, they agree: money.

Carl McKinney understates the situation "I spent more money than any other person at our club. My responsibilities include more equipment and personnel than the other departments combined. Since I spend over a half million dollars per year, this must be recognized as being of importance to our owner."

Plum Hollow's Ward Swanson quickly passes over the importance of his six-figure budget to make the point that he feels respect for the superintendent is the result of "the total volume of the job the man is doing; the total amount of dollars he handles and the responsibilities he's charged with. For example, Plum Hollow was worth in the neighborhood of \$200,000 ten years ago. Today, it's worth close to \$3 million. The superintendent today simply has a greater investment to protect — a bad superintendent can lose that investment real quick."

Out on the West Coast, Ron Taborski considers the money aspect from still another angle. According to Ron, "To have a top golf course . . . a championship course . . . you need a top man to maintain it. Of course, you're going to have to pay him. He gets respect as a result of his earning power . . . because in any business, the man making the most money is usually put in charge."

Naturally, there would be no need for a top man . . . no need to spend enormous amounts of money on turf if today's golfer didn't expect — didn't demand — great grass.

As Lennie Blodgett points out, "Every weekend on T.V. people tune in to see a beautiful layout . . . beautiful grass that plays beautifully. They can't see any reason why they can't have grass like that at their own course. Television has gone a long way in improving the image of the superintendent."

And one course the viewers often see — once or twice every year — is



*Carl McKinney, superintendent of the JDM Country Club in West Palm Beach, Fla. (formerly the PGA National Club), has held one of the most demanding positions in the profession. Until January of this year, McKinney's course was the wintering grounds of some leading touring pros. "The multimillion dollar pro tour has increased pressure for turf perfection. Now the superintendent is being recognized as the professional which did more than just get the grass green," he says.*

Carl McKinney's. With the number of tournaments played at the PGA over the years, Carl's insight into this aspect of the question is perhaps the sharpest: "The multimillion dollar pro tour has increased pressure for turf perfection. Now the superintendent is being recognized as the professional which did more than just get the grass green. Over the years because of our quality turf we have changed the game of golf. No longer is golf a game of chance but a sport of skill."

"And," Ron Taborski adds, "just try having a tournament where the grass is in poor condition and see how fast that superintendent gets some recognition . . . I guarantee his name will become known. They just can't afford to have bad grass with the stakes they're playing for. Who's the most important man on the golf course? Have a tournament and find out."

Gary Carle, the golf pro at Meridan Hills, notes that at their club, he and Steve Frazier have "quite a few members who are very sophisticated travelers. And they have the means to go to many differ-

ent golf courses. They go all over the country . . . all over the world to play golf. And when they get back here to the club, they say that there's no better place than right here."

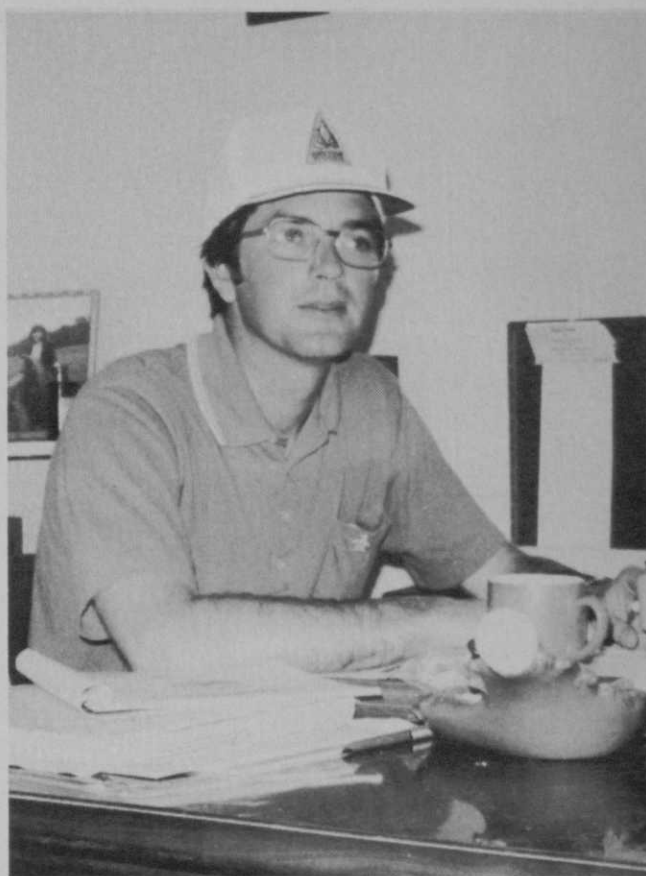
Steve says that it couldn't be any other way: "Anybody who belongs to a club wants it to be the best it can be."

So, for a superintendent to gain any respect at all, he first must be a top grass man. He has to know grass. Looking back twenty or thirty years, Kittansett's greens chairman Winthrop Wing recalls that the old greenskeeper "had to learn in the fields, from experience. There were no turfgrass schools. They didn't know the technical data . . . what they were actually doing. They made numerous mistakes and some of the mistakes were actually good, they worked out well. They just went out and did the best they could."

By contrast, each of these superintendents has made an intense study of his subject, much like any other professional in any other field would do. Jerry Gerard has a degree in turfgrass management from Maryland. Lennie Blodgett got his agronomy



*Steve Frazier has a master's degree from Purdue University and spent ten years working in turfgrass related areas before settling down at Meridian Hills Country Club in Indianapolis, Ind. Frazier feels that maintaining good communications with the golf pro and clubhouse manager is essential to successful management.*



*Jerry Gerard is golf course superintendent at the Bretton Woods Recreation Area in Germantown, Md. "It's a very technical profession now and the superintendent has to be a scientist, public relations man, jack of all trades," he said.*

degree and served an apprenticeship as an assistant superintendent. Ward Swanson got his degree, then worked on public golf courses in the Detroit area before going to Plum Hollow. Ron Taborski graduated from Penn State and was superintendent and assistant superintendent at a number of private and public courses in both the Los Angeles and San Francisco areas before accepting the post at Half Moon Bay. Steve Frazier has a master's in turf management from Purdue and spent five years as a superintendent and five years with his own landscaping firm before settling down at Meridian Hills. And, Carl McKinney spent the first dozen or so years of his working life in heavy construction, then went on to golf course construction and finally worked as golf course superintendent at a few clubs in the area before going to the PGA.

But even being an outstanding turf man isn't all there is to being a modern superintendent, respected and treated like a professional. He also had to demonstrate that he is a competent administrator.

"A superintendent manages money . . . he manages the manpower working for him . . . and he manages the members . . . all of which is a far greater percentage of being a superintendent today than it was twenty years ago," according to Plum Hollow's Swanson. "He's an administrator, a manager in every sense of the word. I spend a third of my time in administrative duties . . . a third with public relations, meeting players on the course and in the pro shop, being there to talk with the members about the course . . . and a third, usually before nine in the morning, in the actual care of the grass. Of course, these things overlap . . ."

Jerry Gerard agrees. "It's not just fertilizing once a year and mowing grass. It's gotten into a lot more than that. It's a very technical profession now and the superintendent has to be a scientist, public relations man, jack of all trades.

What's in a title? Ron Taborski, the golf course superintendent at Half Moon Bay, heads every phase of the golf course operation, includ-

ing the activities of the pro and the pro shop. He started at Half Moon Bay when the construction started. He was on hand when every decision about every facet of the course was made . . . the irrigation system, fairways, tees, greens, cart paths, everything. And thanks to an understanding management, his word was the last. More of an administrator than the oldtime greenskeeper could have ever imagined, Ron figures that he spends only twenty percent of his time in the actual business of growing grass. He relies heavily on his assistant to take care of the everyday chores, while Ron himself is kept busy with public relations, labor relations and all sorts of administrative duties.

To Carl McKinney, too, "It's not just growing grass as the situation was in the past. It's also a thousand other things. You must deal with personnel all the time. Today you must be able to communicate. On a yearly average our staff is nearly fifty people. I really could not say but approximately 30 percent of my time is dedicated to management, which ex-



*Ward Swanson, Plum Hollow's superintendent, feels respect for the superintendent is the result of "the total volume of the job the man is doing, the total amount of dollars he handles and the responsibilities he's charged with."*

cludes equipment maintenance decisions. In an operation of our size, because of a constant personnel turnover, I am always training new people. We are located in the fastest growing area in the country; thus our labor pool is competing with higher paying construction rates. Gone are the days of having the 15 to 30-year employee. Getting quality people to operate ten thousand dollar machinery is a constant problem. Educating personnel is a never ending task."

Carl's club was probably among the first to recognize the true value of the golf course superintendent. Carl has been a member of the club's board of directors for the past five or six years. He answers only to the owner of the club and his budget is more a guideline than an iron-clad decree. Having been at the club since shortly after it opened, Carl finds his tenure of great value: "I've been here so long, I really don't need approval on a lot of things, which makes the

job much easier . . . we're ready to move on whatever decisions I personally make."

Add to a knowledge of grass and the ability to administrate, the art of communication and you've almost completely described why these men have achieved their individual successes.

Meridian Hills' Steve Frazier feels that "when there's a breakdown in communications and the golf pro can't talk with the superintendent, you're in trouble. And when the golf pro can't talk with the clubhouse manager . . . and the clubhouse manager can't talk with the superintendent, you have real problems."

Lennie Blodgett points out that the people a superintendent is working for at a golf course are not professional turf men. They are experts in some totally unrelated field, yet they are his boss. "People in strange businesses don't know a darn thing

about golf courses. You must inform them. Don't try and snow them under. Be honest all the way. Sometimes you may have to say things that people don't want to hear, but you must communicate."

When Jerry Gerard has a problem at Bretton Woods, he does his best to keep his membership aware of what's happening. "If I lose turf, I owe it to them to let them know that something has happened and that everything possible was done to keep it, but those things didn't work, and now I'm doing my best to bring it back."

Things are no different in Michigan, Ward Swanson agrees. "You have to show your people that you're working on their course. If there's a problem . . . if someone has a complaint, be there. It's much better for a member to air a complaint to me than to go into the locker room and bad mouth me for this or that. It's quite possible that what's bothering him was a situation created by the greens committee in an attempt to better the course. So his argument may well be with his own elected officials rather than with an employee of those officials."

The final thing that brings these superintendents out of the realm of the foreman in charge of a grounds crew . . . the thing that makes their commitment to professionalism become apparent to their management and membership . . . is an intangible, an inner drive, an attitude.

Jerry Gerard says that to be treated like a professional, "you have to act like one."

Lennie Blodgett urges that a superintendent try to do everything possible for his club. "It's just that whenever a problem comes up, you've got to tackle it."

Steve Frazier gets a little closer to the mark when he says, "I really do love the game of golf and I've dedicated my life to the game of golf. I get my kicks out of seeing people have a lot of fun and enjoying my golf course. It's quite egotistical, too, but I want to be recognized as an authority and as a good superintendent . . . and the only way you can do this is by having a fine golf course. This is part of the enjoyment I get out of my job."

Then there's Carl McKinney, after almost a decade of keeping his course in tournament conditions at all times: "You have the materials, the chemicals, the fertilizers, the

*(continued on page 64)*

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## THE OLD from page 62

The elimination of antique or unique features to serve the need for faster play can prove disastrous to a course's character. Frequently, there is an alternative plan that may achieve the same result and still allow retention of past touches.

We all need to be reminded of where golf began and of the important steps that have been taken along the way to advance the game to its present state of excellence. Appreciation of the elements in terms of an over-all appearance go hand in hand with an appreciation of a well-played round.

The serious golfer is not merely interested in scoring. He likes to feel the presence of a course, to enjoy the beauty of a well-contoured green and the challenge of a well-constructed bunker.

There is no better assurance of continued success as a course operator than in maintaining character touches most layouts already possess.

There is no better way to ensure your golfers' total satisfaction with the game than in retaining and highlighting antique or unique features at your course.

## SUPERINTENDENT from page 46

whole thing. That's one big package. If you're able to put it all together with the weather, you can come up with a finished product that you can really be proud of. It isn't the salary or anything like that that's kept me in the business; it's the challenge to do a good job."

The challenge to do a good job . . . it's not offered to every superintendent. And, to be sure, not every superintendent would accept the challenge even if it were there. But on a growing number of golf courses across the country, an awareness of the true value of the superintendent has come to both the superintendent and his management. And when that happens, when the superintendent is given total responsibility for the condition of the course and an adequate budget . . . and when he, in turn, applies his knowledge of grass, his skills as a manager of men and money, and his ability to communicate . . . then he earns the respect and appreciation of his management and the people who play his course.



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