

Down

&

These head
superintendents
dig ditches,
mow greens, spray pesticides,
whack weeds, grind reels – and love it

"My philosophy is that nobody is going to jump in a hole unless you jump in one first," says Russel "Rusty" Tisdale, superintendent of Cobb's Glen CC.

Dirty

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

The dirty, crusty and worn gloves hang like a couple of trophy fish on the wall in John Monson's pint-sized office. They've seen better days. That's because they've seen thousands of days.

A handwritten note by Monson hangs on the wall below the retired and decrepit gloves. "Guess they are worn out," it says. "New in 1957. Have seen many ski tow ropes and golf course dirt. RIP. 1/03/02. J.M."

The gloves are a testament to Monson's hard work as the superintendent at Long Prairie CC, a semiprivate course in the small town of Long Prairie, Minn. If the gloves could talk, they would tell you Monson is more blue-collar than white-collar when it comes to the business of tending turf. You'll find him in a ditch wielding a beat-up shovel more often than sitting at his desk grasping a shiny ballpoint pen.

"I can still shovel as much dirt as the kids," the 61-year-old says proudly. "Sometimes I think I'm younger than I am."



Monson is part of a segment of superintendents that prefers to get down and dirty when it comes to golf course maintenance. They like to dig ditches to locate irrigation leaks. They like to mow fairways and roughs. They like to fire up weed eaters and whack the tall grass. They like to spray pesticides. They like to grind reels. Hence, these superintendents don't wear Hagar slacks, Nike golf shirts and \$80 FootJoys to work (not that there's anything wrong with that).

Of course, these rugged superintendents must like to get down and dirty because their job descriptions call for them to do so. Their courses don't sport big maintenance budgets, and their crews don't feature a slew of workers. But make no mistake: They are the type who feel it's their duty to work side by side with their crew members in two feet of muck.

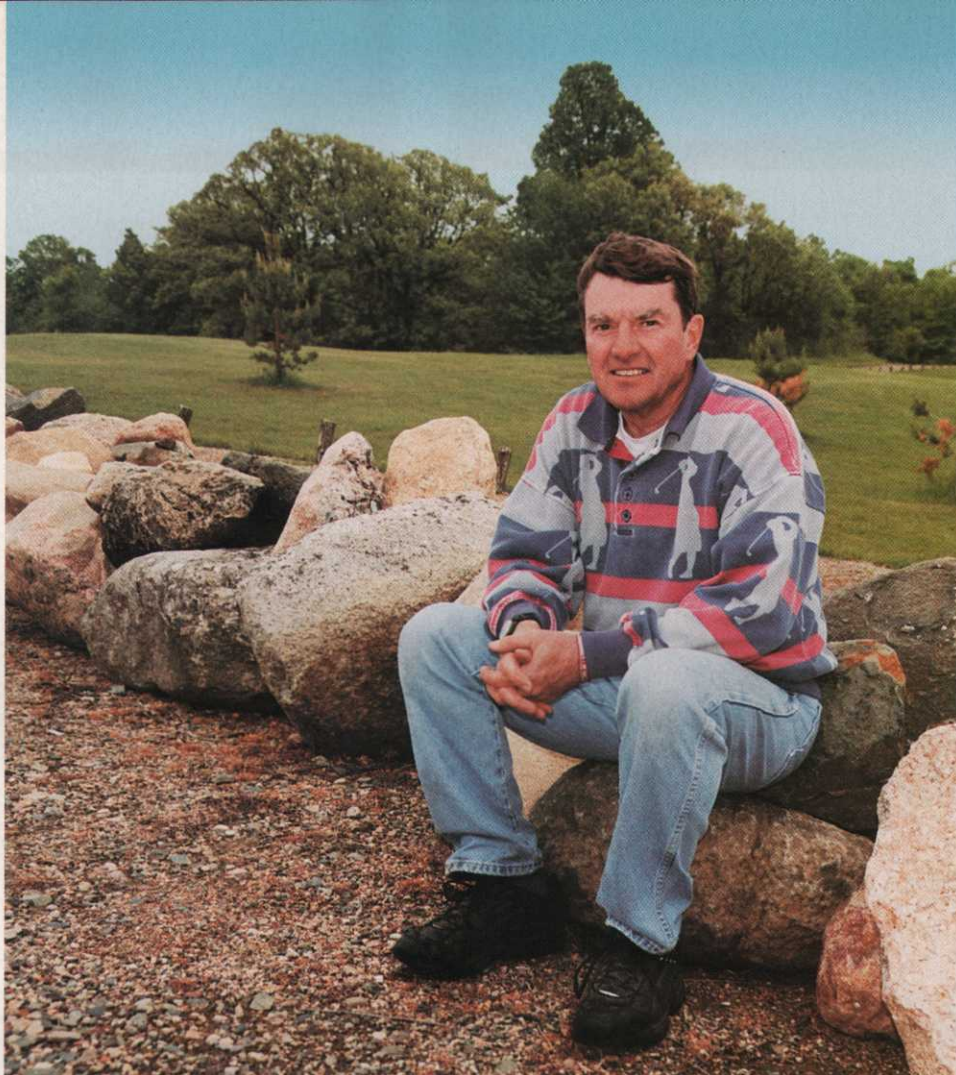
While some superintendents shoot for the stars in terms of money and glory (not that there's anything wrong with that), many of the down-and-dirty types don't care how much

Continued on page 38

“I can still shovel as much dirt as the kids. Sometimes I think I’m younger than I am.”

John Monson

SUPERINTENDENT
OF LONG PRAIRIE CC



LARRY AYLWARD

Continued from page 37

they make and if their courses ever appear on any “best of” lists. But that’s not to say they don’t care how their courses look. They are just as passionate about good agronomy at their modest tracks as superintendents are at the big-name courses.

It’s hard to say how many down-and-dirty superintendents are scattered throughout the country. But it’s safe to say they’re well represented in every region and definitely not a dying breed.

“We don’t do surveys to see if you’re a coat-and-tie superintendent or a dirt-under-the-fingernails superintendent,” says Jeff Bollig, director of communications for the GCSAA. “But we know there are all types of superintendents.”

Love the mud

On this cool and cloudy afternoon, Monson is dressed in faded and dirty blue jeans, a long-sleeved shirt decorated with silhouettes of Payne Stewart swinging a golf club and black shoes with more mileage on them than a college kid’s 1982 Chevy. Monson, who has

worked at the course since 1968 and has been its superintendent since 1977, is 61 going on 35. He’s neither tall nor broad-shouldered, but he’s as tough as a pair of steeled-toed boots.

“You have spray technicians and irrigation technicians at the bigger courses,” Monson says. “But at places [like Long Prairie], you’re the jack of all trades and master of none. That’s what I like about it. I couldn’t just go around and not do anything physical.”

Dave Spotts, superintendent of Eagle Crossing GC in Carlisle, Pa., knows where Monson is coming from. He’s the spray tech, irrigation tech and certified ditch digger at the public course. Getting grubby is part of his day.

“I’m kind of like Pig Pen,” says Spotts, who wears a blue Dickies uniform to work. “Even if I’m not going out to dig a ditch, I still come back dirty.”

The 48-year-old admits that certain body parts hurt more than they used to, but he won’t let the aches and pain change his hands-on approach. “What am I going to do, sit in a rocking chair?” he says sarcastically.

If his name is on the course, Spotts says

Continued on page 40

Continued from page 38

it's his duty to be in the midst of its daily maintenance. "I have to be out there on top of it."

Leading by example

If there's a big ditch to be dug, Monson won't instruct his crew to do it. It's likely he'll say, "Let's dig it together."

"I don't expect any of my employees to do something I wouldn't do myself," Monson says. "If the job is too dirty or too hard for me

to do, I don't expect them to do it. I lead by example."

A superintendent is going to earn credibility and respect if he works shoulder to shoulder in the mud with a guy making seven bucks an hour.

"My philosophy is that nobody is going to jump in a hole unless you jump in one first," says Russel "Rusty" Tisdale, superintendent of Cobb's Glen CC, a semiprivate course in Anderson, S.C. "Leading by example is the easiest way to get people to do what you need to get done."

Joe Ondo, certified superintendent of Winter Pines GC in Winter Park, Fla., estimates that about 40 percent of superintendents are of the dirt-under-the-fingernails variety, like himself. Ondo has been at Winter Pines since 1979, and says he's been getting down and dirty since Day One.

"The guys who have worked for me appreciate that I'm not afraid to be right beside them," Ondo says. "If I have to get in there and hold a pipe wrench, I will."

Ted Cox, superintendent of Running Fox GC in Chillicothe, Ohio, says he doesn't view himself above performing any difficult task.

"If a crew member comes in from a tough job, I'll tell him to take a break and let me take over for awhile," Cox says. "He'll appreciate that."

Cox's philosophy is simple: If you lead by example, your crew will work harder for you.

While it's good to work close with the crew, Tisdale and others are careful not to get too chummy with workers. "Sometimes I might get too close, and someone might try to take advantage of me," Tisdale says.

For example, a worker might start showing up late because he feels he can get away with it since he and his boss are buds. But that thinking won't fly with Tisdale.

"[A worker] might think that I won't fire him because I'm his buddy," Tisdale says. "But I will."

"It's good to be one of the guys, but you have to watch it," Ondo adds. "Sometimes you have to crack down."

Nothin' fancy

Monson's 10-foot-by-10-foot office has no heat. But it does have a desk, which is more

Continued on page 42

Jean-etic Makeup

You think Ted Turner's decision to colorize *It's a Wonderful Life* was controversial. In 1999, the GCSAA caused a stir when it colorized the blue jeans of a noteworthy superintendent in a back-page advertisement that appeared in the association's magazine, *Golf Course Management*.

Mark Wilson, certified superintendent of Valhalla GC in Louisville, Ky., was wearing blue jeans in the ad. But because some leaders of GCSAA viewed dressing in blue jeans as unprofessional, the GCSAA instructed its graphic design team to color the blue jeans brown for the ad.

"That was funny," says Ted Cox, superintendent of Running Fox GC in Chillicothe, Ohio, who wears jeans and boots to work almost every day. "Did [the GCSAA] really need to do that? I don't think so. I'm not going to change the way I dress just to conform to what the GCSAA says I should wear."

But Cox, a hands-on superintendent who's heavily involved with the maintenance of his course, knows when to don his good duds. If he's summoned to an important meeting, he'll wear a pair of khakis and a golf shirt. He doesn't want to look like a slob in a situation where he's supposed to appear professional.

Russel "Rusty" Tisdale, superintendent of Cobb's Glen CC in Anderson, S.C., says there are days when he wears holey and dirty jeans.

"But I dress up if I have to go to a meeting and present myself," he says. "I've got suits and ties in my closet as well as overalls."

There's an ongoing debate on how superintendents should dress. Some say superintendents should never dress like blue-collar workers. Others say superintendents have to dress like blue-collar workers because many of them perform blue-collar tasks.

But the key is that certain situations call for superintendents to appear professional, no matter what their collars, says Joel Jackson, *Golfdom's* contributing editor and a superintendent for more than 30 years. Jackson had his blue-collar and white-collar days. But if there was a chapter meeting or trade show to attend, he always wore clothes to befit the occasion. It's alright to jump in a hole and get dirty, Jackson says. Just make sure you have a change of clothes in your office in case you get called into a meeting.

Back to the ad in *Golf Course Management*. Jeff Bollig, GCSAA's director of communications, says it was the members' call, not CEO Steve Mona's, to colorize Wilson's jeans. He says the magazine's publication committee, comprised of superintendents, made the decision because they want their peers to appear professional in print.

But Bollig stresses that the GCSAA understands there are superintendents who get down and dirty and have to wear crummy clothes work.

"Just because we don't have superintendents who wear jeans in our magazine doesn't mean we're bypassing the superintendents who get down and dirty," he says. "It's all about positioning the superintendent as being professional."

— Larry Aylward, Editor



Russel "Rusty" Tisdale (front) feels more at home with a shovel in his hand.

“Leading by example is the easiest way to get people to do what needs to be done.”

Rusty Tisdale

SUPERINTENDENT
OF COBB'S GLEN CC

Continued from page 40

than what some others have. Spotts doesn't have a desk because he doesn't have an office to put it in. His course's maintenance facility resembles a four-car garage. "I have a little table with a phone on it," Spotts says.

But Monson, Spotts and their down-and-dirty colleagues aren't overly concerned with office size and cool things to hang on their office walls. Heck, they don't spend enough time inside to enjoy such amenities. They also realize that they have to get by with what they have because of their slim maintenance budgets.

"We don't have a lot of money," Monson says, noting his maintenance budget is a mere \$40,000, not including salaries. "One of our fairway mowers is 15 years old, and one of our triplex mowers is from 1989. But they work good as new."

Keeping a low profile is another trait of these superintendents. Spotts says he doesn't care if golfers don't know his name. But he says he likes it when he overhears golfers say, "The

Profile of the Down-And-Dirty Superintendent

- Enjoys manual labor.
- Wears faded jeans and crusty work boots. In some cases, wears a uniform.
- Leads by example.
- Works with a small maintenance budget.
- Enjoys taking something apart and putting it back together again.
- While sitting, it's usually not in a fancy office.

ROB BELKNAP

guy out at the barn keeps this place looking really good."

While Spotts admits he's not the sort to be a superintendent of a high-profile club, he respects the superintendents at those tracks and realizes their job descriptions might not call for them to dig ditches and grind reels.

"That's a whole different profession than what I'm doing," he says. "I'm basically cutting the grass for Joe Sixpack."

Continued on page 44

“I’m kind of like Pig Pen. Even if I’m not going out to dig a ditch, I still come back dirty.”

Dave Spotts

SUPERINTENDENT
OF EAGLE CROSSING GC

Continued from page 42

Ondo says his course’s players appreciate that he’s willing to get physical and dirty. “For this type of course, it’s a good thing,” says Ondo, whose public track receives about 75,000 rounds a year and charges \$24 for 18 holes on the weekend.

Ondo, who’s active in the Florida GCSA, says he knows superintendents who never get dirty because it’s not in their job descriptions. Their courses’ members don’t want to see them on fairway mowers.

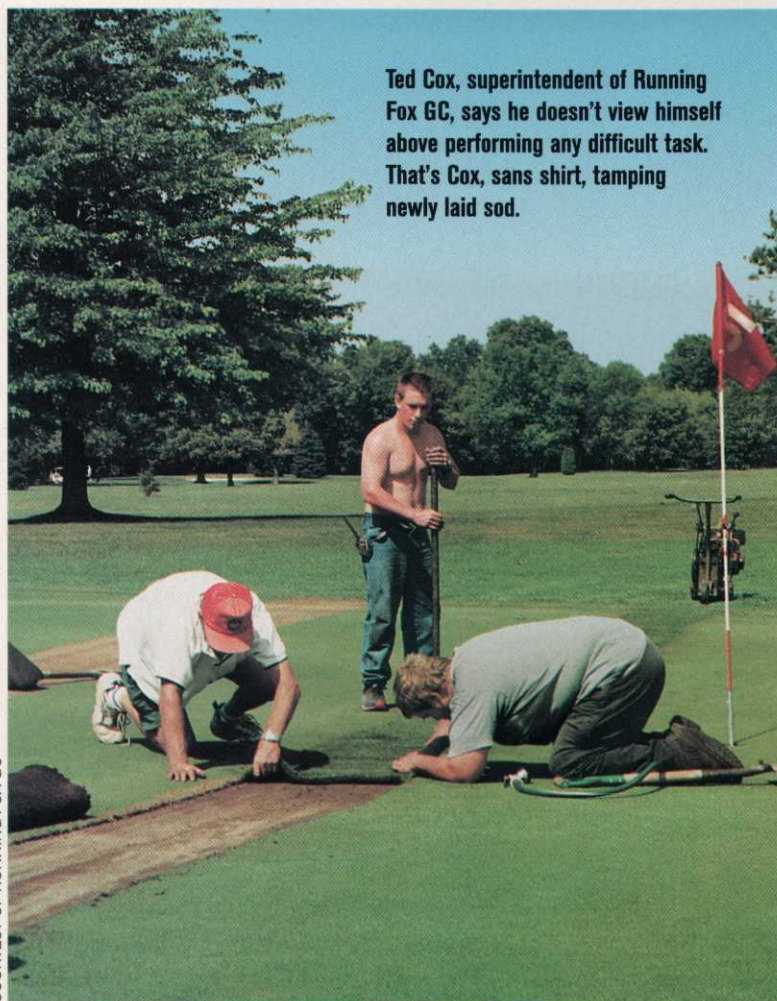
“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Ondo adds. “Their green committees feel they have crews working for them to do that work.”

Tisdale, however, is no fan of what he calls “elitist superintendents” who do nothing but drive around in utility vehicles and bark orders to workers. “I know they have their ways,” Tisdale says. “But with their budgets, their people and my attitude, I could do 100 times better.”



LYNN PELHAM

It’s a good thing Joe Ondo wears a uniform on the job. If he was wearing an expensive golf shirt, it might get ruined.



Ted Cox, superintendent of Running Fox GC, says he doesn’t view himself above performing any difficult task. That’s Cox, sans shirt, tamping newly laid sod.

COURTESY OF RUNNING FOX GC

It shouldn’t be assumed that all superintendents at high-profile clubs don’t like to work up a good sweat, however. Take John Szklinski, superintendent of Southern Hills CC in Tulsa, Okla., who says he makes it point to let his employees know he’s not above what they do. “I look for opportunities to get into the trenches,” Szklinski says.

It also shouldn’t be assumed that down-and-dirty superintendents are the type who keep to themselves and couldn’t give a four-iron about growing in their profession. Tisdale is heavily involved in extracurricular activities and is currently a board member of the Carolina GCSA. Ondo, a certified superintendent, is past president of the Florida GCSA.

“I’m politically active,” Tisdale says with pride.

Mr. Fix Its

A common trait these superintendents possess is a love of mechanics. They love to take stuff apart and put it back together again. Hence, you’ll often find them in the maintenance shop repairing mowers and other turf maintenance equipment.

“Working on equipment is like therapy to me,” Tisdale says. “I can take anything apart and put it back together again.”

Cox does most of the mechanical work at Running Fox. "I really enjoy it," he says.

They also like the detective aspect that comes with their jobs. If there's a funky-looking fungus on the fairways, they want to find out what it is. If the irrigation system has gone awry, they want to find out why.

Spotts says diagnosing such problems is his favorite part of the job. "I enjoy problem-solving in the field," he says. "It's a real mental challenge for me."

Monson says something is always breaking at Long Prairie, but that's OK. "People might think I'm nuts, but it's neat," he says of tracking down problems and repairing them.

Monson relates a story about a solenoid going bad on a sprinkler. He worked like Sherlock Holmes to find it and fix it. "When you fix something, it gives you satisfaction."

Less pressure

Since many down-and-dirty superintendents work with low-maintenance budgets and less refined golfers, the pressure to provide Augusta National-like conditions isn't as severe as it is at high-end clubs.

"It's a little more laid back here," says Spotts, who's able to take most weekends off. "The clientele isn't as demanding."

Spotts earns \$35,000 and has no complaints.

"I could probably make more somewhere else, but I'm satisfied with the pay here," he says. "It's just that there's so much more intense pressure that comes with the big salaries. I went for a lower salary and more job stability."

Monson, who also earns about \$35,000, says he's had solid relationships with the course's board of directors and players over the years.

"I don't get much flak," he says. "There are no politics here. I don't get afraid when a member says to me, 'Can I talk to you for a minute?'"

Monson is actually in the midst of his second career. He taught biology and astronomy at the local high school for

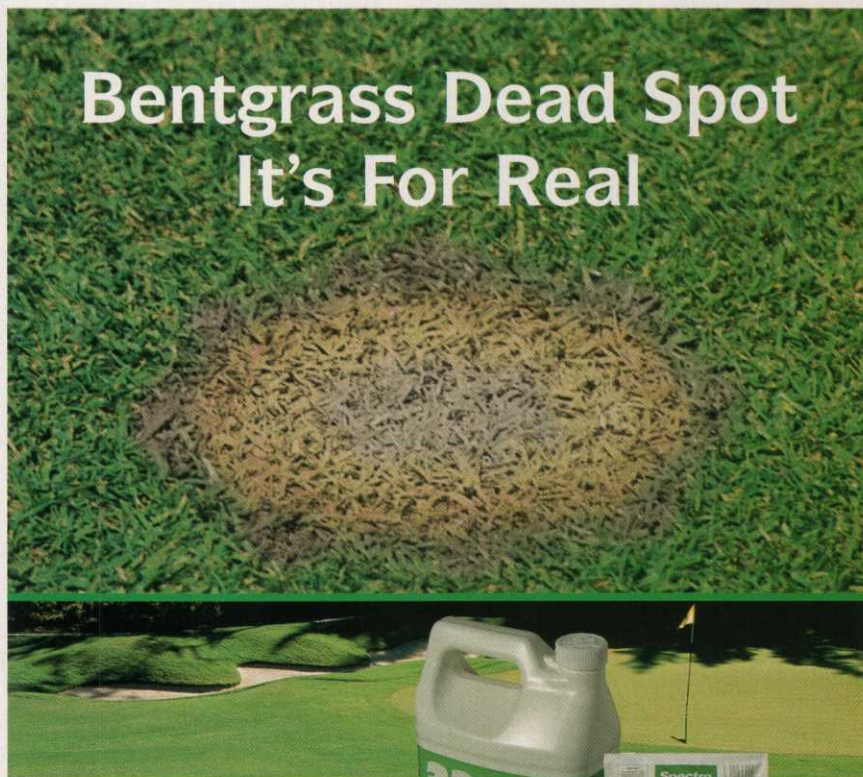
more than 30 years before retiring in 1998. Monson joined Long Prairie when it was a nine-hole course and worked part-time. When he retired from teaching, he became the course's full-time superintendent, just as the course was expanding to 18 holes.

Monson, who never earned a turf science degree and basically learned golf

course maintenance through on-the-job training, chuckles and flashes one of those you-can't-be-serious looks when asked about his plans for retirement. "I can't quit because I'll go nuts," he announces.

It's only a matter of time before another pair of tattered gloves are hanging from Monson's office wall. ■

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