Mark "Doc" Grace danced precipitously close to the edge of disaster in 1994. His sod farm, a family operation in Owings, Md., since 1955, could no longer compete against the bigger farms that moved into his area.

Grace's expenses mounted — he had a wife, three kids and a mortgage. Just when he thought he would have to give it all up, his neighbor, a meat cutter, walked in and asked if he could hit some golf balls on one end of the farm.

It seemed the man couldn't find the time or money to get a tee time at the local courses. Grace, whose only previous experience with golf was as a caddy for his high-school chemistry teacher ("I was flunking the class — I needed to do something to ingratiate myself to him"), told him to go ahead. Soon, the neighbor brought seven or eight friends and they all hit golf balls on the outer edges of the sod farm — and Grace saw the light.

"I decided to open a driving range," Grace says. "I had no idea how to build one or what it would take to run it, but watching them hit the balls inspired me."

Grace educated himself by reading industry magazines on maintenance and ownership topics. He taught himself how to build and run a driving range. He learned how much to charge for a bucket of balls. With his new knowledge and understanding, Grace set out to make a success of his range.

Grace's story recalls a different era in golf course maintenance, when hard work, self-education and learning on the job might be enough to launch a superintendent's career. But today, when even the most entry-level maintenance job requires a four-year degree, Grace's story reads like something out of a history book. It also contains a lesson that there still are opportunities for self-made superintendents to succeed with a willingness to commit to lifelong learning.

Ten years later, Grace's self-education continues. He still reads and learns all he can about how to run a golf operation, and it's a good thing — he's added a nine-hole par-3 course and a nine-hole regulation course to his portfolio at Mellomar Golf Park to complement the driving range. That required more knowledge than how to shag golf balls, so Grace focused on becoming his own architect and superintendent.

When he built his par 3, he read everything possible on golf course architecture. Grace also leaned on the advice of a young engineering student who had worked for him in high school, doing odd jobs around the course for the chance to use the range.

"He was ambitious, and he went to work for the construction company that built the course," Grace says proudly. "Now he's in charge of a construction crew that's handling a huge renovation in Florida. He definitely has talent."

Of course, building the track was only the beginning. Grace knew he needed to increase his agronomic knowledge, so he went to one of the most respected superintendents in the area, Keith Herschberger, with a proposition.

"I told him I didn't want to get paid," Grace says. "I told him I was willing to do anything he wanted me to do on his course. But the catch was that I could ask him any questions I wanted about how to care for a golf course. He was completely understanding and helped me immensely."

Grace realizes how lucky he is to be in a business where people are willing to help out others without letting egos get in the way.

"I've been able to rely on a lot of people who didn't have any reason to help me out other than their love of what they do for a living," Grace says. "I've been lucky to know so many of them as I've gotten into this business."

Money is still tight, but it's getting better. To this day, Grace doesn't keep an official maintenance budget (although he says he'd be

Continued on page 72
Mark "Doc" Grace credits his wife, Peggy, with helping him keep his golf dreams at Mellomar Golf Park in Owings, Md., alive.

"I have a patient and understanding wife, which has been one of the keys to my success," Grace says. "She squirrels away enough money during the season that we can stop paying ourselves during the winter. It's not always easy for her, but we know that we'll eventually stabilize the finances."

And for Grace, the life-long learning opportunities the golf industry provides him makes any risk he takes worth it.

"Every day is a perpetual learning experience," Grace says. "I can't wait to get here every morning and check out what's happened to my golf course since the sun went down the night before."

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