Tragedy Is Waiting to Happen
When it comes to protecting employees, the right time to implement a safety program is now. Tomorrow could be too late

BY BARBARA MULHERN

The death of a 48-year-old Mexican worker, crushed by a mower at a golf club in California, is a stark reminder to all superintendents of the critical importance of safety.

Francisco Rios, an employee of the Stone Tree Golf Club in Novato, was transporting a rotary mower with a blower attachment to the other side of the 13th green when he unexpectedly hit a dip in the non-irrigated portion of the steep slope. He lost control and the mower flipped over on top of him. Golfers came to his aid, but it was too late. Five weeks later, with his wife and family members from Mexico at his side, Rios died at a nearby hospital.

“It happened so quick. I guess that’s the worst part,” Kevin Pryseski, the certified superintendent at the private club, says. “The equipment had rollover protection (ROPS), but he was not wearing the seat belt. It’s a tragedy. In my 23 years as a superintendent, nothing like this has ever happened to me.”

Rios, who died in March of 2001, was not the only golf course employee seriously injured or killed at courses around the country the past three years. Among the recent fatalities:

- A long-time Mexican worker in his 50s, who was operating a large turf sweeper on a 15- to 29-degree slope at a private course in the western part of the country. The sweeper overturned near the No. 6 fairway sand trap and the worker was crushed to death. The equipment did not have ROPS, and the manufacturer’s recommendations were that it not be operated on slopes greater than 20 degrees, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) investigators say.
- A 61-year-old employee, who was operating a fertilizer

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spreader on a steep hill at a course in the South-
east. He was found dead under the equipment,
which had flipped over on top of him. The
man had done maintenance work at courses
for more than 20 years.

A 26-year-old groundskeeper, who was
pinned under a small tractor after it toppled
over an embankment into a shallow lake at a
course in the Southwest. A co-worker who was
mowing the 18th green rushed to his aid, but
it was too late.

These incidents — as well as many other
nonfatal worker injuries that occur at courses
around the country — are nearly always pre-
ventable, says Mike Blankenship, the safety
director at the Mississippi Farm Bureau
Federation.

"I wouldn't think that any accidents on golf
courses aren't preventable," he says, noting that
the equipment used on golf courses is just as
dangerous as farm equipment.

Superintendents, Blankenship adds,
"ought to have weekly safety meetings with
employees," stressing such issues as using eye
protection and hearing protection, wearing
the seat belt if the equipment they operate
has ROPS, staying off steep slopes, not re-
moving safety guards or shields, keeping away
from rotating PTO (power takeoff) shafts,
and not carrying passengers on mowers or
other equipment.

Wake-up call

Rios, whose son still works at the course, was
"on a steep slope he shouldn't have been on,"
Pryseski says. "It was just poor judgment." But
Pryseski also blames himself for not spending
as much time as he could have stressing safety
to his 20 employees.

"This obviously woke us up. Our training
definitely didn't adhere to California/OSHA
standards. We paid $23,000 total in fines," he
says. "You think nothing like this is going to
happen. Until it does, I would think most guys
are pretty lax in their safety training. This does-

n't ever cross your mind, and you're always
in a hurry. So you go through the basics, then
get the job done."

Since the incident, Pryseski has assigned
a bilingual (Spanish/English) assistant as safety
officer to better communicate safety to the
course's all-Hispanic work force. He also sig-
ificantly strengthened his employee safety
program to include:

- a written safety manual that spells out the
responsibilities of both management and
employees and includes all
other components
of the course's safety program;
- a file for each employee that includes
forms and sign-off sheets to document when
training on various pieces of equipment or
other safety issues takes place;
- additional training for each piece of equip-
ment (using manufacturers' Spanish/English
videotapes) — emphasizing that seat belts must

A Safety Checklist for Superintendents

☑ Hold regularly scheduled safety-training sessions in a language and manner
your workers can understand.

☑ Document in writing attendance at all safety meetings and safety training
sessions.

☑ Have written safety rules, and make sure they are fairly and consistently
enforced. This includes making it mandatory that employees use personal
protective equipment such as hard hats, safety glasses or goggles, and
hearing protection when warranted.

☑ Train your workers to always wear their seat belts if their equipment has
rollover protection and it is in the upright position.

☑ Train your employees not to operate equipment on steep slopes. Make sure
they follow the manufacturer's recommendations on how steep is too steep.

☑ Be sure all equipment operators review and understand the manufacturer's
operating manuals and safety instructions. Do not assume that all of your
workers can read, even in their own native language.

☑ Make sure your workers know how to appropriately dress (long sleeves,
long pants, sturdy shoes with nonslip soles) when operating equipment. If
the equipment has a PTO (power takeoff unit), train them to keep their dis-
tance and not to wear jewelry or loose clothing that could get caught in the
rapidly rotating PTO shaft.

☑ Train your employees to recognize the signs of heat stress during the hot
times of the year, and show them how to protect themselves from the sun.

☑ Make sure your safety training includes the other "basics" such as carefully
checking the mowing path for obstacles each time workers mow; operating
equipment a safe distance away from lakes, ponds, and sudden drop-offs;
being extra careful on wet terrain (especially slopes); never removing or by-
passing safety guards or shields; and never carrying extra riders.

— Barb Mulhern

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Superintendents and their crews can run, but they can't hide from potential danger when it comes to tending 18 or more holes.

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be worn if the equipment has ROPS;

• monthly safety meetings (held in Spanish) that include the viewing of safety videotapes, followed by a short true/false quiz; and

• a safety incentive program — employees’ quiz scores are posted and bonuses are given for the best scores.

At Woodland Hills (Calif.) Country Club, certified superintendent Steve Sinclair has what he considers a strong safety program — but even then, employee injuries have occurred.

"The most serious one was when a worker was struck in the eye with a golf ball when going from one location to another on a utility vehicle. He lost most of his eyesight in one eye," he says.

In another incident, an employee was crossing the street with a walk-behind aerifier. "We have three street crossings, and at every one we have a stop sign I made up for workers that warns them of traffic," Sinclair says. In this particular case, the worker did stop and wait before crossing the street. A Jeep appeared to be stopped but suddenly started moving. The worker was struck and wound up with a chipped bone in his ankle.

"One thing that’s important on a golf course is to make sure the workers understand the game of golf," Sinclair says. "We’re on a 97-acre property with 18 holes and there is no place to hide sometimes, so we really need to emphasize that here. No matter where you are on the property, you need to be aware of where they’re (the golfers) hitting and in which direction they’re trying to hit.”

Employee safety training at Woodland Hills includes weekly safety meetings every Friday afternoon. "We cover everything from safe lifting procedures to anything we see on the golf course when someone notices something wrong,” Sinclair says. "We combine these with a safety lesson, and have workers sign off on both.”

“We also go through a worksheet that lists all of the safety concerns in the (maintenance) yard and on the golf course. We give them safety glasses, hard hats, earplugs and show them where everything else is that they’ll need. If the person doesn’t speak English, we’ll bring in a translator,” he says.

Providing safety equipment is also a key part of the safety program at the Fountaingrove Golf & Athletic Club in Santa Rosa, Calif., according to superintendent and safety coordinator Andrew Trinkino.

"I have a separate line item in my budget for safety equipment and safety supplies. We are running about $8,000 per year on that," he says. "I always say that one-eyed greenskeepers don’t get very far in the profession.”

Trinkino, who has 18 employees, says his course has held monthly safety meetings since the late ‘90s. “We’ve purchased the Superintendent’s Video Workshop (see accompanying Safety Resources article) and have had good participation. We’ve had no turnover in about three years, so we can see these guys progress.”

Trinkino, who has received some good safety ideas from colleagues, also has a sign-off sheet to document attendance at each safety session. In addition, a posted 3 by 4-foot sheet includes all employee names and a spot to fill in the date and subject of safety sessions.

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"We put red dots on it," Trinkino says. "If a person was sick or didn't attend the safety session, he or she gets a red dot. That enables us to go back, determine why the person wasn't there, then train the person."

Language and other barriers
A recent investigation by The Associated Press showed that one Mexican worker per day is dying on the job in the United States across all industries. Mexican workers, the study noted, are 80 percent more likely to die on the job in the United States than native-born workers.

With the high proportion of Mexican and other Spanish-speaking workers at courses around the country, it’s critical that any employee safety program take into account potential language and cultural barriers, Blankenship says.

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Mike Blankenship
Safety Director
Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation

Hispanic workers may not ask questions of their supervisors, even when there is something they don’t understand. In addition, direct eye contact with a person in authority is considered disrespectful in many Hispanic cultures.

Another potential barrier to effective safety training with any worker is that longtime employees who have done things a certain way for many years are often reluctant to change their habits.

"If employees have never been around equipment, they are more likely to think about safety than those who can’t see the forest through the trees," Blankenship says. "Older employees have been doing the same thing forever and, right or wrong, they don’t even think about potential hazards."

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Pryeski pleads with other superintendents not to wait until an employee is killed to start thinking about safety. “You’d better wake up and realize that these things can happen,” he says. “There’s the legal side — you have attorneys calling you and OSHA coming down on you. But you also have this personal side. Someone comes to work on a golf course, then never goes back home. You liked this person — his son still works for you. You think, ‘Maybe there’s something more we could have done.’ You can make 100 excuses not to start a safety program, but it’s not that difficult once you do it.”

Mulhern is a freelance writer from Belleville, Wis.

Safety Resources

The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA), some private companies and other safety organizations offer many helpful resources. Among them are:

- **GCSAA**: An information packet on employee safety; various self-study courses on such topics as responsible pesticide use and personal protective equipment for pesticide applicators; the Environmental Management Program (which includes a section on employee safety and the right to know); and a members-only online compliance section (that includes a category on worker safety and links to various articles). For more information, go to [www.gcsaa.org](http://www.gcsaa.org).

- **Superintendent’s Video Workshop**: This training, produced by EPIC of Wisconsin, includes safety videos, tests, sign-off sheets, and instruction guidelines. For more information, go to [www.svwonline.com](http://www.svwonline.com).

- **Monthly Video Safety Training for the Golf Industry**: Produced by Risk Compliance (Hobe Sound, Fla.), this service provides monthly videos, quizzes and an instructor’s guide. For more information, go to [www.golfsafety.com](http://www.golfsafety.com).

- **National Ag Safety Database**: This database includes information you can download at no cost. Search by topic (such as Machinery Safety [mowers] or Personal Protective Equipment). For more information, go to [www.cdc.gov/nasd/](http://www.cdc.gov/nasd/).

- **National Safety Council**: The NSC produces numerous safety videos and other safety-related materials. For more information, go to [www.nsc.org](http://www.nsc.org).