

# NEAR MISS

That minor accident could have been a serious accident. What are superintendents and manufacturers doing to help keep workers safe?

BY STEVEN TINGLE

**T**hey called him “Cooter” and he worked at my parents’ golf course from the first day shovel hit dirt back in 1968. He mowed rough on a big Massey Ferguson tractor dragging a seven-gang reel unit. Five days a week, 6:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., year after year.

Cooter was a man of schedules. Every day around two o’clock, nature called. And Cooter answered. He’d park the big Massey Ferguson on a knoll between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> fairways just a few yards from the course restrooms. Same time, same place, for years. But one day, after nature was satisfied, Cooter opened the door to find his tractor was not where he’d parked it. In fact it was nowhere to be seen.

He laughed, figuring someone was pulling a prank. He started walking back to the maintenance shop, across the 15<sup>th</sup> fairway, past the pond that bordered the low end of the hole. He strolled by the water just in time to see the last reel slip below the water’s surface.

Every golf course has stories like this.



Somebody forgets to set a parking brake and a tractor ends up in a pond. Or how about the time the mechanic slipped on hydraulic fluid and busted his head? Or that summer intern who wouldn’t wear a hardhat because it wasn’t “cool,” only to get knocked out by a low hanging limb.

These tales serve as reminders of the importance of workplace safety and the consequences of not paying attention. Most of the time the stories end with a laugh; but not every time.

## **A serious example**

Michael Costa was the superintendent at Cahoon Plantation in Chesapeake, Va., for 14 years. One Monday last fall Costa was spraying tee boxes when somehow, inexplicably, he ended up underneath the spraying unit and died of mechanical asphyxiation.

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## Play It Safe

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Costa was only 42 years old, married with two children. An investigation of the accident by the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry cited the golf course for improper use of the sprayer and inadequate training, finding Costa had dismounted the unit without engaging the parking brake or blocking the wheels. The department also proposed close to \$17,000 in fines against the course.

I was crushed after reading about Costa's accident. I wanted to learn more about how the golf course maintenance industry was dealing with workplace safety and where it fell in the hierarchy of course conditioning and tight budgets. I wanted to talk to the professionals in this industry, the superintendents, the manufacturers, the Man.

### The right thing to do

Every superintendent I spoke with was committed to safety, on and off the re-

cord. I heard about monthly safety meetings and equipment training sessions, paper trails and workman's comp rebates. I heard about making safety the No. 1 priority. Not because of fines, or insurance, or corporate policy, but because it's the right thing to do.

Mike Williams, superintendent at Whittier Narrows Golf Course, Los Angeles, says preparedness is key when it comes to workplace safety. "Accidents don't happen every day but you still have to react and be prepared for them. You always have to be on your toes for when something does happen out of the ordinary."

Williams runs safety meetings once a month and discusses topics pertaining to the time of year or current projects. "In the summer we talk about heat stress and exhaustion and taking care to not get overheated," says Williams. "If we're cutting trees we talk about safety with chainsaws. Everyone signs off on it so they understand if something does hap-

pen I have their signature. I also ask them questions, so when they leave the meeting there is no uncertainty about what is right and what is wrong."

Williams also notes the importance of properly maintained equipment. "I have a very good mechanic who makes sure all guards are in place and that safety switches are not bypassed. I'm not going to sacrifice someone's safety just because it's Friday at two o'clock and I've got two more fairways to cut and something's wrong with the machine. I will definitely have that machine repaired before they jump on it again. There's no hurry to get the golf course ready when it involves someone's safety."

### Good business

Proper safety training and documentation can also save money. Shane Wright, CGCS at the Vero Beach (Fla.) Country Club has earned workman's comp rebates at his club for the past five years

## ANOTHER CLOSE CALL

Casey Crittenden, CGCS at Bella Vista CC, knows three things that can save your life on the course: A seatbelt, a roll bar and cell phone.

In 2010 a maintenance employee at Crittenden's course in Bella Vista, Ark., was mowing near a creek bank when the back tire of the mower dropped into a hole. The mower flipped, and the employee, Bonnie Vines, was trapped underneath. Vines had followed all of the proper safety procedures — most importantly securing her seat belt — which, along with the roll bar, prevented

her from being crushed by the mower. Keeping calm, Vines used her cell phone to call the assistant superintendent and report the accident. The assistant in turn immediately contacted 911. Members of the local fire department, along with three of Vines' coworkers, eventually freed her from underneath the mower. She was then airlifted to a hospital in Springfield, Mo., where she was treated and released.

"It was just

one of those freak accidents," says Crittenden. "I think most employees want to do a good job and sometimes we all fail to recognize some potential issues when we're out there, so we have to all remind ourselves and be cognizant of those things. Fortunately, she had followed all of the safety procedures we discuss in our meetings and that prob-

ably saved her life."

The accident served as a learning experience for Crittenden and his staff. It also reminded everyone of the importance of following Bella Vista's safety procedures, which require hard hats, seat belts and equipment inspection. As Crittenden says, "You really have to be prepared for anything."



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WHITTIER NARROWS GC

by completing a department safety audit every month. “At first it seemed like a lot of documentation but it’s really paid off,” Wright says. “It’s been cool for us because our club actually gives the rebate back to the staff. So if it’s a \$120 or \$130 check every year the guys really understand what safety means at that point. Not only is it good for their physical well being, it’s also good for their pocket books.”

In addition to training, Wright also ensures all equipment is properly maintained and suggests outlining the shop and creating barriers to define grinding areas or places with a lift table. “That helps keep the guys out of areas where they shouldn’t be,” says Wright. “It also defines high risk or safety goggle areas.”

Manufacturers are also working hard to keep workers safe. Tracy Lanier, product manager for John Deere Golf, says his company has a long history of working to provide safe, reliable products for cus-

tomers. For example, Deere has installed operator presence bails on its walk mowers for more than 15 years.

But Lanier agrees, no matter how safe the product, the end user is the best defense against accidents. “The best safety feature is the proper training of operators,” says Lanier. “Operators should read the operator’s manuals, which are available in many languages, and also watch operator training videos for the machines. They should become familiar with the machine they intend to use and practice in a safe area prior to operation under their supervisor’s direction.”

Finally, I reached out to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) several times. “What is the government doing to educate our industry on proper workplace safety and regulate and enforce its policies?” I asked. I was routed and rerouted to multiple personnel. I was told to submit questions in written form. I was then

told my questions were too vague.

I resubmitted questions and was told it would take a couple of weeks before someone could respond. I was promised materials, website links, articles.... I’m still waiting.

### **Commitment to safety**

A golf course can be a dangerous place to work but when it comes to safety, golf course management professionals should be proud of their commitment to keeping themselves, their staff and those who use their products safe and free of injury.

Cooter never did live down his accident. Friends were always asking him the best way to mow water or where to hide a tractor. Not everyone found it funny; I remember that my dad was red-hot angry when he found out thousands of dollars of mowing equipment was at the bottom of No. 15 pond.

But Cooter was lucky — someone could have been seriously injured by his actions. ■

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