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is something you have to do, and you do it regularly for a paycheck. You might sort of slog through it every day and not care much, or you might be very good at it and you may learn through experience and trial and error over the years. Either way, when or if that job ends, what will you have left?

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Typically, when a superintendent attains CGCS status, his or her employers will offer congratulations. But that person — like me when I attained certification many moons ago — isn’t guaranteed a pay increase. A lucky few superintendents will be financially rewarded soon after achieving CGCS designation — good for them!

Understand that employers are looking for those they feel are the most qualified in today’s highly competitive market. If you’re currently in the job market, you’ve likely noticed that most, if not all, the prime jobs being advertised have a “GCSAA Certified Preferred” notation on them. Does that mean you won’t get hired if you aren’t certified? Probably not, but why not get moving and begin today, so you can walk into the interview and tell them you are already seeking certification?

No one can argue the fact that having more experience and respected certification will give you the edge and advantage in today’s competitive market, especially in a challenging economy.

It’s easy to make excuses as to why we can’t achieve certain things — we’re too busy, we don’t have the time, etc. You can keep talking about all the things you don’t have, but I believe it’s better to focus on what you want to have, and it all boils down to whether you are willing to look ahead.

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Craig Currier, whether riding in his utility vehicle or walking the golf course (above), spent ample time on his radios talking about the weather.

Bethpage Black’s Craig Currier refuses to let Biblical-like rains dampen his spirit at this year’s U.S. Open

It’s easy to commiserate with Craig Currier, considering it’s pouring down buckets of rain on his parade — the 2009 U.S. Open. You feel downright doleful for Currier, the golf course superintendent at Bethpage Black Golf Course, for what he has had to endure on this stark Thursday morning, the opening round of one of America’s greatest sporting events.

It’s 10:20 a.m. and the weather sirens are blaring throughout the golf course with the message that play has been suspended after three hours and 20 minutes because of the driving rain. Tiger Woods and other golfers, who have played anywhere from one to 11 holes, are running for cover from the deluge that will soon transform Bethpage Black into Bethpage Lake and cancel play for the day.

Currier expected as much. Earlier in the morning, he saw the mass of red, yellow and green blotches approaching the area on the weather radar. In fact, during a 4 a.m. meeting with his grounds crew, Currier announced, “I can’t imagine we’re going to get much golf in today.”

But that didn’t mean Currier wasn’t going to do his best to make sure a lot of golf could be played. After all, he and his staff had been gearing up for this event for a few years since the United States Golf Association announced Bethpage Black, located on Long Island in Farmingdale, N.Y., would host its second U.S. Open. Currier and his crew weren’t about to pack it in for the day.

Currier has been awake since 2:45 a.m. He arrived at the 4 a.m. meeting with his crew, consisting of Bethpage’s 60 full-time members and 100 volunteers, looking as spruce as George Clooney ever could for that time of day. Currier is bright-eyed and clean-shaven as he starts on the X’s and O’s of the day’s game plan.

“Where are the bunker guys?” Currier asks of the group assigned to maintain the Black Course’s majestic hazards. “Will the rough fluffers please meet down in front,” he asks.

After receiving their assignments, the workers scatter out the door and into the rain. Unfortunately, the forecast for the next four days is similar to the forecast for the week that Noah built his ark — steely skies and steady rain. Currier is well aware of it as he steps outside to chat with volunteer Frank Darby, the men’s golf coach at nearby St. John’s University. Currier, a huge Pittsburgh Steelers fan, half jokingly tells Darby that meeting Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, who played Bethpage Black the previous week as part of the star-studded U.S. Open Challenge, could end up being the highlight of “my Open” because of the dismal forecast.

Currier has labored intently the past few years with United States Golf Association representatives to get the Black Course, one of five tracks he oversees at Bethpage, prepared for the U.S. Open. While they can get the course in the best shape possible for the event, they can’t manufacture a cloudless sky. And rain has a tendency to muck up everything from wedding days to picnics to golf tournaments.

Currier curls his 6-foot-5 frame into his Toro Workman utility vehicle and speeds off. It’s about 5 a.m. He’ll make many stops before the first tee shots launch at 7 a.m. on
holes No. 1 and No. 9. As the rain begins to slow, Currier remarks, “Hopefully, the rain won’t be as bad as they say, and we’ll get some golf in. It will be a shame if the whole day gets washed away.”

The problem is it has been raining on Farmingdale almost every day for the past two weeks. The course is like a soaked sponge. “We really can’t take much more rain,” Currier says.

While the sun can’t shine through the thick clouds, the darkness of the night soon gives way to morning. The rain has stopped for now, but the wind is starting to blow. During his rounds, Currier encounters Mike Davis, the USGA’s congenial director of rules and competitions. Davis is measuring green speed and probably praying for a miracle in the form of a big, blue sky.

At another stop, Currier checks on the progress of two crew members who are zipping up and down a putting green on two new electric rollers, which were delivered to Bethpage the night before. Currier ordered the rollers, which are almost 400 pounds heavier than gas-operated versions, to squeeze the greens tighter to keep the water rolling off them.

After a few minutes, Currier climbs back in his utility vehicle to continue his rounds. He sails the vehicle through puddles of myriad shapes and sizes. Currier is a multi-tasking man in motion. He drives the vehicle with one hand while carrying a radio with the other. Another radio is within reach, and he’s constantly switching back between the two. His cell phone is stashed in his jacket pocket. When it rings, Currier fetches it. A circus juggler has nothing on him.

It’s 6:20, 40 minutes to tee time. Currier encounters a white golf car driven by Dave Oatis, director of the USGA Green Section’s Northeast Region, who has been working with Currier for months on the course for the tournament. The two stop their vehicles.

“How you feeling?” Currier asks Oatis, who has been battling a cold. “Hey, it’s the Open,” Oatis responds, knowing he has no choice but to suck it up.

If this was a sunny and dry morning, Currier would have the mowers out in full force. But the weather stymied that plan. Instead of mowers, Currier has an army of squeegees and a fleet of Water Hogs (rolling devices to remove standing water) on the course.

“When you get water like this, everything is out the window,” Currier says. “We’re doing everything on the fly.” He smiles slightly before adding, “I’d get bored if we didn’t have this kind of stuff.”

It’s pushing 7 and the wind gusts are gaining strength. One can hear the whip of the red, white and blue USGA flags hanging on the grandstands. The weatherman says the rain machine, which has been off a couple hours, will kick back on about 7.

The weatherman is dead on. In fact, Continued on page 34
Currier’s staff numbered about 160, including about 100 volunteers. He needed everyone of them to keep the course in good playing condition.

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the rain comes pouring down almost exactly at 7. Currier finishes touching up a bunker near the ninth green and spots a group of golfers heading toward the 10th tee. “Let’s go watch the first tee shot of the U.S. Open,” he says.

The rain comes down even harder, but not enough to cancel play — yet. Currier positions rotating workers with squeegees at every green. These guys don’t know it at the time, but they will get their share of media exposure, from ESPN to “Sports Illustrated,” not to mention the many newspapers, magazines and TV stations covering the event.

Many grounds staff members have retreated to the maintenance shop, where a hot breakfast awaits them. Currier is one of the last to show up. He places his two radios in front of him and gobbles down a plate of bacon, eggs, sausage and French toast while watching the tournament on TV.

Play continues, but so does the rain. Currier stops by his office. Outside his door, Darby is waiting for him with two former St. John Redman basketball players for him to meet. Currier is a big fan.
Volunteer Andy Taylor fluffs the rough at 4:30 in the morning.

“What can you do?” he says quietly.

Currier also doesn’t sit and steam. He relies on his sense of humor to pull him through. He spots the two former St. John basketball players vacating the course. “Go Orangemen,” he yells. They turn to him and laugh.

Someone once said, “Humor is really laughing off a hurt.” Back at the maintenance shop, there is hurt — guys have been working their butts off all morning for naught — but there is humor, too. It’s announced that play for the day has been canceled and will resume the next morning. Outside, Currier gathers a group of drenched workers to tell them the news. It’s quiet when Currier

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finishes speaking until Mark Newmiller, a volunteer from Raleigh, N.C., and one of Currier’s friends, lets go with this zinger of a “Caddyshack” quote made famous by Bill Murray/Carl Spackler, “I don’t think the heavy stuff’s gonna come down for quite a while.”

Everyone cracks up.

Later, Owen Regan, a sod and seed dealer from Rhode Island and a hardworking volunteer, tells Currier he’s the “happiest guy at Bethpage right now” because he sells sod, and he knows Currier is going to need a ton of it after this tournament. Currier laughs.

The rain isn’t supposed to let up until the middle of the night, but the USGA’s goal is to play golf from morning to dusk on Friday to catch up. Currier heads home and goes to bed at 7:30 p.m. He’s up at 2:30 a.m. for the 3:30 meeting he has called. At the meeting, he tells the crew his rain gauge at home registered about 2 inches. “It could be worse,” Currier deadpans. “But I’m not sure how.”

It’s nearing 4 a.m. and the workers get out and at it. There’s much work to be done. The good news is the golf course is in decent shape. The USGA’s Davis says he’s “beyond delighted” of the condition of the course. When USGA Agronomist Adam Moeller tells Currier the greens are running 13.8 on the Stimpmeter, Currier replies, “I have the fastest mud on Long Island.”

Currier and his crew are nothing short of magnificent readying the course on this morning and for the rest of the U.S. Open. A big reason for this is Currier has assembled a team of workers that respects him so much they refuse to let him down.

Bethpage Black endured more rain on Saturday and the tournament finished a day late. Underdog and little-known Lucas Glover won the event and made for a great story.

And so did Currier and his crew for what they had to endure from Mother Nature. As Tiger Woods said, “The staff did a helluva job getting the golf course ready.”

Currier didn’t let the rain ruin his parade at all. You could say he just let it roll off his shoulder—kind of like the beads of water off his glistening raincoat.
Unemployed superintendents face difficult challenges in a bad job market

By John Walsh

Unemployment during this economic recession reached 9.4 percent in May, the highest level in 25 years and 3.9 percentage points higher than a year earlier. About 14.5 million people have felt or are feeling the sting of job loss — some for the first time in their careers — since the recession began in December 2007. Job losses have been large and widespread throughout the major industry sectors.

The golf course maintenance industry is no exception. Whether the reasons are financial or political, more golf course superintendents are being laid off. They’re sleeping in and spending more time with their families while looking for their next jobs.

Unemployed superintendents face difficult choices while trying to support their families: moving their families to take another job, taking a job that pays less than what they were making previously or taking another job in a related field. Jay Buccellato, Eric Cznarecki and Paul Mayes are a few superintendents facing those challenges.

A need to save money

Buccellato was laid off in November as superintendent at the Alaqua Country Club, a high-end, private 18-hole facility in Longwood, Fla. He was there 3.5 years.

Alaqua, which opened in 1988, has endured difficult times. The original equity membership was returned to the bank and then a member bought the club with a partner. Buccellato worked for the new owner/member.

When Buccellato began at the club in 2005, the course was in such bad shape that he treated it like a grow-in. Less than 50

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percent of the greens had grass on them, and the detail work was neglected.

"The owner told me to do whatever I needed to do to restore the club and get it back to the high-end position it was once at," Buccellato says. "He let me alone as long as he saw results."

The club spent $1 million improving and maintaining the 85-acre course in Buccellato’s first year and $900,000 in his second. The spending remained in that range until the middle of last year when the owner told Buccellato to save money.

"He was getting $1,000 a month from members, but no new members were coming in," Buccellato says. "The competition is tough in Orlando, and there are three other golf clubs within two miles of Alaqua."

Despite the needed improvements, members loved the course and were excited to see things change. "It was the club in Orlando in the late 1980s," Buccellato says. "It had been 10 years since the members saw the golf course that good."

The owner wasn’t running out of money, but he was forced to cut back when the stock market headed south and play declined, Buccellato says. Even though Buccellato was keeping things together with a Band-Aid — the 20-year-old irrigation system needed renovation and the course needed new maintenance equipment — Buccellato still thought he would be around for a while because the owner had invested a lot of money in the course.

Buccellato was surprised when he was let go.

"We just overseeded the golf course, and we were heading into winter when the owner called me out of the blue and told me we needed to meet," Buccellato says. "I had a bad feeling. He said he appreciated everything I’d done for the club, but it was losing money, and I was the highest-paid employee."

Buccellato’s assistant, who was making $40,000 less than him, took over. After hearing the bad news from the owner, Buccellato got in his truck and left.

"I thought I’d be safe even though things weren’t good financially because I did a good job," he says.

**Political downfall**

Colliers Reserve Golf Club in Naples, Fla., wanted to raise its standards, and it hired Eric Cznarecki to do so.

"I felt we did that," Cznarecki says. "We turned the club around based on membership feedback."

"Detail work is what I brought to the table," Cznarecki says. "I felt we did that," Cznarecki says. "We turned the club around based on membership feedback."
adds. “Turfgrass quality, detail work and the native areas were the three main areas of improvement.”

Cznarecki, who was only the third superintendent at the club since it opened in 1993, says he worked well with the different boards and green chairmen, except the last one.

“The boards were advisory, and they knew they hired a professional in me,” he says. “But the fourth green chairman I worked with had a personal agenda he thought was best for the club that was in conflict with what I had in place for five years. I had a good professional relationship with him, but we just disagreed at times.”

During discussion about a course renovation, the green chairman said he felt uncomfortable going ahead with it because he felt the club needed more member input. Additionally, there were other renovations in line, but they were put on hold because of the economy.

Cznarecki recalls how he was let go: “The general manager called me two hours before a green committee meeting, and the green chairman was in the room. The GM told me he had to let me go. I had a great relationship with the GM, but I worked for the club.”

His last day was March 19.

“The GM wanted me to save as much money as possible, and the green chairman was asking me why these renovation projects weren’t getting done,” he says. “You’re in a tough spot when the GM tells you one thing, and the green chairman tells you another.”

The greens committee wasn’t aware of Cznarecki’s firing, he says, adding that several members e-mailed and called him after he was let go.

“I was caught off guard; I was blindsided,” Cznarecki says.

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Looking for Work

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"It was just political. It wasn’t financially motivated. But, overall, Colliers Reserve was extremely good to me."

Cznarecki says he has learned from his firing.

“I didn’t address the finer details with the green committee,” he says. “Next time, I’ll relay all the information to the entire club — overall membership should know what’s going on before a major project happens.”

But Cznarecki, who says he hasn’t been the most politically savvy person, thought he communicated well overall at Colliers Reserve. “How do I deal with someone on a power trip?” he says. “I can’t put personal integrity on the line.”

A short stint
Paul Mayes was a superintendent with ValleyCrest Golf Course Maintenance at Industry Hills (Calif.) Golf Club, a 36-hole resort facility. But he worked there for only one year beginning in early 2008 after being “brought in to take it to the next level.”

Mayes, who has worked previously for management companies, doesn’t speak ill of ValleyCrest — things just didn’t work out.

“I was surprised [to be let go], but I can’t get into the particulars,” he says, acknowledging he received a week’s severance, and sick and vacation pay. “All I can say is I was involuntarily dismissed.”

Mayes’ last day at Industry Hills was Jan. 16.

Post job loss
Buccellato, who has been laid off before, enjoyed sleeping in for a few weeks after he was let go. He received two weeks of severance pay and two weeks of vacation pay after leaving.

Through networking, Buccellato took a job as a spray technician at the Country Club of Orlando in late May. He views the position at the 18-hole, private facility as temporary until he lands another head superintendent job. “It’s a good job to have until a superintendent’s position opens up,” he says. Buccellato signed up with a headhunter to broaden his chances of finding a job.

The job hunt has been slow. Buccellato has heard of situations in which other superintendents have been let go, but the clubs either aren’t replacing them or already found people to replace them.

Buccellato has been doing online self-study through the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. Although he hasn’t been to a local association meeting since he...

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July

THIS MONTH’S HEALTH TIP

Dogs and fireworks don’t mix. Protect your dog during the July 4th holiday. The sound of fireworks can terrify your dog, and he might run away, perhaps into traffic. A dog’s hearing is more sensitive than a human’s hearing. Explosive noises can damage your dog’s hearing, or a falling firecracker can injure the dog.

Rusty. His owner is Brian Kimbrough, golf course superintendent of River Forest Country Club in Elmhurst, Ill. (Photo by Jeff Schenkel)

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