



In Bounds

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North Oaks Golf Club

My son surprised me recently. When asked what he was thinking of pursuing in college, out of the blue this 17-year-old Star Wars whiz kid announced, "Well Dad, I kind of like working with grass. It is hard to get up so early in the morning, but once I am at work I really have a lot of fun. What you do is cool."

Speechless, I was taken aback. My boy, now a young man, had never showed signs of a green streak but rather leaned toward mathematics, engineering and writing in previous vocational discussions. But golf course management? Never would I have suspected this to be an interest. Never, ever.

During the lull of our conversation my heart began to grow with pride. It wasn't ever my intent to groom Tyler to be a Turf Head, but perhaps his last five years upon the course instilled within him the love I have for the outdoors, watching a project through to completion and working with a swell bunch of people. Or maybe he witnessed how hard I worked and how much enthusiasm I have for my position and he wanted a bit of that pie.

On second thought however, how much pie is there to be had in the golf course management industry?

When I began my career, although at the time I didn't think of it as such, there were seven of us (*eight if you include the night waterman, just an enigma really*) on the White Bear Yacht Club

crew. Bill Peitz, Superintendent/mechanic, John Steiner, assistant superintendent, Roger Zolner, rough mower/mechanic, Tony Larson, fairway/rough mower, Steve Sampair, greens, tees and national guy, Rick Copeland, bunker groomer/grunt and me, rotary mower, rock picker, hand clipper and all around super grunt. Sure player expectations and limited budgets didn't necessitate conditions we know today, but for the time eight people produced a very nice product.

It was during my second year at college, with John Steiner at the helm of the WBYC, that the ranks began to grow. (*Here I must add, that John's U of M class of 1976 was the first true turf agronomist class to graduate.*) Our team suddenly included a gardener, a mechanic, several more "grunt" positions and I had been advanced to a seasonal assistant. Wow, twelve on the crew in 1980.

The demand for recreational golf was taking off in the '80s and with that spurt came the development of redundant academic "Turf Programs" across the country ranging from vocational schools to four year colleges. My timing was perfect. Graduating in 1983, I caught the wave of golf popularity and rode the breaking crest to several opportunities as superintendent on three golf courses in two years. Sure I was a hard worker, and very, very lucky. Give much credit to John for his help along the way as well as tutelage from Dr. White at the University, but the ocean of turf management opportunities was vast and lightly traveled.

The golf course development boom generated a huge interest in the field of turf maintenance. Competition increased player expectations to levels never before experienced and a greater disposable income introduced more players to the game. The 1990s created a rare tidal wave of opportunities. More and more young men and women were encouraged to pursue turf management. Schools of higher learning produced a glut of young ambitious professionals, each with a hunger to become top dog.

The industry during this unprecedented growth period absorbed everyone who entered the ranks. Positions were created to match the player's expectations. No longer were there only first assistants, but second assistants became the norm as well. Full and assistant time horticulturalists were employed to manage the garden plots and even arborists were brought on board for their aerial expertise. Huge iron arsenals demanded the creation of associate mechanics to assist in the preservation of the equipment. And, of course, there was and continues to be the smattering of spray and irrigation techs.

But not unlike a wave dissipating upon the shallow beach, the explosion of growth slowed to a crawl. Unfortunately the institutional education curve was far behind the climax of course development. And thus there is currently an excess of educated and aspiring turf professional wannabees who hunger for advancement, and better yet, advancement with great pay in the location of their choice.

Combined with the shortage of upper management positions due to the reduction in the growth of golf, is the extended tenure we experience in the Upper Midwest. Just a decade ago it could be expected that several very good superintendent positions, would be posted through the course of an off season. Not so today. Player education regarding circumstances beyond the superintendent's control, better rounded turf professionals and the availability of a vast number of tools to further promote our longevity has limited the progressive and quick upward movement of the first assistant. And this in turn impacts all of the

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There in lies my dilemma. Do I encourage anyone, and in particular my son, to enter this highly competitive, very demanding, sometimes stressful and too often under-compensated profession? Will there be any "growing" room for them when they graduate? Will competition limit their advancement to a club located far from the destination of their choice? In my heart I feel that the answer is to discourage anyone with only a vague interest in the profession from investing into it as his or her livelihood.

Ouch, that hurt me to the core to say. But it is true. And it applies to those who only have a passing interest in the industry. Those individuals, who think the job is for them because they like to play golf, believe that it is more a seasonal than a full-time position, or that there is a fast track to the top. However, to the young men and women who are passionate for opportunities in turf management I have a few words of wisdom.

Keep your passion alive by teaming up with veteran and tenured superin-

tendents who can offer you more than a paycheck. Take advantage of their life lessons and dedicate yourself to providing them the very best employee possible. Give 200 percent of yourself. Listen, look and learn what it takes to be the elite in the industry.

Maintain your passion by loving and living turf. Become a participant in the MGCSA. Make your face known. Look good and act professionally at ALL times. Your image and or the perception of your professionalism never goes unnoticed. Continue your education at all levels in and outside of the turf industry. Generate a plan "B" just in case. Attend any and all meetings you are invited to, you never know who you may meet there. Be enthusiastic about the position you have created for yourself.

Anticipate being an Assistant for a long period of time particularly if relocation is not in the equation. Plan your lifestyle dependent upon your income. Don't overextend yourself financially or you will develop a disdain for the profession. Have patience with your personal economy. Large pay increases typically are achieved through position advance-

ment rather than extended employment at one club.

Above all else, if you find yourself losing interest in the profession, take a step back and evaluate your goals in life. Should your passion wane beyond a bad day or two, don't hesitate to seek sage advice from your mentors. They will help guide you in a healthy direction. As I tell my staff, "If you don't love what you are doing, find another job. A position in life where you will be happy. Contentment leads to productivity, which opens the door to opportunities. Opportunities are lost for lack of passion."

I suppose I just answered my perplexion.* My suggestion to Tyler will be to follow his heart with gusto. Consider his options carefully and develop a second, just as fervent alternate route to travel. The opportunities in the turf industry will be dependent upon how hard he applies himself, the relationships he creates and his passion for the business. Passion, professionalism and perhaps a lucky twist of fate will take him wherever he wants to go.

* made up word

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