

The Evolution of the Golf Course Superintendent

Editor's Note: This article comes from our national organization, Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. GCSAA is also marking its 75th anniversary this year. The celebration continues at the 2002 International Golf Course Conference and Show in Orlando, February 3-10, 2002.

Origins of the Game

Golf's introduction to Scotland (between 1424 and 1457) probably came through the merchantmen that sailed into the great harbors on the east coast. Golf was so popular in the 15th century that the fourteenth parliament of King James III decreed on March 6, 1457, that "fute ball (soccer) and golf be utterly cryit-dune," and "nocht to be usit" because the game interfered with archery, an essential element in the defense of the realm.

When the invention of gunpowder at the end of the 15th century reduced the importance of archery, golf again became popular. The Scottish and English paintings and sketches from the early 18th century show golfers playing with maintained fairways and greens, which implies that the work of greenkeeping was well established at that time.

The Royal and Ancient Golf Society of St. Andrews was formed in 1754 and formalized the game by creating a small number of basic rules. In its most rudimentary form, the game consisted of a course, implements (clubs) and a ball. The balls and implements were fairly standard, but the courses varied significantly

depending upon rainfall, wind, variety of grass, land features and the presence of grazing animals (the first lawnmowers).

The Early Greenkeeper

The Royal Burgess Golfing Society minutes indicated that in 1774, a boy was engaged as "our cady" and considered the first "greenkeeper" with a remuneration of six shillings per quarter year and a suit of clothes. From 1809 to 1820, a person was employed with the title of club-maker and officer, as well as assistant in keeping the green. However, in 1866 a council made up of two members of each of five area clubs was appointed to take charge of the green and pay jointly a person "to make holes, look after the flags and mend the turf." A motion was carried that a professional golfer be employed as a servant of the club and the entire charge of the course be entrusted to him. Tom Morris was introduced and his duties explained.

Morris would keep the putting greens in good order, repair them when necessary and make new holes. He would be allowed one man's labor for two days a week and it would be understood that he was to work under the supervision of the green committee. The newly appointed

chief of the links was paid 50 pounds per year and 20 pounds for the upkeep of the links. Although Morris would retire in 1903 after 40 years as greenkeeper, the basics of some of his maintenance practices are still employed today. Golf historian Horace Hutchinson wrote in his book *Golf*, "The greenkeeper is engaged by the club at a certain annual salary to look after the ground, arrange (sic) the tees and read the riot act to small boys who play off the greens with their irons, and to generally act as custodian. He will also be the overseer of one or more horny-handed sons of toil who, under his directions, roll, sweep and mow the greens and fill up iron-skelps, and other wounds in the grounds."

Hutchinson explained in 1906 that the profession of modern greenkeeper was no easy one and not to be picked up lightly by a caddie or a professional player. He went on to say that it should be a profession unto itself. Hutchinson believed the greenkeeper should have an elementary knowledge of chemistry and botany, and be a man of acute observation.

As the popularity of the game increased, the rules became

more formalized and so did maintenance of the course. And just as the game itself changed, so did the role of those in charge of the playing field. Maintaining a golf course in excellent playing condition while permitting continuous use by golfers in weather that changed seasonally and unexpectedly, demanded knowledge of turfgrass and effective management methods.

Greenkeepers in the United States were greatly influenced by the traditions of England and Scotland. While there is some indication that golf course construction in America was attempted in the early 1800s, the first real golf course was not constructed until the 1890s. However, the challenges of maintaining golf courses in the America were much different than in Europe, thus these professionals had to adapt to the conditions.

Technology, Education, Community

Just as technology has had an impact on the playing equipment, golf course maintenance has been subject to technological advancements. Automatic, satellite-controlled watering systems have allowed superintendents to use water resources more efficiently, while improving conditions for golfers. Equipment such as triplex mowers, verticutters, aerators and lasers have positively affected the playing surface while causing little, if any, downtime for facilities.

University and privately funded research have resulted in better turfgrass cultivars, environmentally friendly maintenance practices and improved golf course designs. The result is golf courses are better conditioned and can better withstand the effects of weather, traffic and disease than a few decades ago. Turfgrass research was limited until the

1920s when the USGA Green Section was established for that purpose. By the 1960s, most states were conducting turfgrass research. It was also during this time of impressive growth that the occupational title of "golf course superintendent" began to replace the term "greenkeeper."

Advances in education have had a great impact on the professional growth of golf course superintendents. Until the 1950s, it was common for the superintendent to spend 90 percent of his/her time performing maintenance duties. Today, that figure is nearer to 35 percent as budgeting, scheduling, personnel, research, design and planning activities each command attention. In order to perform those duties, aspiring superintendents could no longer rely solely on serving an apprenticeship as a steppingstone to the top position.

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Colleges and universities began offering golf course management curriculums featuring classes in agronomy, business management and communication. The first vocational course for greenkeepers was introduced in 1927 by the University of Massachusetts, which followed shortly with a two-year course of study. In 1957, a two-year course in turfgrass management was started at Penn State. During the 1960s and 1970s, numerous vocational and university turfgrass programs became available and today more than 100 colleges and universities offer two- and/or four-year degrees.

A recent GCSAA study indicates that 95% of golf course superintendents have some post-high school education. For superintendents younger than 30, that number is just over 98%. Approximately 47% of the college

degrees earned by superintendents are in turfgrass management, with 12% in horticulture, 10% in agronomy and 8% in business administration. Continuing education is virtually a requirement for golf course superintendents in order to perform at a high level. Employees who administer the application of chemicals on a course are trained and licensed by various local, state and/or federal governing bodies.

Entrusted with administering a large portion of a golf facility's budget and managing its most valuable asset, the golf course superintendent has become an integral member of the management team. Many have assumed roles such as director of golf, manager of golf course operations, general manager, etc. In fact, a recent reader survey by *Golf Digest* listed the superintendent as the most important

individual employee at a golf course, including the club/course pro, club/grill manager, starter and beverage personnel. As the game and business of golf has grown, so has the recognition of the superintendent as key to the enjoyment of the game and the economic vitality of golf facilities.

"Maintenance is more important to the golfer than design," internationally-respected golf course architect Michael Hurdzan notes. "Given the choice between a well-designed course and a poorly maintained one, or a poorly designed and well-maintained one, the golfer will nearly always choose the better maintained. Maintenance often has a greater influence than design on a course's difficulty and speed of play."

Though education, research and technology enhanced the trade, it was the creation of com-



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munity that elevated the position of the superintendent. The creation of the USGA Green Section in 1920 and the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America in 1926 provided a means to network and exchange information for the maintenance of golf facilities.

The Superintendent Profile

While the golf course superintendent profession has changed over time, it is still largely a combination of art and science. However, financial implications and technological advances have changed the position from one of a laborer to resource manager. Today's superintendent must manage labor, time, materials and finances in a manner that is compatible with the environment, meets financial goals and serves the customer. So what kind of person chooses the superintendent profession? Surveys indicate a passion for the game of golf and/or a desire to work with nature or

experience an outdoor setting as the reason(s) people pursue the career.


An analysis of golf course superintendents in the United States reveals the average individual is 41 years old, earns \$57,057 annually, has been a superintendent for 11 years and has worked at two different facilities. These figures represent the mean, thus significant differences may exist depending on region of the country, the number of holes at a course, course type (private, resort, public), number of employees supervised, size of maintenance budget, etc. Those who complete a rigorous certification program administered by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America generally earn higher salaries and have a greater opportunity to advance in the profession or in the administration of their golf facility. It is not unusual to find a superintendent who earns well into the six figures.

The Future

A 1997 study by the National Golf Foundation examined trends in the golf industry for a period from 1986-96. It found the growth in golf facility construction significantly outstripped demand. In real terms, the supply of golf courses grew by 2,350, including a rate of 392 courses per year from 1991-96. In terms of golfer demand, the 1986-96 period saw an increase from 20 to 25 million golfers, however the number of golfers (25 million) and rounds played (460 million) has remained essentially the same from 1990-95.

In 1999, the NGF updated its study and found golf facilities continued to be developed at impressive rates. In 1997, there were 16,010 golf courses; that figure grew to 16,743 in 1999. Annual golf course openings topped 500 for the first time in


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The Illinois PGA's Golf Hall of Fame Inducts Ray Gerber



Don Gerber, longtime superintendent at Chicago Golf Club, accepts the Illinois Golf Hall of Fame plaque on his late father Ray's behalf. Don's remarks were heartfelt and moving.


Until October 12, 2001, the Illinois PGA's Golf Hall of Fame had inducted only one superintendent: Bob Williams, in 1990. Now, after an 11-year drought for the greenkeeping profession, Ray Gerber has joined an illustrious group that includes the other three Class of 2001 inductees: longtime Medinah pro Tommy Armour, celebrated amateur golfer Bill Shean and Tour pro D.A. Weibring.

During this, the 75th-anniversary year of the MAGCS, Ray Gerber has received plenty of ink in *On Course*, which he edited for 11 years (1972-83) during its *Bull Sheet* incarnation. Ray deserves every column inch we've devoted to his remarkable achievements, and then some. A three-time past president of the MAGCS and past president of GCSAA in 1950, Ray held the post of superintendent at Glen Oak Country Club for 34 years (1936-70). Always committed to education and ever the innovator, Ray received many distinctions during his lifetime, including the Charles Bartlett

Award for Public Relations in 1971, the Distinguished Service Award from GCSAA in 1975, and the Herb Graffis Special Recognition Award in 1981.

Dan Roan, sportscaster for WGN-TV, acted as master of ceremonies for the festive evening, which featured outstanding hospitality by the Glen Club and a moving video presentation highlighting the life and times of each inductee. Ray's son, Don Gerber, accepted the honor on his late father's behalf. At the Gerber table, in addition to Don, were Don's wife, Lynn; two of Ray's

granddaughters; and Bob Williams. In tribute to Ray, the Midwest also sent a delegation, including Brian Bossert, Luke Strojny, Kevin DeRoo, Fred Behnke, Mike Bavier, Carl Hopphan, Pete Leuzinger, Al Fierst, Jeff Leuzinger and Cathy Ralston.

Ray's splendid career and devotion to profession and family notwithstanding, the one comment I hear about him time and again is how much he epitomized a true gentleman. In this, perhaps, is the ultimate tribute. 

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1999. In terms of golfer participation, an all-time number of rounds played (564.1 million) and the second-highest number of golfers (26.44 million) were realized in 1999.

Most observers are cautiously optimistic that the growth of golfers will gain momentum as the "Baby Boomer" generation begins to age. There are approximately 78 million Baby Boomers, and this group was responsible for

the biggest growth in the game when it reached 20-30 years of age. Research indicates that golfers spend more and play more as they age. Thus, the Boomers should fuel growth. The recent success of younger players and minorities on the professional tours will likely spur participation as well.

For the superintendent profession, the expansion in golf courses and other golf facilities

such as driving ranges, pitch and putts, etc., plus a probable increase in golfer demand is likely to result in good career opportunities for some time to come.

Information gathered from GCSAA archives and Golf Course Management Magazine.

