

Carl Hoppman -N- Midwest Golf House

Photo by Peter Wagner/courtesy CDGA



Photo by Dr. Randy Kane



Carl Hoppman is overseeing development of the Short Course at Midwest Golf House as well as the realization of an arboretum on the grounds there.

Almost 2,500 years ago, Aeschylus wrote, "Time as he grows old teaches many lessons." There are many lessons to be gleaned from this month's profile of Carl Hoppman.

"Golf is a service industry, and our primary function as superintendents is to communicate with and service the needs of our customers, employers and members. How we portray ourselves through our words and actions widely impacts our credibility and success more so than the turf itself."

—Carl Hoppman

It is a cool, crisp, sunny morning in early January as I write. Worsening weather conditions were imminent. I had the high honor and profound privilege to visit with Carl as we reflected back on his career, the substructure that shaped it, and the advice and experience he could share with us.

Carl's career as a superintendent began at Aurora Country Club in 1956. He worked there for 28 years. In 1983, Carl moved to Evanston Country Club. Fifteen years later, Carl became the director of development for the Illinois Turfgrass Foundation (ITF). I saw his passion for our profession in his heart through his eyes. His hands displayed his craftsmanship and success, and as he spoke of the fun he has had these past 50 years, I listened.

Carl has big, muscular hands; undoubtedly, so did his father. Carl was the son of German immigrants. A first-generation American, he grew up in the blue-collar neighborhoods of rugged East Aurora. Carl's father was a craftsman. He used his hands to fabricate precision machine parts as a tool-and-die maker. He worked hard to support his family. His wife, Carl's mother, raised and nurtured their children. That was the tradition. They were proud. He learned to work hard, very hard. Carl is proud.

Carl had an early interest in being an architect. Thankfully, he admits, it did not pan out. As fortune would have it, after serving in the Marine Corps during the Korean conflict, he would soon succumb to the passion inherent in our profession after working on a golf course. That was in 1953, many lessons ago.

I asked Carl, what advice would you give to one aspiring to become a superintendent? "First, there are significant advantages to developing a core
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group of close peers (other superintendents). The success you achieve in part will be dependent on fostering these relationships. I attribute much of my success to the guys I hung around,” Carl says. “They lean on me and I on them. We shared ideas and discussed everything pertaining to turf care. We often played golf together, and I have enjoyed that camaraderie ever since. Facing situations and finding solutions through the critical review and consultation of my peers enabled me to enjoy the successes I gained,” he adds.

Second, Carl offers additional advice, believing superintendents today need to develop excellent public relations and speaking skills along with a positive attitude. “Golf is a service industry, and our primary function as superintendents is to communicate with and service the needs of our customers, employers and members. How we portray ourselves through our words and actions widely impacts our credibility and success more so than the turf itself,” Carl notes.

The third and final piece of advice Carl has to offer is “be humble.” To paraphrase Carl, everyone will face challenging situations during their careers. Adversity is going to happen. Be prepared to handle it and learn from it. That core group of peers pays off here. Chances are one of them has had similar situations. Ask for their advice and assistance. There is a tremendous advantage to being open and out-front with regard to club communication. You are often looked upon as the leader, the guy with mean-

ings and skills. Never let an opportunity to impact an audience of members slip past. There are going to be times when playing conditions are not up to standards. Learn to bite your lip, choose your words carefully, be considerate and use tact in addressing these types of concerns proactively.

I asked Carl, what one thing would you change about our profession and Association if you could? Carl points to “those with their hands out” regarding the Association and reminds us that “you have to do it yourself.” While the Association provides some tools and networking, you have to get involved and participate. “Our strength as an Association is your participation.”

When I asked of his mentoring influences, Carl offered some familiar and not-so-familiar names. John MacGregor, Joe Chapman and Wally Fuchs stood out as men to whom Carl attributes much of his success. “These men had great skills, attitudes and ways of communicating clearly and concisely. Each had special skills and knowledge that I respected, admired and emulated,” Carl says.

John MacGregor was the “greenkeeper” at Chicago Golf Club, and was reverently known as the dean of Chicago greenkeepers for those 25 years. John was an original charter member and past president of GCSAA, and Distinguished Service Award recipient in 1935. A Scottish immigrant, John would often visit and console Carl in his early days at Aurora. “John had the uncanny and beautiful ability to get his point across

with so few words. He was a quiet man with a deep Scottish brogue. He encouraged me to learn and excel,” Carl recalls.

Like John MacGregor, Joe Chapman’s words spoke volumes. Joe was the elder statesman at Aurora Country Club. As Carl’s greens chairman, Joe instilled in Carl the necessity to be tactful, honest and respectful of others.

Lastly, “Wally Fuchs supplied me with an immense wealth of technical knowledge, practical expertise and friendly advice. Wally has been my closest friend for 40 years. He entered the Chicagoland market in 1964, and I have been the benefactor of our relationship ever since,” Carl says.

According to Carl, the largest challenge facing the golf course industry during the next 20 years is excessively high expectations. “We are expecting too much regarding course conditioning, especially green speeds. Grass plants have three basic parts: roots, blades and crowns. Mowing at 1/8th of an inch or less eliminates one of the three parts. When are we going to learn that ever-increasing high expectations are detrimental to turf health in the end!” Carl exclaims.





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