

Goodbye, Carl Spackler

Author's Note: I was inspired to explore this topic after attending the Annual Assistants Workshop in March. It was one of the most impressive seminars I have attended in a long time. The energy and insight that each speaker possessed left many of the assistants and superintendents in the audience wanting more at the end of the day.

Riddle me this.

I am a college-educated, computer-literate time-manager, problem-solver, committee member as well as an equipment, spray and irrigation technician. I am a leader and a professional! What am I?

A golf course superintendent?

Actually, I am an assistant golf course superintendent.

The skills I can boast are commonplace among the assistant superintendents we see today. This business is younger and brighter than it ever has been before and it keeps on improving. Superintendents raise the bar every day to better the industry and to better themselves as leaders and professionals. Also, golfers are learning and demanding more out of our profession. All this puts more demand on assistants; witness that now many assistants have assistants! Educated second assistants, spray technicians, irrigation technicians and foremen are hired to assist in daily course work so the assistant can monitor and manage almost every other aspect of the course on a day-to-day basis. Like strip malls, turf programs are popping up everywhere, producing more energized and bright minds. Specialized education is taken very seriously—it's hard to find a job as a golf course manager without this sort of degree. In the past, if a greenkeeper even had a degree, it was in some kind of agriculture or something totally unrelated. Mike Bavier, superintendent at Inverness Golf Club in Palatine, recalls that in the 1960s he was one of a few in the field who had a college degree; this landed him an assistant's job at top 100-rated golf course Olympia Fields Country Club. This would not be the case today. The golf booms of the 1990s, defined by Jim McLoughlin at this year's assistants' workshop as the player boom, the golf course boom and the practice facility boom, have also led our industry into focusing more on not only turfgrass degrees but specifically "golf" turfgrass degrees as a prerequisite to getting the job done right. Many people believe that the number of turf programs and the amount of qualified men and women they produce have flooded the turf industry as compared to the scenario of 10 years ago. This is not true. As McLoughlin pointed out, an average of 190+ golf courses are still being built each year. Also, superintendents retire, get fired or leave the business, allowing "youngsters" into the mix. So don't worry, it's business as usual, supply and demand.

Many assistants run daily irrigation programs and assist with issues like budgets and fertilizer and pesticide programs using a particular computer program. Sometimes they write articles for their local chapter publication. Computers skills are very important, and for the most part, mandatory for assistant superintendents to have today. It is the job of the assistant superintendent to fill the shoes of the superintendent when he or she is absent from the golf course. The assistant has to make all of the managerial decisions during that time, be able to solve any problems that may occur during the superintendent's absence and make the right decisions based upon the superintendent's philosophies. An assistant needs to be able to interpret the superintendent's ways of thinking and to be able to carry it out when in a difficult situation.

Assistants are day-to-day superintendents and have been recognized as such for many years. Now, superintendents and greens committees are requesting that their assistants attend greens committee meetings and sometimes,

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Academy Award nominee and Chicago-area native Bill Murray portraying Carl Spackler, assistant superintendent at Bushwood Country Club, in Caddyshack. Murray's performance was pure genius, the movie hilarious, but the Spackler character has long colored the perception of assistant greenkeepers.

other committee meetings the course may have. Our very own local chapter understands that assistants are superintendents too and encourages assistants to volunteer for various committees so that we might share insights and new ideas to better all of us. An assistant is often seen in professional attire in the clubhouse and at other business meetings alongside the superintendent. Assistant superintendents make more business decisions and appearances today than they did just 10 years ago. Since the day superintendents started gaining respect and stature as professionals, assistants have been following right behind them and are now receiving recognition just as head superintendents did only in the past few years.

During open discussion at the assistants' workshop, Jon Jennings, CGCS of Chicago Golf Club in Wheaton said, "Look how much business we do in this business."

When you think about it, this statement makes a lot of sense. Our customers are golfers and many golfers are very successful people who know everything there is to know about good business. To be able to cater to their needs, we need to be able to communicate on their level and speak the language they understand. Most golfers do not have agronomy degrees (even though sometimes we wish they did) and they don't care that you topdress or verticut your greens. They want to know how much does it cost, and how it will affect their play. Questions like these have been dealt with by superintendents for years, but now assistants are witnessing this, hands on, through involvement with their golf course's committees. They are learning what really goes on behind the scenes.

Salaries are keeping pace with the new assistant's role. In 2003, the average base salary for assistants in our region of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Wisconsin was approximately \$31,000 while the average salary (not base) for assistants in 1995 was approximately \$25,500. The average base salary today is 18% higher than the average salary was eight years ago. Fringe benefits haven't changed much since 1995, though. The only significant change has been an

increase in cellular phone use by assistant superintendents.

This golf industry has continued expanding over the past few years even though we haven't seen a large increase in golfers or golf courses since the "golf booms." The slower economy has forced superintendents (the true leaders in this industry) to look for new ways to keep the game alive and growing. They are responsible for the new growth by educating golfers and people within the business. These positive actions have had a ripple effect, causing the assistant superintendent positions to assume more responsibility. Assistants have become businessmen themselves. Assistants used to be portrayed as glorified bunker-rakers. Their business was all hands-on and behind-the-scenes, performing tasks that today are accomplished by a foreman, second assistant, technician or any crew member. Their job was to shut up and remain unnoticed while making the superintendent look like a hero. Many assistants lacked formal education. Many had the "Carl Spackler didn't, so why should I" attitude. It's a good thing that assistants are increasingly viewed as leaders and professionals, and that the Carl Spacklers of the world are becoming extinct. Because if it were the other way around, golf would be in bad shape!



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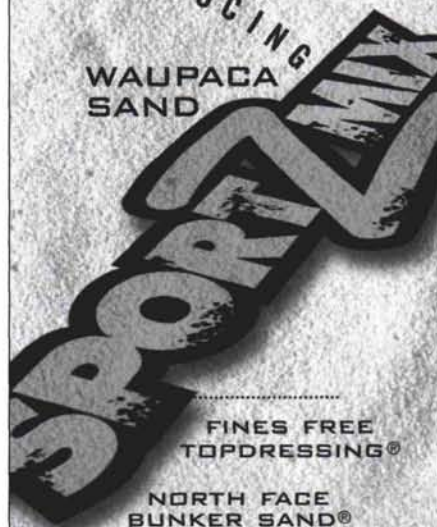
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