

The Supporting Team Player

There is a term used in basketball for the player that does not start the game, but is an integral component of the team. That individual is often referred to as the "Sixth Man." This "off the bench" player doesn't start the game. Five players start. When the first substitution is made, that player is the "6th man." The phrase "best 6th man," is used to acknowledge the best player on the bench. The sixth man does not get the starring glory. He stands in the background, is ready to assist when needed, and sometimes, may not be called upon at all. However, the sixth man knows that he is helping and supporting in many other ways.



Ashworth, in the cart and ready for an action packed day on the course.



The little terror, ready to get loose and chew something.

The "sixth man" I make reference to is the dog. The dog dutifully goes to the golf course each day and becomes a background player on the maintenance staff. The breed or age is irrelevant. Both the staff and the dog know what to expect from each other. Sales representatives visit numerous courses throughout the day and know the dogs by name.

This golf course dog story begins in August 1993. My 30th birthday was a surprise orchestrated by my wife. Upon returning home from an afternoon of watching poa self destruct under a hot August sun, I saw a number of cars in the vicinity of our rented condominium. This is fairly common given the proximity of other condos. Not thinking anything of it, I walked into the main entry to a large greeting of Surprise!! Boy was I surprised. On the edge of the room was a large, covered, rectangular object. When the time approached for presents, my wife Susan directed me toward the object. I uncovered a large, empty, dog crate. Susan had made the unilateral decision that it was time to get a new dog, and my birthday would be the vehicle for that decision.

We had had a dog the previous Fall. Spalding was a large, 3-year-old, black Labrador retriever with enough personality and assertiveness for two dogs. Spalding accompanied me one morning while I was changing cups. A squirrel in the woods caught his attention. As he often did, Spalding ran after the squirrel as fast as he could. He disappeared from my sight, and a moment or two later I heard him yelp. He limped as he came toward me from the woods. I assumed that with his rambunctious nature he had sprained his foot. I thought nothing more of the event. The next day, something was wrong. Spalding labored to get up and to hop in the truck to go to work. Usually he

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was ready to knock the door down and get the day going.

I brought him to the vet and had him examined. The vet did find a minor sprain in his front foot and a small puncture in his chest. To be on the safe side, the vet x-rayed the chest to see if Spalding had been shot accidentally by a hunter in the thick woods behind the course. The x-rays showed nothing metallic within the chest. He was given a prescription for antibiotics and we were on our way home.

Two days later, Spalding was breathing very heavily and his behavior was quite lethargic. I took him back to the vet, and he stayed for observation. I was called the next day by the veterinarian who informed me that Spalding had died that morning. I was speechless. A couple of days ago this was a healthy dog with a sprained foot, and now he was dead. The vet wanted to perform an autopsy.

The vet called a couple of days later. He said that it was the strangest thing he had ever seen. While running through the woods, Spalding had run into a stick. He struck the stick or branch with such force that it penetrated his chest. As the forward force caused his body to compress, his heart shifted to the front where the stick punctured his heart and broke off. The x-rays did not show the stick or the damaged heart. Spalding lived for a week with a hole in his heart before he died.

It was after all this that my wife went looking for another dog as a surprise birthday present. The condominium we rented in Connecticut had a strict no pet policy. Susan had negotiated with the owner to double our security deposit if we could have a dog. Originally, her plan was to find a dog and have it in the crate ready for the party. She reviewed several newspaper ads and even went to a local, upscale breeder. She said that the breeder would bring the puppies before you for viewing and selection. You were not permitted to handle them at any time. These dogs were also \$700 each in 1993 dollars. No sale. My mother found an ad in the Hartford Current, which covers the

northern part of the state: Labrador puppies for sale, \$250.00. I called the number and we traveled northeast for two hours to take a look at them.

When we knocked on the door, there was no answer, no barking or anything else, for that matter. When we walked around the side, off in the back of the heavily wooded, lot we could see a kennel. Walking back toward the kennel, we could see at least eight lab puppies scurrying about. They were an even mix of yellow and black. At that moment, the owner arrived. He opened the kennel door. All eight puppies poured out of the pen and began to run back and forth. I watched them and managed to grab hold of one particularly active black puppy. I looked at his eyes. The owner insisted that the parents had good hips. He even had AKC papers certifying



Ash, about to learn a life lesson about leaving some individuals alone.

that the puppy was a purebred.

We paid him cash and began the drive back home in the pickup truck. The puppy sat between us and started to breathe heavily and drool after about 30 minutes of driving. It turned out he was car sick and did not enjoy being in the front seat.

A Name is a Name

One of the first responsibilities of any pet owner is selecting a proper name. It must be a name that is commanding and deserving of the dog's heritage. In my mind it should not be the name on the AKC certificate. Those names are, for the most part, long and very stale. Finally, it should be a name that can be yelled with great clarity as the dog picks up the

“Susan had made the unilateral decision that it was time to get a new dog...”

18-hole, ladies' club champion's golf ball from the fairway and runs with it toward you.

Two days had passed and I was at a loss for a name. Sitting in our living room one evening, the little terror was chewing on a leather tag he had found. As I ripped it from his mouth and looked at the damaged item, there it was, “Ashworth.” The leather tag was from a new shirt. The name was strong, had a golf undertone, and could be bellowed quite strongly when the dog needed to be brought to attention. Ashworth it was.

Ashworth fit in very well at work. He, of course, had his moments, such as the time he removed my assistant's lunch from a duffle bag and ate it. Another: during the boredom of being in my office, he chewed through the telephone wires. Nothing was sacred. A sales representative dropped off a one-gallon container of experimental wetting-agent that would later be named Primer. Ashworth took it upon himself to chew through the plastic container causing just about all of the wetting-agent to leak out and be absorbed in the three-month-old carpet in my office. As I added water to the area for cleaning, it foamed up uncontrollably. I never did have to worry about LDS in my office. The stain remained until the carpet was replaced five years later.

Take the Pain

There are many life lessons that can be learned from your dog. As one reflects upon experiences gone by, the lessons come to light. For instance: Ignore pain, and don't let it interfere

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with what is important. Ash was about six months old and running alongside my assistant's cart. As the cart went downhill on a path, Ash, in his infinite wisdom, decided to cross in front of the cart and was run over. Instinctively, my assistant hit the brakes causing the cart to skid across the dog's back leg. Off to the vet for the first of what would be many visits. Fortunately nothing was broken.

He did require some stitches and his left side was shaved from the mid section back. While he was at the vet, we decided to have him neutered. The vet did not have a problem with this. He said Ash would be ready to go home the next day. We received a telephone call from the vet's office later that same day. They said that we could come and pick Ash up as it appeared he was unaware of having had a surgical procedure earlier that day.

Gulag

Training was a challenge and Susan should have earned sainthood for her patience with Ash. Because she worked from our home, she spent hours training and disciplining the dog. She trained him to sit when



Ashworth always was gregarious, approachable and friendly.

she made a closed fist while speaking to clients on the phone. One of the classic training techniques occurred around 9:30 one evening. Ashworth's crate was in the kitchen, and our bedroom was on the second

floor. He began yipping incessantly. I tried to ignore it, but Susan was having none of it. The covers were thrown back from her side of the bed. She rushed with a full head of steam to the kitchen. From the distance I heard a loud bang on the top of the crate and her shout, "NO!". That was the last time Ashworth ever barked or made any noise with the exception of panting. When she returned, even I was afraid to speak for a while.

Ambassador

As golf course superintendents we are often categorized as withdrawn or behind-the-scenes people. We are not the first person you see when you arrive at the Club. Many times, we are so involved

with our work that we have no interaction with players during their round of golf. Ashworth, being gregarious in nature, allowed me to meet a number of people each year, whether I wanted to or not.

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Ash was sneaky. With his quiet demeanor, he would often slink away unnoticed and look for fun things to do. Children playing were always a big draw for him. I would let him out of my office at the end of the day while I programmed the irrigation computer or prepared something else for the next day. One evening, I locked the door to the maintenance facility and began walking toward my car. I called Ashworth to come and got no response. I looked around and did not see him.

As I walked toward the golf course calling his name, I saw a group of players on the 15th tee. On the back of the tee, being petted by the Club president, was Ashworth. When the group had each hit their tee shots and begun to walk toward the fairway, Ashworth was following close behind. I would have to engage with the group in order to get Ash back and go home. The membership for the most part really liked Ash. They would ask where he was when he was not riding with me or running alongside.

Not everyone appreciated him. On a particular evening in early October, I was driving a cart in from the far, west side of the course. Ash was loping along behind me. I saw a member playing on the seventh hole and stopped to say hello. A moment later Ash had caught up with me and appeared at my side. The member threw his hands up in the air and screamed in high pitched voice, "AAHHHH, a dog, I hate dogs!! Not just your dog, all dogs". The lesson here is: no matter how hard you try, or what your personality, not everyone will always like you, nor can you please them. Ash shrugged it off and we went on our way back to the maintenance facility.

Balanced Life

To be at our best and internally happy, we must arrange a balance between the golf course and our families. When either one gets out of place, the other suffers. Ashworth had the ability to balance life perfectly. I know for a fact that my greatest stress comes from spending too much time in one area of my life and constantly running toward the other.

Ashworth never seemed to have this problem. He was content being in either situation. He could spend all day at the golf course chasing geese,

interacting with numerous people, and still have time to play ball with the kids when he got home.

Sportsman

A sportsman is someone that abides by the rules of a contest and accepts victory or defeat graciously. Ash almost never travelled without a ball or something else that a person could throw for him to retrieve. My assistant was a very good hockey player. Ash would play goalie while my assistant hit tennis balls toward him with a hockey stick. Very rarely could Ash be faked out. Shagging golf balls was another of his favorite activities. His anticipation of where the golf ball would land was uncanny. The second the ball would leave the club face, Ash would take off in that direction and bring it immediately back to be struck again. He would do this for as long as you wanted.

Thrill Seeker

One particular fall, we had an excessive amount of rain in Connecticut. The rain gauge measured over three inches and the golf course was absolutely soaked. Most sections were impassable because the normally benign stream that wound through the property had swollen to a much larger size. For obvious reasons, golf carts were not permitted that day. Anyone having the desire to play was relegated to walking the course.

*When she returned,
even I was
afraid to speak
for a while.*

There was a drainage culvert in front of the seventh tee with a pond on one side and an outflow on the other. Across the top of the culvert was an asphalt cart path that was just barely above water. A vortex was created by the backed up water rushing through the pipe. As I approached the area, I ran into our green chairman and discussed the wet conditions with him for a moment or two. As we talked, Ash, in his incessant quest to retrieve things, walked into the pond to get a stick. Unfortunately, the stick was near the aforementioned vortex. It sucked him underwater and through the culvert. The green chairman and I stood there in disbelief. Oh great, "Labrador drowns while retrieving stick."

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Ashworth teaches a lesson to Samantha during take your child to work day.

The culvert was approximately three feet in diameter and twelve feet in length. We stood there helplessly, neither one of us knowing quite what to do. A few seconds later, there was Ash being flushed from the outwash of the pipe. He went down stream about 25 feet until he could make it back onto the bank. He shook off water from head to tail, grabbed a different stick and ran toward us as if nothing had ever happened.

Research Assistant

Dr. Randy Kane and Lee Miller were performing seed-head suppression trials in 2001 on our 18th fairway. The trial had a rough start. The day we were to begin spraying the different products for evaluation we had a strong southwest wind. Plywood was held on the wind side of the of the plot area to block the wind and prevent drift. Randy would make the trip to Wheaton once a week to evaluate the work. Most of the time he would arrive around 9:00 a.m. We were usually still setting up the golf course for the day. Randy would come to the

maintenance facility, get a cart, and load his tools into the back of it. He would also get Ashworth out of my office and take him out to the 18th to assist with the evaluation. Randy would string the quadrants of the plots and assess the amount of seed-head that he observed under the varying controls.



Trying to convince Ash that he really does know how to swim.

Ashworth would try to coax Randy into throwing a stick he had found or a golf ball pulled from the front of a utility vehicle. The two of them were one of the great research teams of all time.

The Final Lap

We all change. Things that were once easy and effortless become difficult, problematic, or challenging. Ashworth aged and was not the dog he once had been. Monday, February 20, 2006, was a bright, crisp, winter day. The temperature had risen into the upper 20s and there was little to no wind. Ash followed me for the final time as we traveled the course to review work that would need to be completed for the spring start up.

Ashworth taught me many things and bridged the lives of everyone that worked with him. His positive attitude was a model for all to follow. As gracious as he was throughout his life, he also knew when it was time to move on to another opportunity. When you have done all that you can do in one location, you need to look for the next bridge to cross in order to assist where you are needed.



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The Grass Profession

Hey Turf Guy my lawn has brown patches. What's going on?

Before I tackle such a challenging question it might be worthwhile to present my credentials. At the present time I am the Executive Director for the Midwest Sod Council and the Fundraising Director of the International Turf Producers Foundation. During my career I have also been a Golf Course Superintendent/General Manager and a College Turfgrass Professor. I tell you all this so I can tell you this: I am a turfgrass expert, more exactly, a turfgrass sod expert. I share this with you not because I proclaim it to be so, but because everyone else believes it to be true. That being the case one can only assume that it must be true. Of course, since others have such a flattering perception of who and what I am, it also creates a dilemma of sorts. Such a distinction can also mean different things to different people. To some I am a guru, a wizard with problem-solving solutions, the all knowing Carnac the Magnificent, but to most I am just a schmuck who has wasted most of his life on grass (if you don't believe me just talk to my wife). But alas I say, let us pause and consider Grass. That's it! Grass — take a moment to think about it.

To some I am a guru, a wizard, the all knowing Carnac the Magnificent

Most of you who are reading this article are no doubt in the same situation as mine. Because of your impressive background, your current title, the scope of your responsibilities, your unlimited experience and thirst for knowledge, you are expected to have a perfect lawn (many of you may know I chose to live in a townhouse at the start of my career). As an all-knowing guru you are expected to have all the answers. You are expected to dispense your knowledge and profound wisdom freely and openly. Did I mention my neighbor is an accountant? I don't ask him to stop over and help with my taxes. Another neighbor is a mechanic. But I have never once had him come over and jack up the ol' car and do an oil change. And yet, why is it that without fail every summer (and most springs and falls) I get quizzed and interrogated like an undergraduate at the close of a semester. "I have a problem." "Look at this." "What is this?" "What caused this?" "How can I prevent this?" And my personal favorite, "Have you ever seen anything like this before?" These are the easy ones. I can physically see the problem. I can watch how they do things. I have a clue before they even call me as to what the problem might be because I have seen the lawn and I am naturally inquisitive. This is not the case with the rest of my "consulting" work. Every summer I get phone calls from my college roommate in Michigan. "Hey Turf Guy my lawn has brown patches. What's going on?" is the query from 300 miles away. How the hell do I know? But I try to appease him. We do a run down of weather and fertilizer applications, mowing and pet traffic. I come to an answer, and he hangs up. I am probably seldom correct, but it is Kentucky bluegrass, it will grow back. Or better yet, I can get him in touch with one of my sod farm friends who can redo my distant friend's yard. Although I try to explain to neighbors, relatives, co-workers and former college roommates that it is impossible to diagnose the problem over the telephone, the calls continue year after year much like the seasons that come and go. Ever try getting a prescription from your doctor over the phone? "I have this rash on my thigh. It kind of oozes and weeps a yellow substance. Is this normal? Did I mention I just got home from Bangladesh?" This one will take an office visit.

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*You are expected
to dispense your
knowledge and
profound wisdom
freely and openly.*

To the rest I am a schmuck.

My brother has a Ph.D. in toxicology. He is one of 200 people in the world certified to do what he does (whatever that is). Apparently he is in the top of that very elite group. He is working on cures for Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. His is an admirable profession. I, on the other hand, work in turfgrass management. He went to school for eight years. He travels to Germany and Japan on a regular basis. Imagine our family get-togethers during the holidays. My brother shares his colorful tales about his exciting exploits and me, I'll mumble a bit reminding everyone that he still hasn't found a cure for anything and he has been doing this for 10 years! As he shares his attention-grabbing tales of exotic travels I field the lawn questions from my uncles, aunts, cousins and family acquaintances who want to know about the cause of a dead spot of unknown origin somewhere on their lawn. Regardless of my efforts, I always end up looking like a dolt, because I can't diagnose what I can't

see. "Yeah, uh thanks Rusty, I think we're just going to go over and listen to your brother tell that story about the time he was in Tokyo and . . ." Do I sound frustrated, rejected, or in need of attention? Sorry 'bout that but it's just that I spent four years getting a great education, and I can't answer seemingly simple questions I get from my relatives about their grass. Maybe I need a refresher course! Sensitive you say! Nope, I could bring up a hundred other examples from social gatherings that would reinforce my point. Those casual exchanges that usually start with "You do what?" or "You can get a degree in that?" Most of the time they end with "Guess there's more to it than I thought," but sometimes they finish with shaking heads or laughter. After all I have wasted most of my life working with grass. It's enough to make a guy feel like Charlie Brown.

Beyond my family and friends there is another group of people who think I am a schmuck. Many of these people would classify themselves as

*It's enough to
make a guy
feel like
Charlie Brown.*

environmentalists or ecologists. Now that's not necessarily how I would classify them, but that's how they might classify themselves. Most are patently against the idea of turfgrass because it is not native (except for a few species) and it requires fertilizers, pesticides, and water. These people often see a manicured lawn as an opulent possession and golf as a game for the elite. If you are a French aristocrat please don't take it personally

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that's just the way it is. These same people may also have tall prairie grass in their yards, an old windmill, or maybe a few bison roaming around their front lawn. They are proud to fight any city or village ordinance that says you have to mow your lawn. But, I'll tell you this, these people do not know what I know, and they don't believe what I believe. Having gone through my few minutes of emotional therapy by writing this article, I thought I would now share a few thoughts with you in hopes that it might prove beneficial. If you need the citations, sources, research data, verifications, scientific journals, or back issues of Mad magazine that support the information that is to follow, let me know, give me a call, send me an e-mail, whatever, and I will get the information to you.

What I do know?

- Almost every great experience I can remember in my life has a link to turfgrass.
- The turfgrass industry is doing all it can to make sure that the benefits of grass are amplified and that the

drawbacks are eliminated through extensive research.

- A healthy lawn is a boon to the environment, cleaning up air and noise pollution.
- With a little training anyone can grow a healthy lawn with limited inputs.
- A pesticide is anything that kills a pest. Antibacterial soap is a pesticide! Ask the neighbors complaining about your spray rig about the pesticides within their homes.
- Water in streams, rivers, and creeks often leaves a golf course property cleaner than on its way in.
- You can't play golf, baseball, football, or soccer effectively in a tall grass prairie (I usually throw in Disc Golf for this group because they understand that).
- A turfgrass lawn is a better sequester of carbon than a forest environment (This could reduce global warming).
- Turfgrass controls soil erosion better than any other living ground cover.
- Turfgrass cools the atmosphere and decreases the urban heat-island effect.
- Turfgrass produces pure oxygen for us to breathe.

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*I cannot imagine
a world without
turfgrass.*



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- A water retention swale or "Rain Garden" with established turf will retain more water and have less soil erosion than one with established prairie plants.
- Turfgrass is softer than artificial turf and better for the participants (it also won't go in the landfill when its life is over).
- Having a healthy green surrounding enhances physical well-being.
- A properly cared for lawn enhances property values.
- A new study shows that having a nice lawn could improve your social life!
- I cannot imagine a world without turfgrass.
- I like the way the grass feels between my toes.
- Sod is the quickest easiest way to get all of these benefits.
- I will continue working to ensure that turfgrass is used in every area that benefits our environment and our lives.
- I am proud to be a turfgrass management professional.

What I believe.

- Fewer turfgrass lawns = more fat children.
- If environmentalists would educate themselves they would be in favor of turfgrass and of educating homeowners about its care.
- No child should be expected to play sports on an artificial turf field.
- Mowing the lawn is a rite of passage for young men and women (my dad claims it is one of the reasons he had kids).
- Becoming involved with a local school will make every Superintendent a better person and every student a more informed citizen.
- High phosphorus levels in some waters are not caused by educated fertilizer applicators.
- The turf pesticides that we use today are extremely safe when used in the proper manner. Homeowners do not know the proper manner, and it is our responsibility to share our knowledge with them.

- Every Superintendent should be working to make sure that their piece of earth has a positive environmental impact on the rest of the world.
- A world without turfgrass would not be the kind of place where I would like to live.
- All of you should be proud to be turfgrass management professionals.

The truth is, Guru or Schmuck it really doesn't matter. When confronted by people who have a differing opinion from mine, I state the facts as I know them and express what I believe. Another truth: I really am happy with my career path, and I feel that the world is a better place because of the work that I do and continually try to do. I have been blessed to spend most of my life working with grass. Yeah, that's it! Grass...think about it. 

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