

Training Program Keeps Students on the Links

By LORA BOLTE
Sun-Times Correspondent

As the Tournament Players Club enters the countdown before its first national tournament on the new course, the pressure is on to get each blade of grass manicured, each sand trap impeccable, everything brought up to the level of perfection demanded by the touring pros. In another part of town, high school students are busy preparing to take their places in the golf course industry.

A new program at the Westside Skills Center is offering training for entry-level employment to students from all of Duval County. The students work in every phase of golf course maintenance in addition to studying horticulture and nursery operational. Four students from Fletcher Senior High are enrolled in the classes.

The department head at the Westside Skills Center is Bob Baughman of Neptune Beach. Baughman says of the golf course maintenance program, "This is the only program I know of at the secondary level in the country. For training purposes we have built a green and tee. We will eventually have a short nine-hole course. This is the kind of "hands-on" training we stress at the Skills Center.

"We are building the course from scratch. It was pretty hectic around here when the 18-wheelers were unloading

the sand for constructing the hole. We cooperated with the plumbing department in installing the drainage and irrigation systems.

"There will be no play on this course since it will frequently be torn up to experiment with different turf cover. We will be changing it continually to give incoming students the same valuable experience of observing what goes into the building of a golf course."

The students are now learning to operate all the complex and very expensive machinery involved in maintenance. This is as close to the real world of work as it is possible to get in a school setting. The curriculum is geared to prepare the students to take their places in the golf course industry.

The statistics of the golf course industry are impressive. There are 12,000 courses in the United States to provide facilities for 13 million adults (28 percent women). The capital investment in the industry is \$5 billion.

Baughman said, "Golf course superintendents have a problem hiring and keeping responsible workers. The

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machinery is expensive and can't be trusted to lackadaisical employees. We are not just teaching skills, we continually stress attitude, interest, and responsibility. An employer, familiar with our program, knows he is getting somebody who has been trained to act responsibly.

The Skills Center works closely with employers. Baughman is a member of the Golf Course Superintendents Association.

A Beaches resident, John P. Hayden is course superintendent of the San Jose Country Club. Hayden was recently elected to the Board of Directors of the Golf Course Superintendents of America.

Hayden said of the program at WSC, "In the old days, greenskeepers were working with a sling blade and push mower. Now we are using machines costing up to \$40,000. I would certainly look hard at any prospective employee who came to us with some training.

"Greenskeeping is not a dead-end job. If they do well, they can go on to specialize in the mechanical area or work as spray men. These jobs pay in the neighborhood of \$10 an hour.

Chip Powell, course superintendent of Deerwood, who is president of the North Florida Chapter of the Golf Course Superintendents Association, has visited the Skills Center.

"I was flabbergasted to realize that enormous facility was out there and I hadn't even known it existed," Powell said. "It makes a lot of sense to me to spend part of our education tax dollars to train young people for jobs that exist. Not every high school student is headed for college.

"Baughman showed me through the facilities for the golf course maintenance program. Those students will have a marketable skill. Take the list Baughman developed of 65 tasks his students perform. That list is outstanding. It would be years before an entry-level employee would get experience in all those phases of our work. It takes a devastating amount of time for all that training.

"If I were hiring and a graduate with that training applied, you can be sure I would give that applicant priority. In addition, the school's graduate will advance faster if they build on what they have learned."

Powell added, "You have to realize that besides very expensive machinery, we are working with chemicals that must be treated with respect. We are working close to golfers, homeowners, children, pets. Our employees must be knowledgeable and responsible."

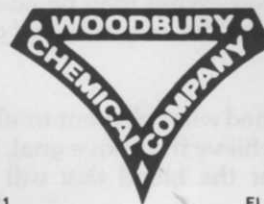
Sixteen-year-old Geoffrey Gibson is enrolled in the program from Fletcher. A golfer since the age of three, he has his long-term career plan mapped out. He will use the skills he is learning at the WSC for summer employment to help him with the expenses of the six-year course of training required to be registered as a teaching pro.

Students spend from two to three hours a day at the center for three years. The balance of the day they complete their academic requirements at their high schools.

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