



# Palm Beach Trade Winds



By: Mike Bailey  
The Falls Country Club

## How Professional is Professional?

It is relatively safe to say, "the image of the golf course superintendent has been drastically upgraded over the past twenty years, from the role model of a "greenskeeper" to that of a more current, up to date "golf course manager". I would like to dissect and elaborate upon the specific topic of "professionalism."

Our industry has been receiving resistance (over the past few years) for the progressive attitude of upgrading the greenskeeper image. Superintendents often hear of our courses being compared in regards to budgets, softness of the greens, number of sand traps, difficulty of play and so on. Recently, however clubs are comparing themselves to nearby clubs in regards to their superintendents. Our individual role model has many factors to evaluate; such as the type of clothing we wear, how much actual labor work we perform, the amount of time we spend at work, how frequently we play golf, and even the number of meetings we attend.

The most significant problem with this "comparison criticism" is the fact that our courses are truly different. Each course must be evaluated by other factors such as public versus private, developer versus member owned, 18 holes versus multicourse complexes, maintenance of common grounds, in house residences versus off property members, the admission of annual members versus equity, country clubs versus golf clubs versus resort complexes. We have just touched upon an array of unjustified comparison, yet the comparisons will continue.

I have discussed this problem of "Professionalism" with fellow superintendents and I would like to share this information with you. While attending a Sunday afternoon picnic at Harrold Campbell's home where a group of friends were gathered to honor Bill Wagner, I asked Bill the question, "Have you noticed much of a change in the image of the superintendent over the past twenty years?"

Bill's response was, "Yes, as for the image of the individual, we have made great strides towards becoming more professional," however in the same breath Bill explained that, "the responsibilities and the actual job requirements have not changed." He reinforced the issues by telling me that when he returned to his course after a stay in the hospital a member of his course scolded him for being observed mowing the rough one hot afternoon. Bill's response was "We're behind and the work's got to get done". Bill's devotion to the course outshines his concern for his image as a supervisor. In review, I believe Bill's priorities are: being a competent, conscionable superintendent, yet that attitude of self pride and professionalism are always present.

I believe that little story tells it all. We find ourselves truly caring about our golf course . . . probably more than any other individual associated with the course. The direction that I'm driving at is the fact that we are proud of our professionalism. Over the years, our image has improved, not only mentally, but physically. Most obvious, we have improved our outward appearance with better dressing attire. Has this developed into a problem? "Sometimes, how over dressed is considered too dressed?" I have heard comments like, "that superintendent was dressed up like a golf pro." Was that comment justified? Most of us would think that dress attire was quite appropriate. The superintendent managed a 36 hole private club of premiere standing, his responsibilities were 100% managerial. On the flip of the coin, "can we underdress?" Of course, dirty jeans, a greasy shirt and muddy shoes is not the proper attire for a professional image. So now the obvious question, "where is the happy median blend between the jeans and the golf pro image?" I believe that lies solely within the perimeter of your individual club. If you are the "working superintendent" of a smaller club where the work force is minimal, the economic situation strapped and no one else is there to get the job done, one's dress

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attire will match the demands of the work load. This is not belittling the image of professionalism. Anything other than the working image would not prove to be successful. Now let's go to the other extreme: "the total managerial position." A position of high visibility, frequent meetings with owners, members and the staff. This would more often be the case for a complex of 36 holes or more and especially when the realm of responsibilities includes the common grounds. It is often in this role model that the golf club member generally lacks the understanding for the business and will sadly make the comment about ones' over-dressed image". What type of dress attire would be too elaborate? A coat and tie would be considered a bit too much on the course, however this is considered to be our standard image for chapter meetings and conferences. So is this considered too much? No. To the contrary this reinforces our image of being a professional turf grass manager.

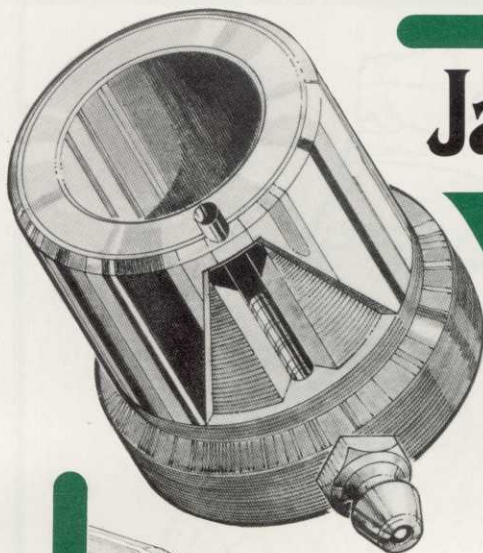
Once we overcome this stigma of overdressing the next topic we commonly hear is, "the superintendent doesn't put in enough time and he doesn't even work weekends." Here again we find many different situations and philosophy that we will review, yet one dominate fact prevails, "the superintendent actually puts in a great deal of time at work." Again, at the smaller club, where the superintendent is more or less a working superintendent, they are usually the individual that unlocks the gate at 6:15 in the morning and yet they also close the gate as the crew goes home in the afternoon, not to mention the other facets, such as opening flood gates late at night when a hurricane is approaching or coming out at 10 p.m. to double check the irrigation system to verify the 2nd cycle of the fairways

came on. And I'm sure we could continue on and on. It is these situations that so few will ever be aware of because if the golfer does not specifically observe you while they play their round of golf, it could very well be assumed "where is the superintendent today?"

Each course has its own structure or command, however, I believe that seldom will you find a situation where management is not on the property at least 40 hours a week and more often than not, that number hovers around 50 to 60 hours. Typically by 3:00 p.m. we have already put in a 9 hour day, yet often we are assumed to be "going home early at just 3 o'clock, (if we can be so fortunate). Then we get to the issue of not coming in for the weekends. After many years of training your staff to competantly handle decisions and managerial pressure, you let the assistants and mechanics take the responsibility and pride of opening the course for weekend maintenance. This I strongly believe builds depth to your staff. This fact is often overlooked or otherwise assumed, "as being the superintendent who doesn't care, because he doesn't even come in to check the course on weekends."

I believe, after years in the business, along with a competent staff, that the management should not be required to come in every weekend. After all, if we also put in exceedingly long hours, week after week, burn out will ultimately creep in, deteriorating one's drive to enjoy their work. This is one of the primary reasons I do not enjoy playing golf on the weekends, I think we need some time off for our family and for our own good. Then come Monday, we can be fresh for the new week.

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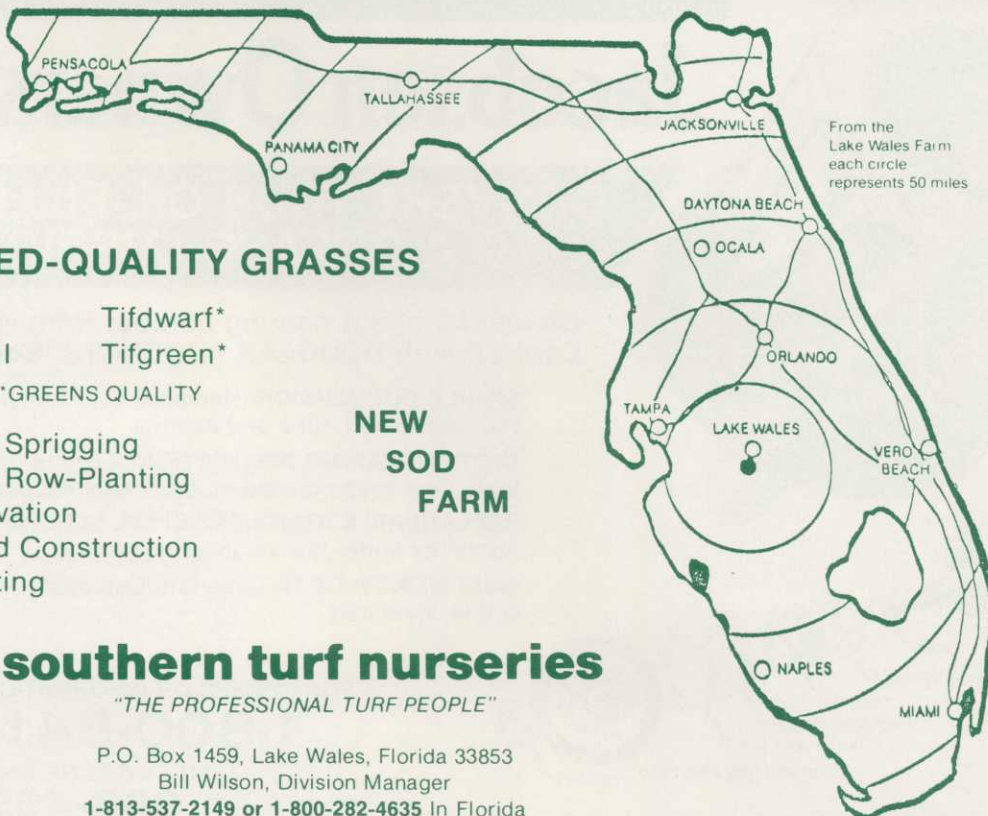
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This takes me to the next topic. Golf — is it recreation or business? How often have we heard the comment “why is the superintendent out there playing our course?” To the contrary, who else can best critique the condition of a golf course than the superintendent? Obviously our club pro can best evaluate the course from a player’s point of view, however the superintendent can best evaluate the agronomic conditions to observe and determine the needs for verticutting, aerifing, topdressing, fertilizations and so on. The sad fact is the golfer seldom realizes that we are critiquing our course as we play. We, in the industry, regard playing golf as a type of inspection and self analysis, not necessarily just going out and playing a round of golf. Then we must ask the question: When is the superintendent to be considered as playing too much golf? First off, we must never play during prime time. Meaning the height of the season or early morning tee times. Obviously, that time should be reserved for our paying customers. I then ask this question: Would it be proper to play around 1 o’clock, after the crew is lined up for the remainder of the work day? The answer to that is “of course - yes.” By the time we finish our round of golf, we have put in approximately a twelve hour day. So is that round of golf to be considered relaxation or work? **PARTLY BOTH WOULD BE THE CORRECT ANSWER.** But, don’t kid yourself, there are many items a superintendent can take care of while playing a round of golf. We can determine if that sand is actually too compacted or that cup was set in the wrong location. No one is a better judge for critiquing a golf course than the host superintendent. Next, is it considered proper to play golf during our monthly chapter meetings? “Aqain, of course, yes.” I try to take the oppor-

tunity each month to play the course at which the meeting is held, this allows me to observe how someone else maintains their golf course. Even more importantly, it gives me the knowledge to become better versed with my membership should the discussion ever arise, “You should see the course I played yesterday, they had. . . .”

The last topic I want to touch upon is our participation with our Superintendent’s Association. How often have you heard the following, “Our superintendent was out yesterday playing golf at a meeting.” There are eight chapters within The Florida Golf Course Superintendent’s Association. Each local chapter conducts monthly meetings to develop communication within our business, giving us the agenda to discuss our business. Hopefully, for you to be absent one working day a month is never frowned upon by your club. Of course, if you are deeply involved with a project at work you will elect to skip a meeting periodically. More often than not, our attendance and participation with our association unifies our profession and we become better supervisors.

In closing, perhaps these comments sound as if I’m venting my frustrations about the complaints so commonly echoed by my fellow co-workers over the years. Were they justified? You decide. Are we steering in the wrong direction to be striving towards greater professionalism. That can only be answered by the club’s individual situation. Perhaps some clubs need just a “greenskeeper,” however where budgets exceed a half a million dollars, responsibilities are vast and the pressure is always demanding, only a “Professional Golf Course Superintendent” can fill those shoes. ■



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