

When the flag is down

BY JEFF BALL

*Golf Course Superintendent
Panama Country Club*

The storms of life will bring out the best and the worst in a club.

The Panama Country Club is a 67-year-old Donald Ross course on St. Andrew Bay. The American flag flies daily, and when there is a death in the club, the flag flies at half staff in memory of the fallen member. When the chips are down, the members flock to each other's aid with Southern style hospitality that warms your heart. On the days following the passing of Hurricane Opal, the flag was down for our course. This is a story of member stewardship in the face of great adversity.

October 3, 1995 — Tuesday afternoon: We have watched Hurricane Opal float around in the gulf and churn itself up to a Class 3 storm. This is the third storm of the season and my maintenance staff had already cleaned up damage from two previous hurricanes. The look in their eyes was that of a fat Thanksgiving turkey. You know the look. You're going to

get it, and bad. We are spreading out maintenance equipment in various buildings on the course, along with enough fuel in cans to get us through the first week after the storm.

My wife packs our Jeep Cherokee and I finish tying down the last few things that all coastal superintendents know to do — pull all the flags, lower the level of our lakes, and move everything that we can under roof. Having lived in the aftermath of Hurricane Camille in Biloxi, Mississippi, the damage that storms of this magnitude can do is always in the back of my mind.

We are packed and ready to go north to high ground Tuesday night. I watch where the storm will make landfall. We went to bed and tried to sleep. It would not come, so I turned the Weather Channel on. The storm was a category 4/5 and the pressure was dropping. I grabbed the family and jumped in the Jeep. As I closed the garage door to our home, I wondered



Hurricane Opal topples an ancient oak across the 8th tee at the Panama City CC.

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what we would have to come home to.

On the way out of town, I stopped by the club to make one final check. The crew was sent home with my prayers for their safety and with instructions to come back when the storm was over and their families were secure.

The storm made landfall about 6:00 p.m., and the old course took it right on the chin. The club is 67 years old and is filled with live oaks and longleaf pines. The damage to the Gulf Coast was extensive, and repair crews would be hard to

come by. The FEMA estimates were over \$1 million in damage to the course, and months later we are still finding things that do not work properly. To compound matters, my home was in a restricted area equipped with Florida National Guardsmen. We could not even go look and see the damage to our home. We were really frustrated and the work load was unbelievable.

The pump station had 3 feet of water in it, and we had several greens covered by the surge. We finally got the power on

and I was going to flush the greens with a deep well that was tied to our irrigation system. That ran for about one hour when a broken limb fell out of one of our large pine trees across the line. We only have 400 yards of power line above ground, and the limbs found it. Balls of fire raced toward the wells and destroyed any hopes of flushing our greens.

"I quit," I said to the Green Committee Chairman, Ted Buckley.

He laughed and said, "Tomorrow will be better."

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Panama City CC Superintendent, Jeff Ball (left) and member, Gary Walsingham (right) admire the work of sculptor Ken Bauldree as he turns the old oak stump into a fox squirrel.

I said, "It better be. It can't get any worse."

Just as the words came out of my mouth, Charles Commander drives up and asks, "When do you think the course will be open?"

I told him that it would take at least two weeks just for debris removal from the fairways and intermediate rough. He said that he wanted to play before he went to the Florida State University football game Saturday. (At this club they take two things very seriously—golf and football.) In the meantime, Buckley knew

that I could not go home and invited me to stay with his family. We dined that evening with candlelight and watched the Braves game on a battery-powered TV at a neighbor's house.

Mr. Commander had exercised his leadership ability by recruiting 75 members ready to work. We started the next morning at 7:00 a.m. and looked like Sherman on his march to the sea. Members arrived equipped with golf carts, rakes and sheets to haul off the limbs, pine needles and Spanish moss. We removed 200 tons of debris in a day and a

half. Our maintenance crew drove the tractors and utility vehicles while the members loaded. We cleaned the fairways and surrounds in eight hours. Ross Weaver, the General Manager, cooked up a great feast, and members insisted the crew join them at the club for barbecue.

The next morning we finished the green and tee surrounds. Then at noon we had a shotgun golf tournament. Two days after the storm, we were playing golf. We had saved ourselves from the defeat nature had handed us and decided to make lemonade with the lemons.

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Member Work Day. Some of the 75 members who helped the maintenance crew remove 200 tons of debris in a day and a half. Two days after Hurricane Opal the Panama City CC was open for play.

The story does not end at the tournament. We had a huge oak tree on the #8 tee that fell and drove the cart path 6 feet in the ground. The tree was so large that we could not even move the logs. I cut off all but 10 feet of the stump and then set the old stump back erect so we could repair the path and tee. I said in passing to

a member that I would like to have it carved into the likeness of a squirrel. The next thing I knew, a sculptor was carving the stump into a fox squirrel.

I know that this does not happen a lot in our profession, but I am very grateful to my membership for the support and help during those difficult times. Having

gone through Tropical Storm Alberto the summer before in Alabama and receiving very little support there, it means a lot. No, it means everything when the membership extends their hands. That is real stewardship at work.

By the way, wives are still looking for the missing fitted sheets.



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That's what one of my college instructors told me. I would like to explore this topic and provide information about what I did during my job search, although I did not lose a position as a superintendent. Everyone who enters this field is advised at some point that the decision to change superintendents can be as frequent and arbitrary as your decision to change toothpaste.

One morning, while I was in a weekly meeting with my supervisor, I was shown the reroutings section in our magazine. A number of lines had been highlighted. These lines were associated with area clubs who had recently changed superintendents. The question was posed to me,"

Can you tell me why these clubs fired their superintendents, then hired the guys who were working down the street? If this person wasn't good enough for this club, why is he good enough for that club?" I had no coherent answer for this question and still do not.

I believe communication is always the least common denominator in any human relationship that breaks down. Whether it is a marriage or an employment relationship, communication is the key. I personally take it upon myself to communicate my successes and challenges to my superiors. This statement may seem obvious to many, but to some I have known, I believe it is good advice.

As far as communication goes, I use a variety of tactics. With my subordinates, I conduct weekly meetings. They can come to me anytime, but I use this time to assure that they have the opportunity to communicate with me. I keep separate pages set aside in my Daytimer to list topics for discussion for each person I report to and each person who reports to me. If I find myself in an impromptu meeting with any of these people I can cover each item of concern without relying on memory.

Communication is not always good enough. I heard an interesting comment while attending

an excellent seminar conducted by Craig Schreiner, AGCA. A question was posed to Schriener that involved an impossible turf management situation and management's unwillingness to acknowledge or address the problem. His response involved something I believe he referred to as the Popeye Syndrome. "I can stand what I can stand 'til I can't stand no more!" It takes a lot to get a successful superintendent to this point. I believe most superintendents think they can grow grass in the closets of the clubhouse if they work hard enough, and many superintendents lose their positions while trying to make an impossible situation work.

So what do you do if you are fired? If your termination was not the result of any misconduct, you will likely qualify for a variety of state benefits. I took full advantage of a program that gave me access to the resources of the Private Industry Council of the Palm Beaches (the PIC). This program was an invaluable benefit to me. In addition to moral support they provided many other advantages. And keep in mind that these benefits are free to the beneficiary as long as they are related to your job search. They provided an office at my disposal where I could receive messages and facsimiles. I could send facsimiles and utilize the long distance phone service. I had access to computers with WordPerfect software. There were secretaries who would type resumes and letters. They offered counseling in resume preparation, job search techniques and interviewing. They would do mock interviews and record these on video tape so they could critique them with you later. Companies would come there to interview and conduct seminars. This was a place frequented by winners who were currently disconnected from a career. I intend to write another article featuring this program because I believe in what they are doing, and I am sure they are saving the taxpayers much more than they require in funds.

I was in a sales position when I was released. It was unfortunate but I was told it would happen to me eventually. It was the first time I had been unemployed since I was 15 years old. A top

Each one of you will be fired at some point in your career

Off The WAHL



Scott Wahlin, CGCS

superintendent and man I respect very much called and asked for a meeting with me when he heard I was unemployed. This man had been released from a very well-known, prestigious club for no reason related to his performance and had landed another top job. He told me to use this as an opportunity to evaluate my life and goals and spend some time with my family. He said that he did not do this when he had the chance but wished he had. I couldn't do that then and probably wouldn't if this happened to me in the future.

I worked a normal work day at least five days a week. I was either at the PIC, in an interview or calling on superintendents from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. I set many appointments to tour courses with superintendents on weekend mornings. I love my family, but I find it impossible to relax enough to enjoy them unless I am providing for them. I did take at least one day a week to devote to them, but that was my normal work pattern anyway. I could justify that in my mind. As far as evaluating my goals was concerned, that took me about two second. How long does it take to say, "Get a position I enjoy and bring home paychecks!" Long-range growth goals had to be put on the back burner in my case. I have four children who like to eat meat! This

superintendent's advice must be good because I heard it many times from people who specialize in reconnecting displaced workers.

I also became familiar with a man who taught me much more than he realizes. I intend to contact him to write an additional article on this topic. He convinced me that I could land an excellent job outside the golf industry for the money I needed without having to relocate. He is incredibly successful at getting motivated people back to work in jobs they enjoy, so the state hired him to work with people who had gotten certified at the PIC. We went through my previous experiences, and he pointed out how these skills could be related to other businesses. He said the top four hiring criteria do not involve education or references. They include: (1) Do they like you personally? (2) Do they trust you? (3) Are they confident you will produce? and (4) Do you seem like someone who is a pleasure to work with? In the short time that I was involved with his weekly seminars, I saw a number of people land positions utilizing their skills in completely different fields without having to relocate.

In my opinion, there is nothing like being a golf course superintendent. There is much stress associated with this position, though. I believe this is

evidenced by an informal survey I did of superintendents while I was in sales. I asked them if they would recommend this career to their children. I am sorry to say that many said they would not.

If you intend to remain a practicing superintendent and you are out of work, the likelihood is that you will have to relocate. There are only so many courses, and they cannot come to you. A parent does not relish the thought of going to his family and saying, "Guess what? We're going to move again! Now go tell your friends goodbye."

The golf course superintendent's responsibilities are so diverse that a person who succeeds in this position for a period of time can do just about anything in business. It is unfortunate, but we do tend to lose our positions without any reason associated with it. If this happens to you it is important to realize how many others have experienced the same thing and that you, too, will land on your feet. I learned much while I was unemployed. I know firsthand how horrifying this can be. If there is anyone who is disconnected or very unhappy in their present position would like to talk, please contact me. I am not an expert, but I believe I can help.

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Where is everyone else?

The last issue of *The Florida Green* contained a great article by Dr. Monica Elliott decrying the treatment of golf course superintendents by golfers who expect flawless playing conditions regardless of weather conditions. Dr. Elliott's words were heartfelt and dead on the mark, demonstrating again why she is so highly regarded by superintendents over and above her substantial contributions as a turf researcher.

Predictably, though sad to say, you and the other members of the choir read Dr. Elliott's article in your own association magazine, rather than in *Golf Digest* where she had submitted it and hoped it would appear. It just seems to be a fact of life that most golfers aren't at all interested in the problems of maintaining high quality turf or helping support our research efforts, while at the same time expecting a perfect golf course each and every time they tee it up. As golf course superintendents, we should be "mad as hell and not take it anymore," to quote from the movie "Network" by way of Monica's article.

Other than the USGA, what other non-superintendent, golf-related organization recognizes the need for turf research and backs it up financially? Why is it that superintendents are the ones sitting on panels debating green zealots about golf's environmental impact; dealing with high-handed regulatory agents; and spending hour after hour planning, organizing, and staging fund-raising events for turf research? Where are the golf pros, the general managers, the developers, the architects, the builders, the owners, but especially, those who play golf almost every day of their lives and profess a love for the game?

I can well understand the disinterest in the day-to-day mechanics of the golf course

maintenance operation — this is what we superintendents are trained and educated for and paid as professionals to do — but I don't understand why we stand virtually alone as the defenders of the game. Yes, we are the ones calling the shots in the facet of the club's operations most likely to have potentially adverse environmental consequences, but we are doing so under the direction of — and for the benefit of — our golfing members.

Answer honestly — how many of you would be doing things the same way if you had total job security and complete authority to manage the golf course as you saw fit? Would there be less water and fewer fertilizers and pesticides applied? My guess is yes, but who gets fired if the golf course does not meet members' expectations, and who is held accountable for regulatory compliance and/or environmental transgressions?

This has been the greatest mystery to me in my 23 years as a golf course superintendent: Why is it that golfers are willing to spend \$250 or more on the latest hot driver or \$40 for a dozen Titleist Tour balatas, but wouldn't spend \$10 a year for turf research if their life depended on it? Though some of them may be rocket scientists, I don't think you have to be one to figure out that escalating maintenance costs over and above the rate of inflation cause higher membership dues and greens fees, and that basic research into the development of new grasses, methods, and products could help reverse this calamitous trend. Think about it. In Florida, Tifdwarf and Tifton 419 are still the predominant grasses found on golf course greens and fairways, and they were released for use over 35 years ago when 1/4 inch was the normal cutting height on greens.

At this point, you're probably saying, "So what's your point, Mark? I've heard all this before and you're still preaching to the choir."

I actually have three points.

I think it's time to resurrect the idea of a

Mark My Words



Mark Jarrell, CGCS
Assistant Editor

“golf tax” in Florida, to finally get golfers to contribute their fair share of the research and development burden necessary to provide the environmentally sound and high quality golf course that they demand. By my estimation, a 5-cent-per-round golf tax would generate about \$2.5 million in this state.

Point two, we need to continue growing and stay unified as an industry so our words carry the clout reflective of this state’s largest agribusiness. Our 1992 survey indicated that turfgrass is a \$7.3 billion industry; by IFAS’ numbers, the rest of Florida’s agriculture is worth about \$5.5 billion. Golf and turf is growing while many agricultural commodities are in

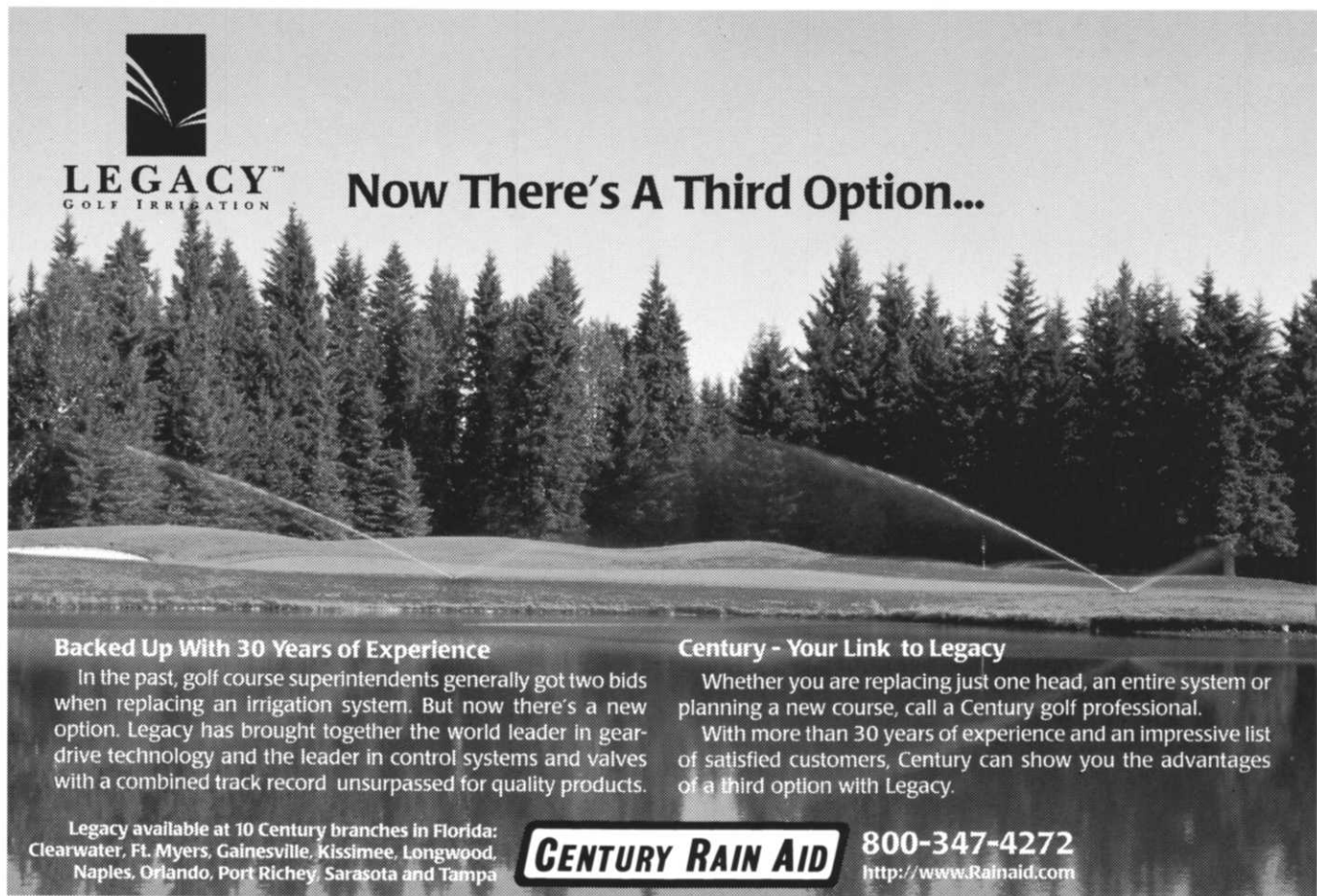
decline or on the ropes due to NAFTA and other factors. The FTGA and the FGCSA need to continue working closely together to solve our problems. Those who disagree with certain decisions or policies should get involved and work through these associations rather than against them.

The third point is that we need to work more closely with IFAS to improve the University of Florida’s turf program, and with the state legislature to secure proper funding. We have already started working with IFAS, and we are making headway. Vice President Dr. Jim Davidson has already agreed to increase turf faculty by three new positions: we will be getting a weed specialist, an

entomologist, a pathologist, and two breeders dedicated half time to turf — that’s a lot more than simply hiring a replacement for the loss of Dr. Bert McCarty.

There should be no adversarial stances between the different segments of the golf and turf industry and/or their customers. There are plenty of very real and very dedicated adversaries to golf, and those of us who care about golf should work together to support the necessary research to provide the high quality that golfers want and the environmentally friendly golf courses that we all want.

Superintendents are doing their part. Where is everyone else?



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Green Side Up



Joel D. Jackson, CGCS Editor

It's been one of those superintendent merry-go-round years already. My rolodex and directory are getting worn out with mark-throughs and erasures keeping track

of new addresses for some guys. Scott Wahlin was right in his editorial "Each One of You Will Be Fired at Some Point in Your Career!" Are you ready for this?

Maybe superintendents take on the aura of a new car to some clubs: new, fast, sleek, high performance, king-of-the-road feel. Then you get a little mileage on you. Body gets a couple of dings. Maybe have a flat tire or two. Need a new battery.

Pretty soon the club's thinking, trade-in time! Instead of getting to know the car, they start all over again with a strange new one. There are no guarantees. The next one might be an assembly line lemon. Oh well, trade that one in too!

I was talking to a superintendent last month who relayed the story of his termination over having thin areas on three or four greens. When he tried to explain push-up greens drainage problems, shade and air circulation stresses on greens built in low woody pockets the owner said, "Those are excuses!" And the superintendent said, "I'm not giving you excuses. I'm giving you the facts!"

Well, two superintendents later the club rebuilt the greens, installed fans and cut down some trees. Guess what? They had better greens! The superintendent ran into the owner sometime later and that owner did have the grit to tell him he was right after all! Bittersweet victory I guess! I

wonder if it crossed the owner's mind that he put several men and their families through hell and then out of work for all the wrong reasons?

I'd be a fool to defend every superintendent that ever got the axe. Some of them probably earned the distinction. But, far too many seem to be the result of some over inflated ego on a power trip or a scapegoat for someone else's faulty decision making. It keeps happening again and again so, it is always refreshing to see those clubs and superintendents that have developed a long term, mature, professional working relationship. One where both sides truly understand the ying and yang of growing golf turf under exacting conditions.

Golf course superintendents are expected to operate with less margin for error than any other sports related professional I can think of. Give me a baseball player that gets a hit 40% of the time and I'll show you a guy baseball cards and shoe commercials are made of. Give me a superintendent with 90% of his course perfect and I'll show you a possible candidate for the unemployment line.

Sometimes it isn't about turf, at least not the green growing kind. Sometimes its politics, diplomacy and image. That's why everyone keeps talking about communications and people skills all the time. It's important to be able say, "We have a problem and here's how we can solve it!" before someone else says, "You have a problem! Clear out your desk!"

I don't know of any way to ever stop the merry-go-round. It's destined to be one of the rides you take in life. The only thing I'd say is, "As long as you're on the merry-go-round, be sure and go for the brass ring!"