

Marking Time

Assistant Superintendents Caught in a Traffic Jam



By Trent Bouts, Editor of the Georgia GCSA's *Through the Green* magazine

Bill Murray spoofed an assistant golf course superintendent as Carl Spackler in *Caddyshack*, but increasingly his performance in *Groundhog Day* shows like a documentary on the position. Day after day, after day, assistant golf course superintendents across the country are rolling out of bed as if it's yesterday all over again. For many, it's becoming increasingly difficult to remain upbeat in the face of a seemingly endless cycle of long hours, low pay and, worst of all, limited prospects.

The golf industry's contraction, instigated, ironically enough, by overbuilding and now exacerbated by the Great Recession, has brought superintendent openings to a virtual halt. For a lot of talented young people, the way ahead looks like the worst Atlanta traffic jam. Their options are stark — remain on idle and hope for a break, or get out and walk on a profession they've poured their hearts and their hopes into, in many cases for years.

It's not just that new-course-construction has ground to a dead stop. Existing courses are closing, and elsewhere veteran superintendents are staying put. Some because they want to limit any risk, others because the crash drained the nest eggs they planned to retire on. When a rare opening does come up, there's not so much a rush to fill it as there is a stampede.

"I couldn't cope with it," admits Drew Wilson, who stepped away from the logjam a year ago to start his own landscaping

business in Atlanta. Wilson's case is illustrative of the frustrations occupying many assistant superintendents and also the extent of the bottleneck. "I would make it to the final cut for jobs but then get beaten out by guys who had 10 or 15 years experience on me, as superintendents. It's very tough out there. I graduated with about 60 turf students and I would bet 50 percent or more of them are now out of the industry altogether."

In all, Wilson, who is 29, spent 14 years in golf course maintenance going back to his high school and college days when he worked part time. Armed with a turf degree from Kansas State University, he later worked at world-renowned Prairie Dunes Country Club and Augusta National Golf Club. Then he put in five years as assistant to Georgia Golf Hall of Famer, Mark Esoda, CGCS at Atlanta Country Club. That's a resume that surely would have fast-tracked Wilson to a senior role a decade ago.

Instead, with a young wife and a desire to have children, he was forced to take a long, hard look at whether a passion for the profession was enough to justify being patient indefinitely. In the end, he couldn't see himself getting his hands on the tools he needed to build the future he wanted for his family. "I was at a point in my life where I needed a next step," he says. "Pulling 80 hours a week at the same golf course for years pushes you to want that next step."

Today, Wilson is still “working 80-hour weeks” but he has his own hands on the wheel as he looks to get ahead. That autonomy, and the flexibility and potential that come with it, are invaluable, he says. “My attitude is better and my wife is happier. My leaving golf had nothing to do with the industry, the people I worked for, or the facility where I worked. My decision was solely needs based. Personally, I wanted more in life and I’m not very patient. I have so much respect for the guys who are still in the industry waiting it out.”

One of those biding his time is Lydell Mack, assistant superintendent to Georgia GCSA director Rob Roy at The River Club in Buford. Mack graduated from Fairview College in Alberta, Canada in 2000. He and wife of five years, Laura, have a daughter, Olive, 3. Mack is 34 and admits he never thought he would still be an assistant superintendent this deep into his career. “My expectation coming out of college was that I would be a superintendent within five years,” he says. “That was probably naïve even in the market at that time. But I never expected it to turn out like it has.”

Mack has been at The River Club for eight years and his ambition is no less than when he finished college. He and Roy discuss his future openly and the boss has even put his shoulder to Mack’s career wheel more than once. “Rob’s been the one to make me aware of some vacancies when they’ve come up,” Mack says. “He’s made some calls to try and get me shuffled to the top of the pile.”

Four times Mack has made it as far as the interview stage for a superintendent position. No small feat in itself when one club told him they stopped collecting resumes at 200. “It used to be that assistants had a little bargaining edge because they’d be willing to work for less just to get the title,” Mack says. “But now you have very experienced superintendents who are willing to do that. The pile has definitely gotten bigger. Just judging from the feeling at meetings and events, there’s an underlying frustration among assistant superintendents who feel that it’s a pretty desolate picture out there. Let’s face it: no one went to turf school to be an assistant.”

Even so, Mack says he is content



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Lydell Mack

enough to wait it out. It helps that he is at a club that compensates him sufficiently to “pay the bills and keep a roof over our heads.” Benefits such as medical, dental and vision also help, and carry more weight than they might for someone without a family. “And the guy I work for is teaching me everything I need to know,” Mack says. “Sure, I’m hoping there is light at the end of the tunnel but I made my decision to do this a long time ago and I plan to stick with it. You just have to be adaptable.”

In the meantime, Mack constantly strives to expand his network of contacts. He serves on the Georgia GCSA assistant superintendents committee and also has a seat on the education committee alongside many experienced, well-

connected industry veterans. “Definitely, part of my motivation for serving is to give back and do my fair share but it’s also to meet people, to build some kind of name recognition,” he says. “If you’re not optimistic then you’re sinking your own boat.”

At 37 and with 12 years as an assistant superintendent, Jamey Smith, from Big Canoe in Jasper, has been at it even longer than Mack but he too remains hopeful. “I try to get up with a good attitude every day, some days it’s easier than others,” he says. “When everything was kicking in the industry, guys were being assistants for four years then moving up. My hope was that after six or seven years I’d have a superintendent position. But I try not to dwell on it too much.”



Jamey Smith

When he does think hard about his circumstance, Smith always comes away “grateful to have a job” and mindful that there is always a “trade off.” He and wife, Jamie, have been married for 12 years and they have two children, Brody, 4, and Briley, 1-1/2. “Sure, there are good days and bad days but if I didn’t enjoy what I do so much, then the assistant superintendent pay might bother me more,” he says. “It’s always tight. You can always use more money. We’re not buying a lake house. But we get by and I am at a great facility, with great people. I get to work outside. The fact is it’s tight for a lot of superintendents too these days.”

Smith’s last point is true enough. Some superintendents have had their compensation packages trimmed, along with their operating budgets and often their staffing levels. Yet, expectations for the product they turn out remain as high as ever. The stress that comes with that territory is generally not borne as much by the assistant superintendent. But in cases like Smith’s where has been with superintendent Jason Brownell, for eight

years, he does feel a strong sense of ownership, not of the property but definitely of how it performs.

“I take it personally. If I am going to do the job I am going to do it to the best of my ability,” he says. “I want to make it look as good as it can possibly look and try to never make excuses. It’s the work ethic I was raised with.”

Smith says Brownell’s support and willingness to encourage and immerse him in all aspects of the operation also make the wait a lot more bearable. “If I couldn’t be as involved as I am it might be a different story,” Smith says. “But I am in on green committee meetings, bid processes, the whole range, and that’s good because I want to be well versed in everything involved with the job.”

Patrick Reinhardt, 30, says similar support from superintendent Mike Brown, while Reinhardt spent seven and a half years as an assistant at The Standard Club in Johns Creek, was critical as he waited for an opportunity to advance. “It gets hard to push yourself every day of the year, year after year, for five, six, seven years, but you’ve got to keep your head in it,” Reinhardt says. “It’s rough. It takes a toll on you if you’re working until 5pm or later every day. But Mike (Brown) was great. He made sure we took some time off whenever we could. Every chance he got to hook me up with people who might be able to help me out, he made it happen. Phone calls, recommendations, you name it. He was helping me network all the way through.”

Reinhardt’s chance finally came late last year and today he is superintendent at Georgia Southern University where he is overseeing the renovation of what was formerly known as Southern Links Golf Course in Statesboro. The course is expected to open early next year.

Unlike, Smith or Mack, Reinhardt is not married and held off buying a house to ensure he retained maximum mobility while he searched. In total, he applied for more than 20 superintendent positions “all over the country” before his break came. “It’s tough even getting an interview when they’re getting 300-plus applications,” he says.

Not every superintendent-in-waiting is so fortunate, or so patient. “It gets



Patrick Reinhardt

really hard being an assistant when you’re competing for jobs with a lot of laid-off superintendents,” Reinhardt says. “A lot of good young assistants are burning out and getting out of the industry because they don’t see any room to move up and it’s hard to start a family and provide for a family on \$30,000 or \$40,000. I think a lot of the guys who are

sticking it out are at the higher-end clubs because they are getting paid just enough to make it possible. But it’s got to be hard to have heavy feet and stick around if you’re only earning \$20,000 to \$30,000.”

Adam Wilhite, from East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta, is the assistant superintendent liaison to the Georgia GCSA board of directors and networks frequently with a group of fellow assistants at informal “shop talk” gatherings away from the golf course most months. Job prospects are “a broad topic of conversation,” he says. “A lot of guys would like to see their name next to the title superintendent on the club website or on the business card. I would definitely like to be in a position to make more money. I planned to be a superintendent by the time I was 30 (which he is now).”

Indeed, Wilhite has had, and rejected, the opportunity to move and assume the number-one job at another facility. “A lot of it is also what type of golf course you want to manage. It’s not just about saying you are a superintendent,” he says. “I’m comfortable with my position now because I’m stimulated and learning every single day. I’m not going to spend all my time looking for a superintendent’s job, I’m going to spend my time getting prepared. It’s a quality-of-life thing. If I’m happy and learning and it’s working for my family, then I’m fine with still being an assistant. The leaf is going to flip when it’s ready.”

In the meantime, neither Wilhite nor his colleagues are expecting any overnight change. They’ve been around long enough and understand their industry well enough to know that the outlook is for a lot more déjà vu and very, very few “Cinderella stories.”