

GCSAA shares job fears with PGA, who took steps to help pros

By PETER BLAIS

Expanding job opportunities and influencing job continuity — concerns that have also been raised by Professional Golfers Association of America members — has become part of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America's strategic plan.

"The golf course superintendent's profession is not exempt from such trends as downsizing," warned Tommy Witt, GCSAA board member and chairman of the superintendent association's career development committee.

Fears about too many people chasing too few jobs is something superintendents and golf pros have had to wrestle with in today's uncertain economic environment. Several years ago, the Professional Golfers Association introduced a new certification program designed to break up the logjam of aspiring apprentices wanting to become certified golf pros.

Prior to June 1993, would-be golf professionals usually started their careers working at a course pro shop. After a few months of on-the-job training, they attended the PGA's Business School I classroom program followed by Business School II. Getting to that point typically meant apprentice

pros had invested significant time and energy preparing for their careers. Before enrolling in Business School II, however, they had to pass the Player Ability Test (PAT).

This is where the logjam occurred. The PAT requires that apprentices play 36 holes within 15 strokes of par. For example, an apprentice taking the test at a par-72 layout must shoot no more than 159 [(2x72) + 15] to pass the test. Many apprentices got stuck at the PAT, either taking several tries before finally shooting the required score or never hitting the magic number and having to give up their dream of becoming certified head pros.

Many apprentices stayed in the business, however, working as assistant pros. And since entry into the field was easy and the lifestyle seemingly attractive, many more would-be pros continued to pour in. The result was a glut of apprentices.

The PGA recognized the problem. Acting on a study recommending the association revamp its educational offerings and upgrade members' skills, the PGA moved the PAT to the front of its educational program in 1993. Would-be pros could not enter the apprenticeship program until they had passed the playing test. The goal was to make sure people did not get stuck at the appren-

ticeship level. Of the 12,200 people who took the PAT in 1995, roughly 20 percent passed, according to PGA figures.

"We felt we had to upgrade our standards for people to realize that golf was really a business," Hunkler said. "We never set a maximum number we would accept. We simply needed to upgrade our standards. The result was a slight decrease in the number of people coming into the program."

The PGA followed the front-loaded PAT requirement with additional steps an apprentice must complete before becoming a certified pro. These were:

- A two-day professional readiness program which includes discussions regarding a golf pro's compensation; time required to complete the program; and required skills and aptitudes.

- A formal business school program that includes two elective and 19 core courses, skill simulations performed in classroom settings and work experience.

"It typically takes an apprentice three or four years to complete the program and become a head pro, although it could probably be done in as little as 18 months," Hunkler said.

The PGA added two other programs, one designed to expand career opportunities and the other to match PGA pros

with employers.

The first program recognizes the many career paths available in today's golf industry. It allows members to maintain their accreditation as golf professionals while working as instructors at indoor golf facilities, general managers of golf complexes, teachers at golf schools, technicians for equipment companies and administrators in various golf-related businesses.

"The golf industry has grown and the PGA wanted to recognize that there are many careers available for its members," Hunkler said. "For example in the Northeast and Midwest, many of our members were spending more time teaching at indoor facilities than they were outdoors."

The second program, called Career Links, uses computers to match employer job opening requests with potential job seekers. A PGA member puts his resume on file with Career Links.

When an employer lists an opening with certain skill requirements, Career Links searches its files for potential candidates whose skills match those requirements.

Resumes are forwarded to the potential employer who reviews the materials and sets up interviews. The program was just started last fall.

Job openings

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winter programs have found jobs," said OSU assistant professor David Willoughby. "We have 12 to 15 openings right now and no one to fill them. There seems to be a lot of construction going on and a number of people retiring from the business."

Added Penn State instructor George Hamilton: "It's been a banner year for assistants. There have been a number of course openings, particularly near Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. A new course generally hires away the assistant superintendent from somewhere else to be its new head superintendent. That leaves an assistant opening at his old course as well as an assistant position to be filled at his new one."

Hamilton noted that with the additional administrative responsibilities being placed on head superintendents, many assistants are now doing the day-to-day work done by the head superintendent 10 or 15 years ago. Today's assistant superintendent often oversees a second assistant, who does the work the first assistant used to do. Consequently, there are more assistant superintendents.

Hamilton said Penn State's agronomy office recently listed 51 assistant openings ("a significant increase over a year ago.") and 16 head superintendent positions ("about the same as last year."). Other schools report the number of head superintendent listings remaining stagnant as well.

"The problem is getting from assistant to that next level," Rogers said. "It's a real dogfight for head superintendent jobs."

Part of the problem is the growing number of turf school graduates. While the Michigans, Penn States and Ohios have kept enrollments steady ("We reject two applicants for every one we accept." — Hamilton, Penn State), many schools have added new turf programs or expanded existing ones. The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America "guess-

imates" there are 2,000 two- and four-year turf students at about 120 schools nationwide, said GCSAA spokesman Scott Smith.

"Those numbers worry existing superintendents, but the course owners think it's great," Rogers said. "It's a buyer's market. A course owner can get a young head superintendent for \$28,000 a year, keep him for a few years, then let him go and get a new guy for \$28,000 down the road. If the owner charges \$15 to \$20 a round and is pretty certain of getting that regardless of the course condition, he figures there's no reason to ever pay anyone more than \$35,000 a year if there is a young guy who will start well below that."

GCSAA has tried to educate course owners as to the importance of hiring, keeping and paying for experienced superintendents. The association's Career Development Department beefed up its quarterly newsletter, *Leader Board*, which addresses the superintendent's role in caring for an owner's multi-million-dollar investment. GCSAA has also sought to strengthen relationships with management companies and other multi-course operators. And it is offering more seminars on subjects like resume writing and job-interview skills.

For their part, superintendents are more aggressive in applying for new jobs, Hamilton said. That has put additional pressure on existing superintendents. It has also allowed owners to keep salaries lower.

The difficulty in finding or keeping head superintendent posts has led many to leave for positions in consulting, sales, course design and construction, Rogers noted.

"I've always told students that being a superintendent is one of the hardest jobs in the world," he said. "It's a lot like being a football coach. A football coach's career is dependent on the legs of an 18-year-old kid. He can prepare his player for a game, but he has absolutely no control over him come Saturday afternoon. Likewise, a superintendent can try to prepare his course. But, ultimately, he is at the mercy of the weather, something he has no control over either."

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