

Your next job

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF LIFE AND WORK BEGINS WITH A COMMITMENT TO GROWTH AND CAREER PLANNING

by ROGER STANLEY

Golf course superintendents enjoy challenging work, potential for excellent pay, and opportunities to live and work in locations that most people can only visit as part of a dream vacation. For all these reasons, most superintendents enjoy their careers enough to recommend it to their children. In a December 2003 *Golf Course News* survey of more than 4,000 superintendents, 61 percent of the respondents said they would recommend that a son or daughter become a superintendent (see chart on page 37).

However, realizing the benefits of a career as a superintendent is not easy or automatic. Climbing the career ladder requires a planned series of job changes to grow one's skills and take on greater responsibilities. According to the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA), about 20 percent of superintendents change jobs each year, and on average work about seven years in a position. Advancement requires personal growth, hard work, learning a range of new skills, developing the ability to wear numerous management hats simultaneously and more.

Advancement also requires continuing career management, a skill most aspiring and established golf course superintendents should pay greater attention to, says Jim McLoughlin, former executive director of GCSAA and founder of TMG Golf, a Carlsbad, Calif.-based consulting firm specializing in course development.

"The golf course industry is 10 to 15 years behind most other professional fields in terms of career management," McLoughlin says. "The problem is that the subject of career planning does not appear on the radar screen of most superintendents."

To teach superintendents about the skill, McLoughlin presented "Strategic Career Planning for Superintendents and Assistants," a seminar sponsored by Jacobsen at the February GCSAA conference in San Diego. His central



advice to a packed room was to take charge of their own destinies.

"Seventy-five percent of all people react to life by following the easiest path," McLoughlin says, "while only 25 percent take the initiative with their careers and lives. Winners have a plan that dictates where they want to be five years from now, 10 years from now and later in life. Superintendents who fail to realize their career potential become job vulnerable later in their careers."

McLoughlin says winners at the game of career management are those that continue schooling, work with their USGA Green Section, learn to use new technologies, make good use of down time and balance their lives. As managers, they hire well and delegate effectively. They are organized, good at communicating, dress well and play golf comfortably. They recognize when it is time to change jobs and are prepared to do so.

Career losers reflect the reverse of the above.

"My observation is that superintendents who react to life are those that stay too long at a job early in their careers and don't delegate enough. Later in their careers they still stay too long at a job and try to delegate too much. They often try to take a CEO approach to the job by taking too much free time with declining visibility at their club or course. They also tend to be disorganized and sloppy—a concern because the people they report to tend to be very organized and orderly."

Another discipline for success is being able to balance work and family, McLoughlin says. The goal should be a 40-hour workweek, and while not always possible, no superintendent should want to appear to be a workaholic.

"If you want to impress your employer then do the job within routine hours," he says. "You can do that by managing yourself and learning to delegate. Lower your stress by planning effectively and exercising."

"And try not to bring your work home. Building a firewall between work and home allows you to spend time with your spouse and your children. Being a good superintendent should never mean spending adequate time with your family only during the off-season, a habit that too frequently leads to divorce. The key is to learn to manage yourself first, then your job, and finally your family. If you fail at one, you fail at all three."

Seeing the opportunities

The place to begin with career management is to identify all available sources of jobs throughout the industry. Unfortunately, the player and golf course construction boom of the 1990s when more than 500 courses were opening per year has ended. Today, about 200 new courses open per year. McLoughlin says

while this limits opportunities, it does not end them.

The golf course superintendent job market is dominated by municipal, daily fee and private courses. There are about 16,000 courses in the nation. Of these more than 4,300 are private courses and more than 11,500 are public. Sixty percent of the courses are 9-hole courses, which provide excellent opportunities for superintendents just starting their careers, as well as for superintendents near the end of their careers.

But there are other opportunities to consider, McLoughlin says. One is in construction. Golf course construction is an opportunity too often overlooked by aspiring and established superintendents. "Generally the best way to get into this market is to stay in touch with the architect community," McLoughlin says. "Some shy away because of the temporary nature of this business, but on many occasions the construction superintendent has an opportunity to stay on the job after helping to build the course."

Working for a golf course management company is another opportunity. Contract companies manage about 20 percent of the courses across the country. "For the superintendent just starting out the advantage of working for a management company is that you get to be supervised by professionals, not lay persons."

Another opportunity to consider is working at a golf practice facility. This is a fast growing segment in golf and can be an excellent entry-level job into the world of the golf course superintendent. It can also be a good exit opportunity for veteran superintendents who want to back off on work or to get into an ownership situation.

Other opportunities for established golf course superintendents include 36-hole-plus operations, destination resorts, overseas jobs and consulting.

"Once you know what is possible, the next step in career planning is to identify what you want out of your career and your life," McLoughlin says. "If you desire to own a home with a pool, take major annual family vacations, retire to Arizona and have your children attend Harvard, you need to plan your family's life accordingly, or you will never realize these goals. The same is true with your career."

"My work with golf course superintendents shows that most don't really think long term about what they want out of their careers and

Golf Course News polls superintendents*

Are you improving your business management skills and training in order to qualify for a promotion?



Are you improving your technical and agronomic skills and training to qualify for a promotion?



*Independent online study of 4,000 GCN readers in December 2003 with a 13.7% response.

how to get there. For example, one in five golf professionals envisions owning their own course someday, but only one in 200 superintendents thinks about this. Why? Superintendents are actually in a better position to own and run a golf facility in many ways than are golf professionals."

Getting the job you want

Serious career planning involves three steps: First, knowing how to get a job. Second, knowing how to hold a job. Third, knowing how and when to move on to the next job.

"Getting the job you want can be a matter of luck," McLoughlin says. "Luck does play a role, but at most it is 25 percent of the equation. The other 75 percent are things that you control—your preparation, skill and timing."

Early in a superintendent's career, McLoughlin recommends working as an assistant superintendent at two to three places for two to three years at each job. Try to work in both the north and south to gain experience with cool and warm season grasses to keep both job markets open.

Next, McLoughlin advises serving as the superintendent at two to three advancing jobs.

"When should you think about leaving an assistant job? I think the ideal time is when you have learned everything you can from that superintendent. But don't make lateral moves if you can avoid them, and try to not get trapped into a position because of a big salary or benefits. The goal of early career planning is to envision where you want to be in the short and longer term phases of your career and then work to get there," he says.

As one possible example of a career job sequence, McLoughlin suggests working

as an assistant at several good public golf courses and then working your way up to become superintendent at a good public course. Next, maybe take a challenging job as an assistant superintendent at a good private club and then work your way up to becoming superintendent at better private club. After this, become the superintendent at better private

club. Finally, become the superintendent or property manager at a multi-course facility or a resort.

A special objective in such a career path is to work toward "pedigree" jobs at the country's premier golf clubs and courses.

"The candidate with a better pedigree resume has a better chance of winning a job,"

McLoughlin says. "Your pedigree dictates if you will get interviewed because if you have worked at better clubs it will be assumed that you have had better training and met more challenging standards. All this assumed experience reduces the risk of hiring you. Rightly or wrongly, the chairperson of a search committee is afraid to make a mistake. He or she doesn't want a risky hire. So a pedigree track record gives you the advantage, especially for the better jobs."

McLoughlin advises young superintendents to come up with their own definition of what a successful superintendent is and then decide how to become one. One of the considerations is deciding if salary is more important than pedigree.

"In terms of career opportunities golf is a very flat market," McLoughlin says. "It is relatively easy to find and take a lateral job. But if you want to become the superintendent at a premier course, then opportunities are limited. If success means to one day manage a premier golf course, if that is a major part of your definition of success, then my advice is to think more about establishing your pedigree early on than your salary."

Top 12 skills to get a super job

by STEVE SMITH

For an increasing number of golf courses, hiring a superintendent is no longer a matter of comparing candidates against a wish list. Premier courses recognize that star performers are a must, says Randall Martin, president of Sibbald & Associates, an executive search firm specializing in golf and resorts.

"Today, more than ever, clubs recognize the importance of the golf course superintendent," Martin says. "There is more competition between clubs than there has been in the past, and courses recognize that they need to have a good golf course to attract new members."

Speaking at the GCSAA Show last February, Martin says there are 12 qualities employers look for in superintendent candidates that can do it all:

1. Agronomy skills. "Clubs are looking for an individual with good agronomic skills. This means at least a two-year degree in turfgrass management or a related field, a CGCS who has kept up with the certification requirements and agronomic advancements and someone that has produced a good product."

2. Strong leadership abilities. "Do whatever you can to improve your leadership and management skills by taking the necessary courses or working under someone who has an excellent reputation for leadership and management."

3. Good writing and communication skills. "If you can't clearly communicate and sell your plans for the golf course to the general manager, the green committee and the membership at large, you are going to have problems. You also need to be able to communicate regularly to the membership, in writing, so that they know what's going on."

4. Strong character and decisiveness. "Most clubs are looking for a superintendent for guidance in setting up a long-range plan for the golf course. So, they want someone with the strength of character to stand up and say what the course should be doing and what the priorities should be. Obviously you have to be tactful, but the clubs are looking for a strong individual, not a Mr. Milk Toast."

5. Team player. "Clubs are looking for someone with a reputation of working well with a golf professional and other staff."

6. Approachability. "Clubs want someone who is visible on the golf course when the members are around, someone who the members feel comfortable with and someone they can express their feelings to. If a member has a legitimate concern and the superintendent can handle it in a timely manner, that member will become one of the superintendent's most ardent supporters."

7. Sound financial and administrative skills. "You have to be able to put together a detailed budget and handle the administrative details. In other words, the ability to do paperwork is important."

8. Experience with improvements. "At some point, most clubs will renovate some part of their course, so experience in doing in-house projects, as well as hiring outside contractors and supervising them, is important."

9. Related experience. "When a search committee reviews a resume, they are looking for similarities between the candidate's experience and their facility - similar weather zone, same type of grass, a private or public course, managing a Hispanic work force, or similar factors."

10. Association involvement. "Be active in your local and national associations and hold an office if possible. Clubs look favorably on superintendents who have been recognized by their peers."

11. Play the game. Playing the game was not important just a few years ago, but that has changed. Clubs want a superintendent who plays the game and sees the course from a player's perspective. It's not necessary to have a single-digit handicap, but it is important to play the game."

12. Know what you want. "I've had candidates tell me they really weren't interested after they were selected for an interview by the search committee. That doesn't go over well with the committee or with me. Do your research about the club to determine that you really are interested in the opportunity before you apply. People in the golf business tend to have long memories."

Randy Martin is president of the golf course superintendent division of Sibbald Associates, a St. Louis-based executive search firm specializing in resorts and golf clubs. Martin can be reached at rmartin@sibbaldassociates.com.



Necessary skill set

Many superintendents mistakenly think that being good at taking care of a golf course is the primary qualification for a better job. McLoughlin suggests however, that unless the superintendent is able to document past performance professionally via text, graphics, visuals and a Web site - past performance will mean little.

"I strongly advise superintendents to get USGA Green Section and peer evaluations of their work. From a career management perspective, being evaluated by your peers is the only professional supervision available in the industry today, unless a superintendent works for a management company. However, few superintendents take advantage of this opportunity. Unsupervised superintendents tend to repeat mistakes and fail to grow professionally."

Another mistake McLoughlin sees superintendents make is getting trapped into thinking that their employers should pay for all their training and education. That does not always happen, so superintendents should establish a personal budget to travel to seminars and trade shows and to purchase computers, cameras and other resources.

"Your career is your responsibility and that means spending some of your own money," McLoughlin says. "For example, I suggest you visit Augusta during tournament week - it's the greatest living golf course laboratory you can possibly imagine, especially early in the

week when they are fine-tuning the course for the tournament. There is no harm in asking your employer to pay for some of this, but if they won't then you need to be prepared to do so yourself. Remember, all this is tax deductible.

"I would also suggest that superintendents commit to obtaining CGCS certification. What are you going to answer if one day you are standing in front of a search committee for a job you want badly, and they ask you if you are working to become certified? If you are in the process that will probably suffice. If you are not in the process, what answer can you possibly give them that shows any commitment to the industry or your career?"

Because the successful superintendent must manage a multitude of responsibilities, other career skills to master early in a career include being able to communicate effectively in writing, being a good mechanic in the age of ultra hydraulics, keeping accurate records, knowing how to manage budgets and staff, and being technology literate.

"In this day you need to be able to use a computer, software and work on the Internet. The Internet is a great way to network with other superintendents," McLoughlin says.

"I'd also learn how to use a digital camera and develop your own Web sites. You can dedicate one Web site to your current job - with your employer's permission - that you update weekly with course activity, staff profiles, maintenance schedules, special projects and more - and a second, personal Web site that targets your next job. The goal of this second Web site is to complement your resume. In an interview only 20 percent of your time should be devoted to your past jobs, with 80 percent focusing on a plan of action for the job you are applying for. Most superintendents reverse these percentages in an interview to their own detriment."

McLoughlin says a final suggestion on skills development is to commit to playing golf comfortably and regularly. A recent survey showed that 31 percent of all golf course superintendents do not play golf at all, one-fourth pay once a month and about half pay once per week.

"What does playing or not tell you about a superintendent's commitment? Playing the game is not a luxury. Playing shows respect for the game and is a great way to learn the play and Rules nuances of your course. I suggest playing a minimum of 20 visible rounds per year. Having a low score is not necessary, but take lessons and work to earn a handicap. Also know the Rules well! Take the USGA and PGA Rules tests. Better still, qualify and serve on the Rules Committee at your club or course. All this will earn you

peer recognition within the family of golf, which translates into greater job security."

Options for senior superintendents

It is never too late to begin career planning, McLoughlin says. Even the more veteran superintendents have options they can exercise to put themselves in a stronger situation.

"Again, the place to start is with what you envision for yourself," he advises. "For some established superintendents that will mean continuing to work at their present jobs on their own terms. For others it will mean moving on and up."

For those who want to continue working career planning can involve negotiating a better contract, expanded responsibility, the opportunity to earn outside consulting income, and possibly taking a sabbatical leave.

"The best way for a veteran superintendent to keep the future job opportunity door open is to have an established track record for managing his or her present golf course operation impeccably and below the standard budget norm for the region. With this card available, superintendents will always be able to call their shots because they will always be able to pay their own way."

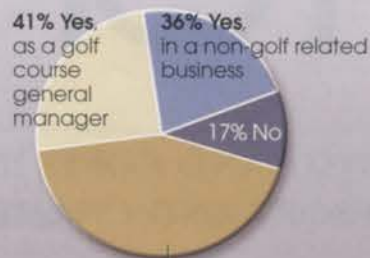
For those who want a better challenge or more rewarding work than a present job offers, the opportunities include becoming a superintendent at a better golf course operation, establishing credentials to become a general manager, or going the entrepreneurial route via a consulting company, or acquiring equity in a golf facility operation.

"There are opportunities to buy a club or buy into a club," McLoughlin says. "Owning a practice range is also a noteworthy experience that I'd recommend. It's a legitimate opportunity that requires one-sixth of the land and development cost of a regulation 18-hole golf course - while at the same time potentially delivering similar bottom line revenues."

"Whatever route you take, whether as someone who is just entering the business or as a veteran superintendent working on exiting on your own terms, your dreams are

Golf Course News polls superintendents*

If you were offered a new job would you consider taking it?



72% Yes, as a superintendent with a higher salary and more responsibility

*Independent online study of 4,000 GCN readers in December 2003 with a 13.7% response.

Would you advise a son or daughter to pursue a career as a golf course superintendent?



only possible through career planning," GCN

Jim McLoughlin founded TMG Golf, a golf course development and consulting firm, and a former executive director of GCSAA. He can be reached at golfguide@adelphia.net.

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