

In the balance

PLANNING AHEAD AND HIRING COMPATIBLE ASSISTANTS CAN HELP SUPERINTENDENTS ACHIEVE STABILITY BETWEEN HOME LIFE AND WORK

by
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Q Explain your typical day and work week.

I typically divide the year into two seasons—the off-season and the in-season. During the in-season, I wake up just before 5:00 a.m., and arrive at the course about 5:30 a.m. I live only a mile from the club, but I like to stop and get a cup of coffee and enjoy some private time before I get to work.

I don't believe I do anything atypical of any other superintendent. We have many projects going on at one time. I have a terrific staff of 17, and have two interns with us for the summer. I enjoy assigning the first task in the morning. We use a large board where jobs are listed and expectations are posted. I believe at least 70 percent of the

daily work is completed within the first four hours of the day, so it's important I set that tone. I delegate more to my assistants as the day goes on.

The work week can be flexible with effort. I can do a lot of family activities by taking off and coming back later to make up the time from being off property. The job offers a certain degree of flexibility. Typically, I work Monday through Saturday, I try not to come in on a Sunday unless a tournament or the weather dictate I should be around. Saturdays are usually spent meeting with members and being more visible.

In-season, we come back after hours several days of the week to do jobs that might interfere with play, such as pesticide applications, in-line irrigation repairs or getting a few extra acres of rough mowed, or when we want to be less intrusive. When I arrive early, it doesn't translate to leaving earlier, it usually just adds that time to the total day. I estimate I put in about 50 to 55 hours per week. During the off-season, I will adhere to a more traditional schedule and stick to 40 hours per week. Off-season days are full, similar to in-season, but without the intense pressure of getting things done now.

Q How do you manage your time?

I usually don't like to deviate from routines. I like to keep the staff focused and on task. After assigning the morning's first assignments, I will head back to the office to check e-mails and then tour the golf course. As mentioned before, as the day progresses, I delegate more through the assistants. I tend to return all nonurgent phone calls during one or two periods during the day.

We try to be efficient. We have a new maintenance facility, which is four-seasons old, that was designed with a conveyor-belt-type system, meaning it allows moving forward. I'm always saying little victories lead to big victories. I like to accomplish a lot of little chores first then tackle the more time-consuming jobs next. This builds positive momentum. Examples of this could be checking irrigation heads. We will focus on the small, mister-style heads first, knocking off 20 or so at a clip, then tackle the larger leaks later. Another quick example is mulching or weeding flower beds. We start with the smaller beds first and progress to the larger ones second. In general, people feel better with themselves if they accomplish something during the day. Again, it builds momentum. I share my philosophy, never preach, and we go on.

Q Do you consider your job stressful? How do you handle stress?

For me, there's an ebb and flow as it relates to stress. It all revolves around the greens. When the greens are healthy and ball roll is acceptable, life is pretty good. As the temperature and humidity rise, so does my stress level. I tend to internalize most of it.

Admittedly, during the past two seasons, I've struggled a bit. I began to question programs we had in place and the time they were taking to materialize. So I hired a turf consultant, Ed Etchells of Golf Turf, for a review. He has helped reduce my stress level.

I solicited advice from others often. When Ed leaves, I feel good. He gives me peace of mind. I have a touch of insecurity that keeps me motivated. These turf consultants are often negatively perceived, but I believe if used right, they're a great asset. I remind superintendents that the consultants work with you not for you, so be prepared for some blunt talk.

I created some self-inflicted stress by following Tony Savone. Tony was the superintendent at Quaker Ridge for 27 years and maintained this golf course as the standard for the area. During the transition, the membership also wanted me to transition the golf course to play differently—lower heights of cut, less water, lower fertility—all things you're "not supposed" to do. What followed were disease outbreaks that included Anthracnose. This devilish fungus created havoc for a few seasons on the turf. During this time the membership was tough, patience was tested, and rightfully so. I informed them with as much information as possible and gave progress reports. Other superintendents in the area were also dealing with the same problem, so communication among each other was vital for me. I really shook things up. I'm hoping for a less stressful summer this year.

Q Do you feel you spend enough time with your family?

It's vitally important to be able to balance work and family. I live in an affluent area, not because I can, but because I needed to live near to the course. True, I had to sacrifice a larger house by buying a smaller one, but I wanted to be close to home and not have to commute. It's a trade off.

I often bring my kids back to the course with me, and even my wife will come. It's a great feeling to be together like that. They're having fun with dad, and I'm making those mental notes getting ready for tomorrow. If I had a long commute, I wouldn't do that as often as I do. To make more time for my

**GOLF COURSE NEWS
INTERVIEWS STEVE
RENZETTI, CGCS, GOLF
COURSE SUPERINTENDENT
AT QUAKER RIDGE GOLF
CLUB IN SCARSDALE, N.Y.**



Photo: Regency Studios



Photo: Regency Studios

Steve Renzetti discusses a project with one of his staff members. Renzetti likes to review the day's projects early in the morning and delegate certain jobs.

family, I come to work early while they are still sleeping. Again this frees up time for them later on in the day.

My wife is the foundation of our family. She's the reminder for me of what's important in life and gives me reason to maintain a balance. While pregnant with our first child, she was diagnosed with cancer — Hodgkin's. Since then, she's been cured, but it grounded me and put what's really important in life into perspective. It was one of those life lessons learned.

I enjoy picking my kids up from school, attending all their school activities and coaching their little league teams.

Q How does work affect your personal life?

Most of the time, I can separate work from home life. When I'm at home, I want to give my family full attention. During hot summer nights, I might not be as good at that as I would like to be because I'm usually a little nervous worrying about the turf.

I tell my sons, if you're not going to give 100 percent, don't do it. Half efforts don't help anyone, advice I should heed sometimes. It's just my philosophy. Nothing is set in stone. They're guidelines if you will.

Q What is your opportunity like for advancement in this industry?

When I was an assistant, I remember hearing that when you become a superintendent motivation could be tough because the question becomes, "Where do you go from here? You achieved the goal, being a superintendent."

Success is a internal. I strive to be a better superintendent each day. Each opportunity

has its own challenges. I'm happy now. I'm at a great club, one that I could retire at and be satisfied with my career, or be pressed with an opportunity tomorrow. I'm always working, preparing for the next opportunity. I want the choice to be mine. Success is defined differently for everyone. For me, it's about choices and being in a position to not only have them but also be able to act on them.

I'm always encouraging my assistants and interns to be well-rounded and diversify their backgrounds — volunteer with the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America or a local chapter, get involved with extracurricular activities, be active. I encourage them to open their network to a bigger audience, even though some of that might be calculated.

Jim McLoughlin's (McLoughlin is founder of TMG Golf, a golf course development and consulting firm) philosophy of career management is right on. I owe him so much. He opened my eyes to varying aspects of career management at an early age. He put examples of role models, such a Ted Horton (a certified golf course superintendent and consultant) among others, in front of me to serve as examples. I have always taken admirable traits from others and incorporated them into my life when possible.

Q What is McLoughlin's philosophy?

I've participated in several of Jim's seminars and was lucky enough to have attended my first one early on, right out of college. He emphasized setting a broad and solid foundation for yourself, trying to diversify your experience, working for several different style courses, being self sufficient, giving yourself a budget for clothing, education, etc. He has a saying, "be patiently aggressive," and keep pushing yourself in a professional manner.

I remember hearing Jim use the word "pedigree" 18 years ago. Now it's a buzzword I hear often when clubs are seeking new employees. He would point out that you will give yourself a competitive advantage ... All thing being equal, most clubs will hire the candidate with the "name" club on the resume or if he/she worked for a prominent superintendent. Right or wrong, they're covering their butts.

I reiterate the same advice to my assistants and interns. It's easier to build that into a resume early in a career than later when you're less mobile and have fewer commitments.

When he took his seminar "national," I had mixed emotions, my immediate thought was ... now the secret is out and

my competitive advantage will be gone. I say that tongue-in-cheek of course. Jim "gets it." I have benefited from his advice and many others will.

Q How do you coach and mentor assistants?

One of the best means I have of reducing stress is having quality assistants. I always have sought and hired the best, most talented person available. I rely on them to help me meet the goals of the club. I hope I pass on sound agronomic practices. They will innately pick up many of those things anyway because they live and breathe turf, and they see what we do. It's the life lessons I hope to influence, even if it's just a little.

I'm not one to lecture. I talk situationally. I share fun, family stories about my kids. I want them to see that I enjoy my family and that you can be devoted to both, work and family, without sacrificing one over the other. One of my staple interview questions is somewhat probing. I ask what they do with their free time? I want to hear if they're active people or not, or if they're self-motivated. I'm extremely selective when hiring. Compatibility and attitude rank higher than ability. I can train technical skills, but it's hard, if not impossible, to train attitude.

I share club politics and historical perspectives on issues. I'm always emphasizing saving money. A repeated comment I always make is: "You will remember me in 30 years not for the top dressing technique you learned or how to hand-water a green, but hey, I'm glad Steve had me start saving early." It's a lot like father-and-son conversations. I'm flattered when a former assistant or intern calls for advice and some guidance about a particular situation or job. We all get caught up in our own glass-walled worlds, especially during the summertime. A happy employee is a good employee and that goes for me as well.

Q What are your thoughts about being a superintendent?

If a superintendent can manage their career properly, the family/work relationship can be very symbiotic; it could be a wonderful dynamic. There aren't many other careers that could allow the flexibility to make the most out of the two most important aspects of life. I have been faced with opportunities that were compelling, but after careful consideration, I always come back to the flexibility issue. I might not take two-week summer vacations like some other professions, at least not during the "in-season" period. Instead I get my fill in many little pieces. There are tremendous opportunities that makes being a superintendent stupendous. GCN