

Assistant superintendents create more opportunities for themselves

by John Walsh

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Three years ago, the Midwest Association of Golf Course Superintendents made a pioneering move to help assistant golf course superintendents. And it might be catching on elsewhere.

That move was the formation of the Class C Advisory Committee, solely comprised of assistant superintendents. The purpose of the committee, which has eight members, is to help assistants further their professional development through education and networking and aid their ascension to the superintendent level.

"We wanted to understand assistants' plights and concerns," says Gary Hearn, golf course superintendent of Salt Creek Golf Club in Wood Dale, Ill., and president of the Midwest Association. "We wanted to bring them on the board so they could see how things operate, and so when they become superintendents they will want to join the board because of the exposure they received when they were assistants. Some assistants think there's a wall there at the board level and things are going on behind closed doors, but there really isn't.

"We felt we would have better communication with them," he adds. "We're big on committees because everybody gets involved then, and they bring concerns to the board so they can be addressed."

There are 35 to 40 assistants that regularly attend the Class C Advisory Committee meetings, but Hearn and the rest of the board are hoping for more attendance. He says the board is e-mailing as many as it can to make sure everyone is contacted. There are between 650 and 700 members of the Midwest Association, and a little more than 100 of them are assistants, according to John Ekstrom, assistant golf course superintendent at Hinsdale Golf Club in Clarendon Hills, Ill.

In November 2005, Hearn appointed Ekstrom head of the committee. Ekstrom is serving a two-year term and replaced Chad Kempf, former assistant



Ekstrom



Assistant golf course superintendents are creating more opportunities for themselves by serving on their local chapter associations' boards, albeit as nonvoting members.

superintendent at Hinsdale. Kempf now is an account manager and turf expert for EPIC Creative Communications in Wisconsin.

The committee hosts workshops that feature guest speakers, informal shop talks and roundtables in which assistants discuss their careers and the golf business. The committee also contributes to *On Course*, the association's magazine, and helps with scholarships. The committee also has started a quarterly newsletter.

"We're trying to boost camaraderie," Ekstrom says. "We just had an informal dinner meeting. It's mid-summer, and we're looking at the home stretch for the year. We want to exchange ideas and have more educational opportunities. We wouldn't have had the exposure to certain speakers without this committee."

Ekstrom says the association has received positive feedback from assistants.

"Being an assistant, we're not on the level of superintendents, but there could be more effort trying to organize assistants more," he says. "Most superintendents that I know and talk to are

very supportive of their assistants. They know the assistants are the future of the industry and are all for promoting the assistants to the best they can be."

Going forward, the Midwest Association's board will accept recommendations and ultimately select future chairmen of the Class C committee.

"I want jobs to come first and this to come second, third or fourth," Hearn says. "I want to make sure they have the time. We do a good screening of who's out there, and we have a good feel of who wants it and who can handle it."

Connection with other associations would be great, Ekstrom says. Assistants in other regions, after seeing this committee, might start with a group with their associations.

And that could be the Iowa Golf Course Superintendents Association, which has 532 active members, 94 of whom are assistant superintendents. Dan Schuknecht, assistant golf course superintendent at Talons of Tuscany in Ankeny, Iowa, wants to form a committee in the Iowa GCSA that is comprised solely of assistants.

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Schuknecht serves on an assistant superintendent task force for the Golf Course Superintendent Association of America, and from serving on that task force, he came up with the idea to get assistants more involved at the chapter level. He drafted a proposal that included an assistant serving on the board, but without voting privileges. The chapter accepted his proposal, and he became a board member who will serve two years.

"It's a great opportunity for assistants to get exposure to the board and to see what the board members go through," he says. "It's also a great networking opportunity and gives assistants a chance to see what issues the board deals with outside of their jobs. I've been exposed to conversation about sponsors, advertising, issues with vendors, planning a trade show and getting more people involved with the association."

Other chapters that have assistants serving on the board include:

- Metropolitan GCSA
- Quad State Turfgrass Association
- Western New York GCSA
- Mississippi Valley GCSA
- Northern Ohio GCSA
- Southern California GCSA
- Florida West Coast GCSA

- GCSA of New Jersey
- Connecticut GCSA
- Heart of America GCSA.

Serving on the board is a great opportunity for assistants to learn about what goes on behind the scenes at the chapter level, Schuknecht says. He encourages more assistant involvement, such as writing articles for the association newsletter and organizing the inaugural assistant superintendent golf tournament. He says that this fall there will be discussion to establish an assistant superintendent committee. He hasn't spoken to the president of the Iowa GCSA about it but has spoken to Jeff Wendell, CGCS, the association's executive director, who thinks members will support the idea.

Schuknecht helped to quicken the process of organizing the committee by getting a template from Kempf about the procedures of the Midwest Association's Class C Advisory Committee.

At an upcoming Iowa GCSA golf tournament for assistant golf course superintendents, Schuknecht says there will be more discussion about forming a Class C-type committee.

"If formed, I hope the committee will help us with our objectives – to get more assistants to become involved with the

golf tournament, write more articles for the newsletter and allow us to complete the tasks that superintendents and the association do for us now ourselves, such as all the details of putting together a tournament."

Hearn says there's a concern among assistants about moving up to superintendent positions because the industry isn't building as many golf courses as it did in the '90s and the industry is flooded with specialty positions such as spray and irrigation technicians, making it more difficult for assistants to learn every aspect of the industry.

"They are the best resource for the future, and the more experience and education they get, the better golf courses will be," he says.

The biggest thing for assistants is to have more opportunities in a tough market, Ekstrom says.

"It's tough to distinguish yourself because there are so many qualified guys out there," he says. "It can't hurt to have as much networking as possible. Having that opportunity can only make assistants better.

"However, without the support of superintendents, none of this would happen," he adds. "We're all very appreciative of the superintendents."

Changing course

Most of the Olivas Golf Course in Southern California is being regrassed with seashore paspalum, which is rare in the region. by Heather Wood

This is one of the warmest, most sultry summers Matt Mulvany remembers in Ventura, Calif., and for that, he feels blessed.

Mulvany, golf course superintendent at Olivas Golf Course, is regrassing most of the course, sprigging all fairways, rough and tees with seashore paspalum.

"We have reclaimed water high in salt, and we wanted something that was durable," he says. "About 85,000 rounds have been played here per year in the past. We wanted something that could stand up to that traffic and deal with salt as well."

Mulvany looked into other paspalum varieties but decided to plant Sea Isle 1.

"The paspalum has a finer leaf texture than kikuyugrass or some of the Bermuda varieties," he says. "It's an impressive-looking grass."

Mulvany, who has been a superintendent since 1991, has grow-in experience. He took a position at Buenaventura Golf Course, also in Ventura, in 2000

and oversaw the construction, complete renovation and grow-in of the course, which reopened in March 2005.

In 2001, he took the superintendent's position at Olivas as well, running both properties at the same time, which amounted to 36 holes. As the construction on Olivas approached at the end

of 2005, he decided to manage Olivas only so he could focus all his efforts on the construction and grow-in. Ed Easley, construction manager at Eagl Golf, is managing the project. Eagl Golf, which also employs Mulvany, operates the course.

"It's a collective effort between Ed, my-



Management chose to plant the Sea Isle 1 variety on the tees, fairways and rough. Photo: Olivas Golf Course

self, Nick Dunn, director of agronomy for Eagl, and Greg Gilner (golf operations manager for the city of Ventura),” Mulvany says.

“The golf course has, to some degree, a links-style design, and we wanted a turf that would follow that theme,” he adds. “Paspalum is a turf that’s lean and mean and doesn’t need as much maintenance and pesticides as other turf. It’s a pretty environmentally friendly turf, and that kind of goes along with the golf course.”

There are 35 acres of native area on the course, including sensitive areas that meander through the golf course, Mulvany says.

The crew has been working on the task of grassing 90 acres for about two months. By the first week of this month, there was one hole left to sprig. All the fairways, roughs and tees were prepped, rocked and picked. Then the sprigging machine dropped sprigs at a rate of 260

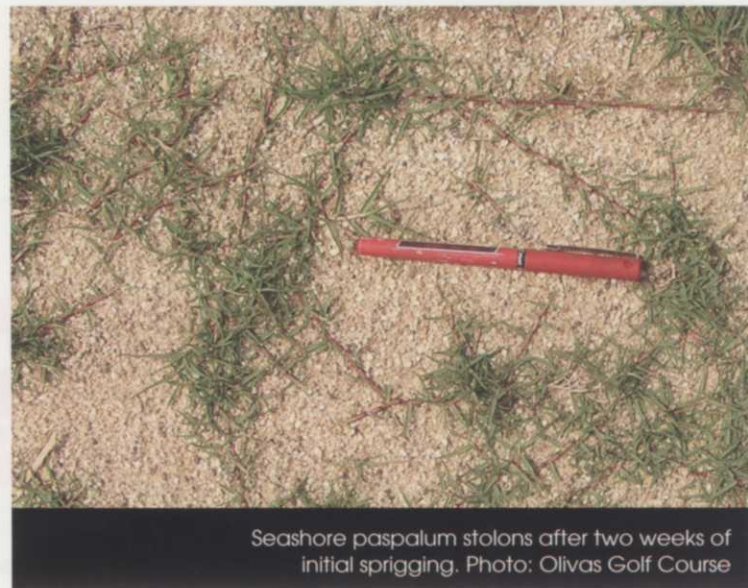
bushels per acre. The tractor-drawn culti-packer unit was then run over the sprigged areas to push the sprigs into the soil. The newly sprigged areas then were watered as soon as possible. Sprigs were planted by hand in the small spaces where the machine didn’t fit to ensure accuracy, Mulvany says.

All of the fairways, roughs and tees are being sprigged except for about two to five acres of sod around the greens, which remained bentgrass, to blend the greens into the green surrounds. Bunker slopes were sodded as well.

The humidity, which is uncharacteristic of Ventura’s climate, has helped the stolons grow.

“It’s amazing that the paspalum sprigs hold pretty well – there is no erosion,” Mulvany says. “Sprigging the slopes gets difficult. You’ve got to be careful.”

Mulvany noticed many of the seed-head sprouts above the 1.5-inch mowing height, which leads to interesting



Seashore paspalum stolons after two weeks of initial sprigging. Photo: Olivas Golf Course

contours around the greens.

“It’s not that we don’t like it, we’re just kind of surprised,” he says. “We weren’t expecting it. It’s just that turf at this time of year really shoots up.”

Mulvany expects to use about two

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pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet annually to fertilize the course.

Mulvany says Olivas is one of a few courses in the region to use paspalum to this extent. The grass is used mostly

in Florida, but not much in California. One course that grows it is nearby Fairbanks Ranch Country Club in Rancho Santa Fe. The club has had the grass on its fairways, roughs and tees since 1985.

But only during the past five or seven years has Mulvany seen a considerable amount written about paspalum.

So far, the results have exceeded Mulvany's expectations, which makes him wonder why he doesn't see the grass used more prevalently in the region.

"You'd think more people by now would have used it," he says. "I'm not sure why, but I bet it would open people's eyes seeing this course."

Mulvany is waiting to see how the warm-season grass will do during the winter months. The question is how much of it will go dormant.

"Maybe that's one of the reasons why more golf courses don't use paspalum – people don't want the brown, splotchy look along coast," he says.

Olivas has been closed during the re-grassing. Currently, four or five holes are at a playable height, but Mulvany says it will take several months before the entire course is ready to reopen.

"It won't be the same golf course that we closed," he says.

Mulvany anticipates that the number of rounds played will increase when the course reopens because curious golfers will want to play the course and check out the paspalum.

"That happens with a lot of new courses," he says. "We'll probably see 350 golfers a week for the first few months." GCN

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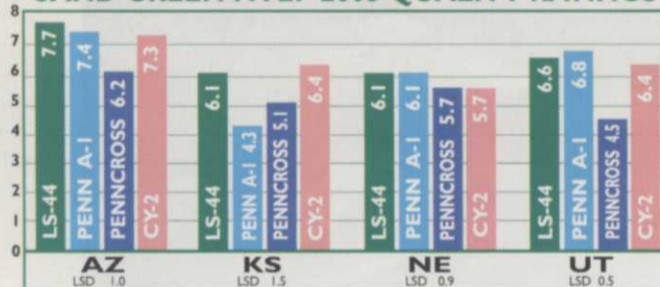
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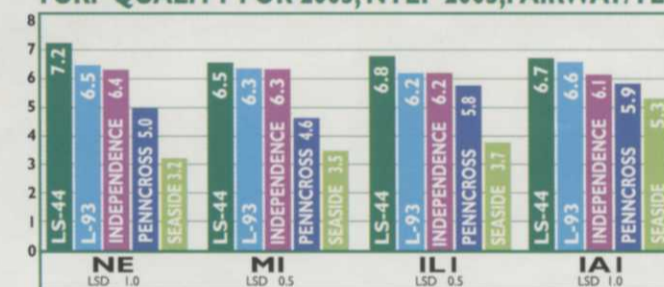
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