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It's a family affair

Have you ever seen the movie, "Ferris Bueller's Day Off"? It's the goofy, sophomoric tale of a teen who skips school and goes on a series of adventures and misadventures with a couple of friends. Basically, it's a cinematic ode to playing hooky creatively.

Well, we have a "Ferris Bueller" tradition in my family. Once a year, if one of our boys has done something terrific, I call them in sick from school, and we do something fun for the day. It might be a trip to an amusement park or a day at the beach. The point is it's a total surprise and it's a day just for them.

My younger son – a fourth-grader – earned straight As this year, so it was definitely time for a Bueller day. But, instead of the usual kid stuff, I decided to combine it with "Take your child to work day." So, I woke him early, threw his sleepy, confused little butt into the car and headed down to The Memorial Tournament at Muirfield Village Golf Club in Dublin, Ohio, to attend a mid-week practice round.

It was a fabulous experience for three reasons. First and foremost, it was a special day with my boy. Secondly, it was a chance for him to learn more about golf and why daddy is madly in love with this insane game. Finally, in the back of my mind, it also was a way to pay tribute to the special role that family plays in our business.

The Memorial is, of course, hosted by Jack Nicklaus, a man who always made his family a big part of his golf persona. And the certified golf course superintendent at Muirfield is a young fellow named Paul B. Latshaw. Hmm ... where have I heard that name before?

A game played by millions of people on trillions of blades of manicured grass has, most wonderfully, spawned gazillions of fabulous family trees. I seriously doubt scientists have identified a golf gene (or a turfhead chromosome), but it's pretty remarkable how much this business runs from father to son, brother to brother, grandparents to grandchildren, etc. Even uncles, aunts and cousins get in the act. The Latshaws, Paul A. and Paul B., are just one example. Here are a handful more from the business side of golf:

- Old Tom and Young Tom
- The innovative Valentines
- Shutterbugs Tom and John Mascaro
- Presidents Bob and Bruce Williams

- The thoughtful Cadenellis
- The amazing Alonzis
- The dynasty of Dye
- The fantastic Fazios
- Palmer, Dan and the huge Maples tree
- The giant Jemseks
- RTJ, Rees and Bob
- The empowered Powells
- The brilliant Baviers
- The Ohio Espositos

(Note: I know I'm leaving out a bunch of great folks, but I have to stop here. An e-mail request about this topic to about 30 friends throughout the country generated information about at least 80 more families who bleed green. Wow! That said, I'd love to hear your family story. Just e-mail me if you come from deep turf roots. We'd be thrilled to print your letters.)

Among superintendents in particular, the business is clearly a family affair. The question is: Why would so many choose to follow in their kin's footsteps when the trail is such a difficult one to walk?

As my son and I wandered around Nicklaus' and Latshaw's course and marveled at its beauty, I thought about this question and all the times I've talked with second-, third- or even fourth-generation superintendents about it. Here are a few of the answers I've received in the past:

1. You grow up with it, and the craziness just seems normal. No summer vacations. Dad leaving at 4 a.m., coming home at 3:30 p.m. and collapsing into a La-Z-Boy. Dinner-table talk about club politics. Calls in the middle of the night about that @#\$\$!! pump station. You've already lived it, so it's just logical you can handle it.

2. You fell in love with it during those occasional rides around the course in the passenger seat of dad's Cushman. The sights, smells and sounds of course maintenance stuck with you. The sense that "dad's in charge here" impressed you. You liked chasing the geese or playing in the mud holes the irrigation workers left behind. For whatever reasons, simply being exposed to the process got you hooked.

3. You got a summer job working for

your dad, your uncle, your brother (or some other miscellaneous relative) and just stayed. You looked up 10 years later and realized it was your career for life.

4. You hated the business and went to college to major in engineering or English or anything but turf ... but you weren't passionate about that other stuff. You changed majors along the way and, voila!

5. You tried another career and wandered back into the family business in your late 20s or 30s, realizing there was more to life than sitting behind a desk.

Those are all the standard answers, but the real insight came a few days later when I met a superintendent at a modestly budgeted muni in suburban Detroit. He's one of those overworked, understaffed guys who's way too busy trying to do seven different jobs or read GCN or any other turf magazine. He didn't know me from boo and wasn't sure what to make of some idiot purporting to be an industry journalist.

As we talked, I mentioned topics familiar to most frustrated superintendents:

long hours, low pay, lack of understanding from golfers, weather, stress and so on. After a few minutes, he looked at me – it was as if a light bulb turned on over his head – and said, "Oh,

you speak turf. Usually, it's only other superintendents or people in your family who understand. Most outsiders don't get it." Bingo.

This business is a family affair because, in most cases, only those who are that close to it can speak the native tongue. Maybe it's because of the Scottish roots of the game, but it feels like a clan: a family united by not only blood but a common purpose and shared history.

Golf brings people together in so many ways. On one day in May, it brought my son and me closer. In the case of family members who share the trials and joys of our profession, it's a special bond that lasts a lifetime. That's something to be appreciated, enjoyed and celebrated.

And, by the way, if you have kids and you're in the midst of the crazy season right now, I highly recommend a "Ferris Bueller" day with them. You won't regret it. GCN

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