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THE FORK IN THE CART PATH

Assistant superintendents face many hurdles while gaining experience and working toward the ultimate goal of becoming a golf course superintendent. One can fill a resume with the best education money can buy, combine it with internships and work experience at the finest country clubs, and still have trouble breaking through into a superintendent position. With 10 years under my belt as an assistant superintendent, I know the frustration and the obstacles facing today's assistants waiting to get their big break.

The industry is overloaded with talented assistants with no place to go. Eventually, many assistants come to a fork in the road – or, I guess, a fork in the cart path – and have to decide which direction to go. When facing such a big decision, assistants have to weigh and calculate many factors such as buying a house, starting a family and the cost of living. It's not easy, and too many of the best assistant superintendents just give up and leave the golf industry. A question many ask is: "When is it time to get out before it's too late?"

In the summer of 2006, I faced the same question. With a wife, two-year-old son and large mortgage payment, I needed to decide to tough it out or get out. There are many careers with a larger paycheck and better hours, but was it time for me to make a new start? I began to evaluate my situation. I was in the upper pay bracket for Chicago assistants and had finished second for the fourth time in a superintendent job search. Frustration was setting in, and I felt the window of opportunity for moving into a superintendent position was closing quickly. I repeatedly asked myself, "Will it ever happen?"

After talking to my family and Mark Thibault, the superintendent I worked for,

I started to pursue other options. I decided to sit my dear old dad down and discuss becoming a journeyman lineman. For 37 years, my father has worked as a lineman in Illinois mainly, but he also helped to restore power after events such as ice storms and Hurricane Katrina. The life of a journeyman lineman is rewarding and can provide a good life for a family. Sounds good, right?

In September, I passed all the tests and interviews to make it into climbing school with a job offer at the end of a weeklong climbing audition. I believed it was time to leave the golf industry, and with an un-



derstanding superintendent, I was able to pursue the opportunity. I spent the first few days climbing and learning difficult skills atop a variety of power poles – it made growing grass look easy. On day four, after climbing up and down for what seemed to be the one hundredth time, I took a moment to rest before my descent. While sitting atop a 35-foot pole, I viewed the surrounding landscape and began to think about the early mornings touring the golf course and taking my son Jackson for cart rides in the evenings. Maybe I was delirious from exhaustion, or maybe I have chloro-thalonil in my veins, but I decided to leave climbing poles to my father.

After returning to my post as assistant superintendent at The Links at Carillon in Plainfield, Ill., I refocused my goals to networking and staying involved with my local association, the Midwestern Association of Golf Course Superintendents. By researching my options to leave, I found where I belong and discovered a newfound respect for what my father did to provide for his family. I also became more relaxed at work and home, focusing on watching my son grow up on the golf course.

It's almost a year later, and with a little luck and a lot of preparation, I made it to the next level. I was starting to think I had a better chance of finding Bigfoot, but on July 2, I started my first day as a golf course superintendent at Mauh-Nah-Tee-See Country Club in Rockford, Ill. It feels great to have my feet on the ground and not on a power pole.

Everyone's path is different and there's no mathematical formula to obtain a superintendent job, but I have a few items to offer assistants in their pursuit of one:

Network. Get to know your area superintendents, assistants and salesmen. It was a fellow assistant who led me to my position. The Mauh-Nah-Tee-See Country Club position was never advertised, and without networking, I would've never known of this great

opportunity.

Communication. Tell your superintendent, golf professional, green chairman or owner about your intentions to move to a superintendent position. You never know who has a connection that gets you the interview and ultimately the position.

Preparation. Actively update your resume and be ready to interview. Jobs open and fill in a matter of days. There's no time to hesitate.

Luck. A little luck never hurts either.

It's not easy out there, but if you're ready to take the correct fork in the cart path when you reach it, you'll eventually make it to the top. **GCI**