



EX-SUPERINTENDENTS TAKE ALTERNATE ROUTES ON CAREER PATHS

BY JOHN WALSH

Thousands of golf course superintendents love the profession so much they'd never leave or wouldn't think of doing anything else professionally. But sometimes there are factors in a superintendent's life that cause him or her to leave the profession. And although aspects of the job are missed, the decision isn't regrettable in most cases. Oscar Peterson, Bill Roberts and Bill Lanthier are cases in point.

DIDN'T SEE THE LIGHT

Oscar Peterson, CGCS, was a golf course superintendent for seven years and was in the industry for 18 years dating back to when he was in high school.

"What lured me into the business was the phenomenon – at the time – that you could get to a course early in your career and retire there," he says.

Peterson graduated with a bachelor of science degree from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1995 and then worked as the assistant superintendent at Blackhawk Country Club in the same city.

"I didn't do the second assistant or spray technician thing because I was lucky enough to get a true assistant's position right out of school," he says.

After four years as an assistant at Blackhawk, Peterson went to Freeport (Ill.) Country Club as superintendent. He stayed there from 1999 to 2004. Then he went to Watertown (Wis.) Country Club as superintendent. After two years at Watertown, Peterson became disillusioned with the job market and left the industry to start his own commercial and residential outdoor lighting business.

"I was enticed by the ideal career path," he says. "I signed up to be an assistant for two years and then get a head superintendent's job; but for others, that's not likely anymore. I was the last of the guys to make it to a superintendent's position early in one's career. I was a superintendent at age 24. Now, there aren't many superintendents under the age of 30.

"I was lucky to get my first superintendent's job, but the town and club went through tough times, and I left to go to Watertown," he says. "At the time, I started a family and was close to other family members. I thought Watertown was more stable. Eventually, I wanted to do less physical labor and work with a bigger budget, but with the economy and shrinking budgets, that didn't happen. I worked 60 hours a week and did a lot of physical labor. I wanted to go to a club with more of a staff."

Like Freeport, Watertown had financial difficulties.

"They cut their budget and asked me to take a pay cut after year two," Peterson says. "There was an exodus of members at clubs in the area. It wasn't just bad decisions made by the board."

Every year Peterson was a superintendent, he looked for another job because his ultimate goal was something else. Every job he interviewed for was because of somebody he knew, not because of his resume, he says.

"Some places had 200 applicants," he says. "That's the way it is nowadays for the top 10 percent of the jobs in the Midwest. If there was a job opening that was better than what I had, I applied for it. In seven years, I applied for about 20 jobs."

Because there are so many applicants for one job, clubs need to narrow the pool. Peterson says assistants are usually thrown out first, then superintendents with less than five years experience, then superintendents with two-year degrees.

"The bad jobs get worse, and the good jobs are few and far between," he says. "I couldn't get to where I wanted to go."

Peterson decided to look outside the industry for gainful employment when he realized the next better

job wasn't going to come along.

"I didn't see the light at the end of the tunnel," he says. "For me, the goal was to be at a stable course with at least a \$500,000 budget, one good mechanic and one good assistant. All the budgets at the courses I was at were going down. It was tough. I wasn't going to settle only for the Milwaukee Country Club, but I wanted to work somewhere better than where I was. I would have gone to a public or resort course, but the budget had to meet expectations."

One morning while at Watertown, Peterson thought he could work less and make more money doing something else. So he left the club and started his own business.

"I'm working less, and I'm not too far from my field," he says. "I'm outside a lot and not stuck in an office all day.

"You hear of people leaving and turning up as salespeople," he adds. "I know a lot of college friends who left the business, but I wasn't interested in a sales job in golf. I'm working for myself, and I have more control over what happens."

Peterson's former job as a superintendent and the one he has now running his lighting company have similarities – both have technical and financial aspects. Peterson puts the skills he learned while he was a superintendent, such as people management, time management, scheduling and dealing with difficult customers and employees to good use at his lighting job.

Even though Peterson misses being a superintendent every day, he doesn't miss working on weekends and attending late-night committee meetings.

"I'm a better parent and better husband for changing jobs," he says. "I wouldn't go back. I would have to be forced into it. It's a maturing thing. I'm 33, and your priorities change a bit when you're older and have a family."

AFFINITY FOR LAW

Bill Roberts, a former president of the GCSAA, was a golf course superintendent for about 20 years in Wisconsin, Illinois and Michigan. A 1975 graduate of Penn State's turfgrass program, Roberts studied under Joe Duich, Ph.D., then he went to work for Bob Williams at Bob-O-Link Golf Club in the Chicago area, where he was from. Roberts became involved with a local superintendents association and then with the GCSAA's board of directors in 1986, working his way up to president in 1992.

After Bob-O-Link, Roberts became the superintendent at Stevens Point (Wis.) Country Club, then went to Knollwood Club in Lake Forest, Ill., and was there for two years. Then he left for the Lochmoor Club in Gross Point Woods, Mich. Lochmoor was the last club at which he worked as a superintendent. He was there while serving on the GCSAA board and as president. He left the industry in 1994.



Former golf course superintendent Bill Lanthier, right, is now a salesman for Golf Ventures in Florida. Lanthier views his job more as helping friends than selling product. Photo: Bill Lanthier

“When I got into the business, I really wanted to be in it,” he says. “I had very good mentors (Duich, Williams and Jim Bertoni, an Illinois superintendent who went to Penn State and who Roberts worked for while he was in college) and those relationships were beneficial. Part of being a superintendent was being involved, and that was my foundation. But I was starting to get a bad attitude even though I didn’t hate the people I worked with or the work environment. When I tell people I left working on a golf course to become a lawyer, they look at me like I’m nuts.”

Roberts remembers when he decided to leave the golf course superintendent profession.

“One July 4, I was sitting at an irrigation controller,” he says. “It was 95 degrees at 4:00 in the afternoon. The golf course was pure *Poa annua*, and I couldn’t keep enough water on the grass to keep it alive. Right then and there I decided, as a culmination of things, I didn’t want to do this anymore. I’ll never forget that.”

After leaving Lochmoor, Roberts and Frank Guastella, the former general manager of the club, found a golf course in Marquette, Mich., called Red Fox Run, which is part of a closing air force base. Marquette County was taking over control of the property, including the golf course, and needed someone to run the daily 18-hole facility, so Roberts and Guastella purchased the lease and have been managing the course since.

“It’s not Pebble Beach, but it doesn’t pretend to be,” he says. “I’m not involved day to day anymore.”

Roberts didn’t consult with colleagues before

leaving the profession. He was convinced.

“I was out of the day-to-day stuff when I left golf,” he says. “I was working with the PGA education staff and still do. I just did it. I talked it over with my wife but not my colleagues. I wasn’t in touch with many of them at that point.”

Roberts says he’s always wanted to work in the legal field. So, after Lochmoor while managing Red Fox Run, he finished his bachelor’s degree at Wayne State in Detroit via its weekend program. Then he attended the Thomas M. Cooley Law School in Lansing.

“They had a weekend program for second career folks,” he says. “It took 2.5 years to get my law degree. I went to school for 14 weeks, then had three off, 14 on and three off. I was very determined and focused. I never looked back. Law school was all about persistence.”

Roberts took the bar in Michigan in February of 2001 and passed. At that point, he and his wife decided to move back to Chicago to be closer to family. Then he took part of the Illinois bar and passed and went to work for the state attorney’s office in DuPage County. He has been there since.

Roberts’s main client is the county’s health department. He deals a lot with confidentiality issues. He’s also involved with civil litigation, personal injury, civil rights and criminal cases.

Some of Roberts’ habits that he had when he was a golf course superintendent remain.

“I still get up at 4:00 in the morning every day,” he says. “I wasn’t able to shake that.”

Roberts sees similarities between the golf course superintendent and law professions. Mentoring and camaraderie are two.

“This office has a mentoring environment,” he says. “There are a million questions to ask, and no one turns me down. It was like that in the golf industry.

“On a personal level, the law profession isn’t as adversarial as you might think,” he adds. “There’s a good level of professional respect.”

Looking back, Roberts says he didn’t have the affinity for the technical aspect of the superintendent’s job.

“I was a history and English guy, not a science guy,” he says. “In law, there’s a lot of reading, writing, speaking and arguing, and those are my natural affinities. So I thought for a time I was misplaced for 20 years.”

But Roberts hasn’t lost touch with the industry completely. He sees Steve Cadnelli, CGCS,

(Cape Cod National Golf Club) and Dennis Lyon, CGCS, (city of Aurora's golf division), among a few others, once in a while.

"I didn't want to be miserable doing what I was doing for the rest of my life," he says. "Every job has it headaches, but I'm having a pretty good time. There are many reasons why people don't make a change, but if you're thinking about it, look at it honestly. For me, it was worth it."

HELPING FRIENDS

Although Bill Lanthier isn't a golf course superintendent anymore, he's closer to the industry than Peterson or Roberts. Lanthier is a territory manager for Lakewood, Fla.-based Golf Ventures and has been with the company for nine years. Before that, he spent 16 years as an assistant superintendent and golf course superintendent.

Lanthier started working at Peach Valley Country Club in Spartanburg, S.C. as summer help when he was 15. He worked for then-superintendent Dave McIntosh at the family-owned facility.

"He inspired me to be as good as him," Lanthier says of McIntosh, who's now an international turf consultant.

Lanthier went to school for golf course design, but there were no placements in the industry for him. At the time, he went to work at Mariner Sands Country Club in Stuart, Fla., doing anything he could and worked his way up to assistant superintendent under Kevin Downing, who's now at BallenIsles Country Club in Palm Beach

Gardens, Fla. Then, at 25 years of age, he left and got his first superintendent job at North Palm Beach Country Club in Florida helping rebuild the course. After six years at North Palm Beach, he received a call from Mariner Sands and returned to work there for four years. After his second stint at Mariner Sands, he went to work for Golf Ventures, a distributor of chemicals, fertilizer and equipment.

"I wanted to build and design golf courses when I was younger," Lanthier says. "At one point in my career, I got a call to go to South America to build golf courses, but my wife was pregnant at the time."

While at Mariner Sands the second time, Lanthier felt like he was at the top of the profession at 30 years old but realized he needed a different challenge.

"Part of the reason for the change was that I was tired of being told what to do and part of it was that I wanted to be my own boss," he says. "Golf Ventures approached me. I never thought I would be in sales, but in a way, I'm not. I'm helping my friends."

When Lanthier went to Golf Ventures, he says there was no training about how to sell, and in hindsight, it was a tremendous positive for him.

"I couldn't sell a fan in the Amazon," he says. "I was never asked to sell anything, just find out what the superintendents' challenges are. The lack of training allowed me to do it my way. I never looked at sales as an option. I'm not lim-

ited to what I can do. The philosophy is to help superintendents do better and the business will take care of itself."

However, the transition to sales wasn't easy.

"I was one of the better paid superintendents at a better club," he says. "Getting paid on sales performance was scary. I'm sure my wife was shocked when I told her about the job change, but she supported it. I love what I do."

When Lanthier was working as a superintendent, he never took a day off, even though no one told him to do that.

"That was my mentality, but I realized I needed to focus on my family," he says. "Even now, I work weekends if needed. I'll do anything in the world to help my friends."

The inflexibility or flexibility with both jobs is self-induced.

"As a superintendent, I could have taken weekends off because the crew wouldn't have missed a beat, but I wanted to be there," Lanthier says.

Although in sales, Lanthier is connected to his former crew members.

"Four of my assistants are my customers," he says. I haven't lost touch with them. I miss riding the course in the morning and at the end of the day. But I know of superintendents who like me to be there at sunrise and ride with them."

Overall, it's natural for people to change jobs during their careers.

"Our industry isn't particularly different," Lanthier says. **GCI**



Former superintendent Oscar Peterson now owns an outdoor lighting company and spends more time with his children.