

# Matchmaker

## Extraordinaire

Retired superintendent Jerry Faubel helps place superintendents in the right jobs

**I**t's early November, and Jerry Faubel is spending his days hunting. On most frosty fall mornings, he's after ducks in the wetlands around his Saginaw, Mich., home. But, by afternoon, he's drawing a bead on a different species: people. More specifically, he's hunting for the right people for the right jobs in the golf industry.

Faubel and his business partner, Bruce Williams, CGCS, run Executive Golf Search, arguably the highest-profile placement group in the business. They're the go-to guys for many golf facilities looking for the perfect superintendent, general manager or club professional. In short, the road to some of the best jobs in the industry leads through their firm.

At 66, Faubel and his wife Sally finally are relaxing a bit, but he's no less interested in ensuring a bright future for the industry than he was when he served as GCSAA's president in 1990-1991.

Faubel grew up as a central Illinois farmboy who went off to Iowa State to study agricultural operations. He quickly realized, unlike many Cyclone classmates, he didn't have a big commercial farm to go back to. He also accidentally ended up working on a golf course as a night waterman one summer. He liked it and switched to turf agronomy at ISU. He worked on and off at several small facilities in Wisconsin for almost five years

while trying to finish school. Eventually, he earned his degree in 1969 and sent a resume to Saginaw Country Club. He got the job and stayed for the next 34 years before retiring four years ago.

During four decades at Saginaw, he kept a sharp eye on the quality of the course conditions but never hesitated to volunteer his extra time to the profession. In addition to working through the chairs on the GCSAA board and serving as president, he's served on the USGA Green Section Committee, USGA Research Committee, Michigan Turfgrass Foundation and Mid-Michigan Turfgrass Foundation boards and Michigan Golf Foundation board. Along the way, he collected important hardware including distinguished service awards from the GCSAA and the Golf Association of Michigan.

Oh, by the way, he and Sally raised a daughter, Sarah, who's now a Wellesley/Harvard-educated doctor doing cutting-edge kidney research at the University of Colorado Medical Center.

Not a bad life by anyone's yardstick, but Faubel wasn't done professionally. Along with a few other industry legends, he set out to fill a void in the placement market and create a new way for superintendents and others to match up with the right facilities. Now, after 40 years in the business, he spends his time as a matchmaker extraordinaire for the best jobs in golf.

### HOW'D YOU GET STARTED IN THE PLACEMENT BUSINESS?

I was always very active at Michigan State and in the industry trying to encourage education. Kenyon Payne, Ph.D., (the longtime head of the two-year MSU turf program) and I became good friends. At the same time, I was involved in fundraising for the GCSAA and got to know Robert Trent Jones. Trent was a tremendous individual who was concerned about education, so he made a large contribution to the GCSAA scholarship fund. He understood that if he didn't have quality superintendents, his work would go for naught. So, when I was president of the GCSAA in 1991, I met with Trent and Ken Payne, and they approached me with the idea of joining forces on a placement business. Trent came up with the name – Executive Golf Search.

As it turned out, Trent was too busy designing the Alabama golf trail to get directly involved, so Ken and I took the ball and ran with it. We started placing superintendents. Bruce Williams came along in a few years and became a critical member of the team.

### HOW DID YOU BUILD THE BUSINESS?

It just took off. We never did much advertising. It's all been word of mouth. Our goal is to bring stability to the workplace for superintendents. It's not for personal gain. The idea is to match highly

BY PAT JONES



Jerry Faubel helps bring stability to the workplace through job placements. Photo by Dwight Cendrowski

qualified superintendents with high-quality golf courses. The average superintendent only stays in a position about seven years, then moves on. The major decision of a hiring committee is to identify the person who's going to fit best in its organization. We identify good candidates, but we try to identify the best qualified person who will fit. We've had tremendous success in terms of people staying in positions for long periods of time. Probably 80 percent of our placements are still in the positions we identified for them.



We don't take money out of the corporation. We donate funds back to the GCSAA and universities. Plus, we also help support the Kenyon T. Payne Award at Michigan State through funding travel expenses to the GCSAA conference.

#### **HOW HAVE CANDIDATES FOR POSITIONS CHANGED THROUGHOUT THE YEARS?**

I see more highly qualified individuals as a whole. First, the educational process through the universities is better. The GCSAA's educational efforts are light years ahead of where it used to be. The focus on different disciplines – particularly business topics – has helped superintendents be much better managers. It's like night and day. Plus, with the popularity of golf, we've had people come in who might have never considered a career as a superintendent before.





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## SUPERINTENDENT PROFILE

We have a more diverse group to choose from. Golf has changed and we've had to change with it.

### WHAT'S THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE OF THOSE WHO'VE LOST JOBS?

The ability to communicate is probably one of the biggest problems. The successful superintendent has to have excellent communication skills. Also, they can't start to think of it as "my" golf course. It's the owner's course, whether a country club or a public facility. Most of all, they have to make decisions based on fact, not emotions or politics. They can't get caught up in the political aspects of the job and be stubborn. Politics have done in more superintendents than anything else. They make bad decisions based on emotion and the politics catch up with them.

### WHY IS THAT?

Superintendents tend to take everything too personally because they care so passionately about what they do. It's one of the beautiful things about our jobs but it's also one of the most dangerous. You're dealing with business people and you have to be able to back up your decisions with facts. It's really important – when you're dealing in a science – to have scientific information to back you up.

One thing that (being on the board of) the GCSAA taught me is the systematic approach to making decisions. It's tremendous at gathering information and making decisions based on facts, not intuition. It's done professionally. It has brought professionalism to the industry. The money a club pays for the dues is well spent.

Whatever your reasons, you have to build your case before you do something. Let's say a neighbor is hypersensitive to an application practice. They call to complain, and you respond by saying that

you're acting legally. Legally, they should go to their doctor and get on the notification list. Buy, why not instead of getting into a fight, you simply call them in advance. Don't create problems that will cause the club pain. Or, you know a piece of equipment is at the end of its useful life. You usually know that a year or two before so you should build the case for the replacement in advance. There should be no surprises. Boards and owners want to know what's happening. If you keep them informed, they're happy. People don't like being in the dark.

### DESCRIBE THE TYPICAL SEARCH PROCESS FOR A HIGH-END SUPERINTENDENT POSITION. WHAT CAN A CANDIDATE EXPECT?

We work for the employer. We try to have as big a pool of candidates as possible in our database. We send a form (to candidates) to help them organize themselves. It's psychologically damaging when you lose a job. We feel sorry for them, but they have to get themselves in order. They need to identify their specialties and areas of expertise.

One good example is that you have two types of expertise among superintendents: construction and maintenance. They're two very different disciplines. The form we send them helps them identify their strengths and weaknesses: They have to consider what they're good at and what they need to work on.

Above all, we abide by the GCSAA's code of ethics. It's extremely important. After we have their information, we'll try to identify their weak points and suggest options to improve them. Finding a job has to be a full-time job. Start thinking about seminars, community college programs – whatever it takes to improve your shortcomings. It's a combination of self-analysis and career counseling. We don't charge



candidates anything for that. Again, it's our philosophy to make the industry better by helping clubs and superintendents fit together.

#### **HOW DO YOU WORK WITH A CLUB?**

We go to the facility, define the job with the employer and help determine the strengths the position will require. Once they've agreed, we find people that fit. We set up the interviews, and we offer to be there and supply questions for the interviewers, go through the process and they pick the person. We don't negotiate salaries – that's between the superintendent and employer.

#### **DO YOU CHARGE A PERCENTAGE OF THE FIRST-YEAR SALARY FOR FINDING CANDIDATES?**

No. We charge a flat fee.

#### **WHAT ARE THE TYPICAL MISTAKES CANDIDATES MAKE DURING THE INTERVIEW PROCESS?**

Some candidates try to anticipate the answer they think the employer wants to hear. They shouldn't try to fudge and embellish. Smart interviewers can see through that immediately. And it's not going to be healthy relationship in the long run if the candidate isn't straight about things. Be honest, forthright and a person of high character – that's going to help you more than anything else.

#### **ARE THERE SEARCHES YOU TURN DOWN?**

We won't take the business when the individual who's in charge of the search committee isn't being forthright about what the problems at the facility are. If they're not being honest with us, we can't work with them. We don't want to jeopardize our candidates by putting them in that position.

#### **YOU'VE BEEN OBSERVING THE INDUSTRY AT A HIGH LEVEL FOR A LONG TIME. WHAT'S THE STATE OF THE MARKET LIKE?**

There's going to be shakeout. We have people in the industry who got in the business for the dollars, and they have to be able to understand our business better. They got into the business for the wrong reasons, and they won't be around in the long term. Like any shakeout, it's not going to be fun.

#### **WHAT'S YOUR TAKE ON STEVE MONA'S DEPARTURE AND EVENTUAL REPLACEMENT?**

Steve Mona did a tremendous job. He did everything he was asked to do in spades. But, the board – and there are always factions on the board – needs to make decisions based on what's best for the GCSAA and not what's best from their personal viewpoints.

#### **WHAT DO YOU TELL YOUNG PEOPLE JUST GETTING THEIR START IN THE BUSINESS?**

Focus on professionalism and using systems in their management – be systematic. Make decisions based on fact, not emotion. Don't get caught up in the political aspects. And, most importantly, remember education doesn't stop after two or four years at the university.

#### **FINAL THOUGHTS?**

When I came into the industry, we didn't have well-qualified assistants. Today – and it's one of the reasons we worked so hard on scholarships – we've finally developed well-educated assistants. It's a tremendous advantage. We have better qualified people who are more knowledgeable. It reduces potential errors and makes the industry better. **GCI**

*Jerry Faubel can be reached at 989-797-0677.*

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