

From PUBLIC To PRIVATE

SUPERINTENDENTS WHO WORK AT PRIVATE CLUBS
VALUE THEIR PUBLIC COURSE EXPERIENCE

By John Walsh

Many turfgrass students have their ideal job in mind when they leave school: Becoming the superintendent at a high-end private golf club. This implies having plenty of money to do whatever you need to keep a golf course in pristine condition, as well as not having to deal with a lot of rounds played annually. However, it's not easy getting that ideal position. Nowadays, it takes longer to get there than it did 20 years ago, and the competition is stiff.

But many say that if students or young assistants want that high-end private-club job, they first need the pedigree of working at a well-known private club. Yet, that path isn't always taken. Some successful private club superintendents have enjoyed stints at public facilities to advance their careers.

BACK AND FORTH

Dan Charlton, who has been a superintendent for six years, started his career working at high-end private clubs. He spent three years as an assistant at Muirfield Village Golf Club in Dublin, Ohio, and seven years as an assistant at Bob O'Link Golf Club in Highland Park, Ill. Currently, he's golf course superintendent at the Evanston Golf Club in Illinois and has been there five years.

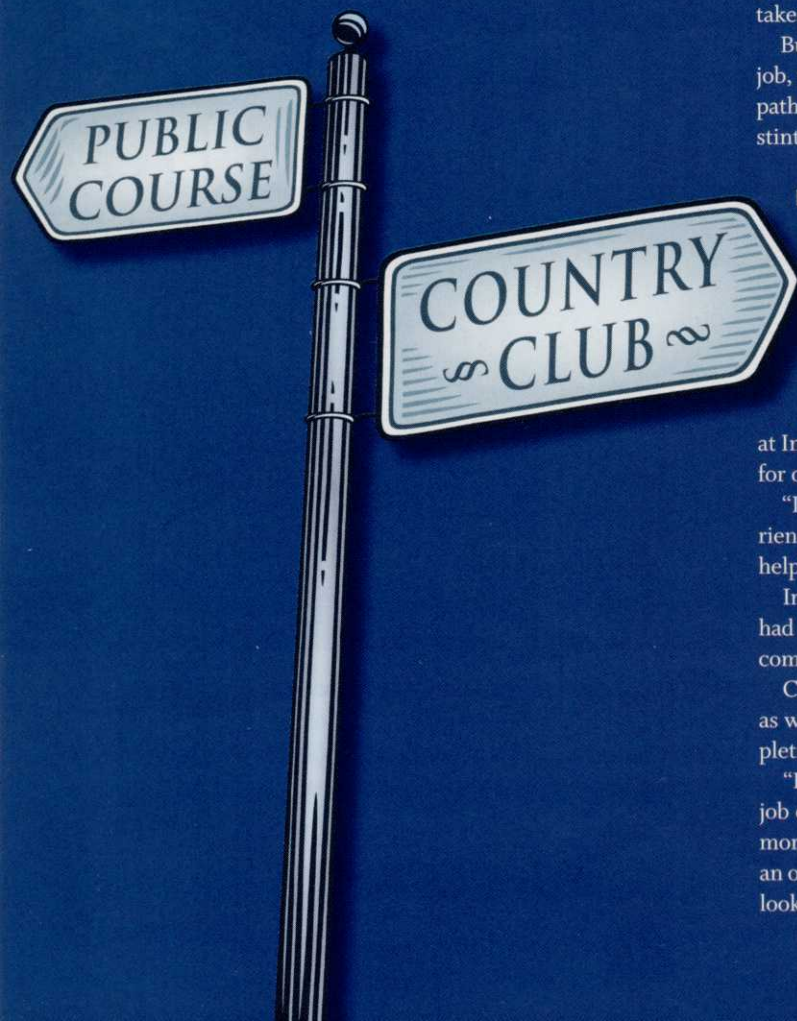
Before landing the job at Evanston, Charlton's first superintendent job was at Indian Lakes Resort, a public 36-hole facility in Bloomingdale, Ill. He was there for one year.

"It's difficult to get a superintendent position in the private sector if your experience is mostly public, although being a superintendent at a 36-hole facility will help," he says.

In Charlton's case, Indian Lakes, which generated 40,000 to 50,000 rounds a year, had a similar budget (\$1.1 million) and crew (33 people with three superintendents) compared to Evanston (\$1-million budget and 21-person crew).

Charlton believes working at a large public course that generates many rounds, as well as being involved with a renovation project – which Indian Lakes is completing – are experiences that helped him advance his career.

"I would've passed on a regular 18-hole public course," he says about past potential job opportunities. "I felt a larger facility with a bigger budget would have looked more favorable on my resume. I was expecting to stay longer at Indian Lakes, but an opportunity came up, and I made the jump back to a private club. Evanston was looking to do a renovation, and my experience fit."





Experience at Indian Lakes, a public facility in Illinois, has helped Dan Charlton at Evanston Country Club (pictured). Photo: Evanston Country Club

Charlton's previous experience at private clubs and the fact that Evanston and Bob O'Link are similar (location and members) helped him secure the job at Evanston.

"I wasn't too far removed from private clubs," he says. "That helped me get the Evanston job. I was in a fortunate situation because it was easier to compare the budget and staff size of Indian Lakes with Evanston's and the committee at Evanston was familiar with Indian Lakes."

Charlton says his short stint at Indian Lakes was beneficial for him, specifically the experience with carts, guest play and various outings throughout the year. Evanston has far fewer outings – only two or three a year – than Indian Lakes, which hosted three or four a week.

"As a superintendent, you don't want to see many outings because it beats up the golf course," he says. "But seeing the revenue outings generate, I see value in them and am more comfortable with more outings and cart use. With public-sector experience, you realize how important daily rounds are and how important that is to the bottom line of the club. You stretch your dollar farther in the public sector, and that experience has helped me keep the budget here at Evanston more in line. You're more fiscally responsible, and there's an appreciation for allowing more guest play and outings to generate more income for the club.

"The Evanston membership doesn't want too many outings (four a year)," he adds. "If we have outings, we need to make money. We can't break even. I don't want to beat up the course if we're not helping the bottom line."

PROJECT EXPERIENCE

Brent Doolittle, golf course superintendent at Shady Oaks Country Club in Fort Worth, Texas, also has benefited from public experience. Before Shady Oaks, where Doolittle has been for more than five years, he worked at private River Hill Country Club in Kerrville, Texas, for seven years. Before that, he worked at the public Lost Creek Golf Course in Fort Worth for four years. Before Lost Creek, Doolittle was an assistant at the private Preston Trail Golf Club in Dallas.

"At that time, I wanted to get my first superintendent job and most private clubs weren't hiring assistants as superintendents, so I had to take a step down and go to a lower-end public facility," he says. "My ultimate goal, though, was to get to a high-end private club.

"Yet, my time at Lost Creek was memorable," he adds. "The greens were Bermudagrass, so I didn't have to work as hard on them during the summer compared to bentgrass greens, so I was able to work on managing people and renovation projects. The Lost Creek owners wanted a top-notch facility on a shoe-string budget, so I had

to figure out how to make these improvements without any money."

Doolittle's improvements were done in-house and included expanding cart paths, upgrading irrigation in order to water from one edge of the property to the other, harvesting flat rock to use in surface drainage areas and adding bunkers. He also resodded and resprigged Bermudagrass greens after a bad freeze.

"Anybody can make these improvements by throwing a ton of money at them," he says. "We had to be efficient with time and money. We had to think about the operation from the owners' perspective: 'Do I really need to spend money in certain areas?' You have to consider things such as aerifying greens without letting play suffer for three or four weeks or making fertilizer applications without shutting down the course."

Doolittle recalls moving from Lost Creek to River Hill and being able to do projects in-house.

"That's what River Hill wanted," he says. "The public experience helped, although it could have been a problem with other higher-end private clubs."

River Hill, a retirement club where all members want to play in the morning, generated 35,000 to 40,000 rounds a year. Doolittle says his experience of managing people efficiently and organizing all the mowers in operation at the same time at Lost Creek helped him at River Hill.

"We were blowin' and goin', trying to stay ahead of the golfers," he says. "Working at a public facility, you learn to operate efficiently and not waste a lot of time. You schedule efficiently and make maintenance more efficient, which allows you the time for the in-house projects."

With all of the things he learned working on the renovation projects at Lost Creek, Doolittle says he still does 99 percent of projects in-house at Shady Oaks even though it's a high-end club.

Having worked at a public course, Dan Charlton understands the value of the number of outings and rounds and their impact on a club's bottom line. Photo: Evanston Country Club

"We've leveled tees ourselves and built 5-foot-high retaining walls around them," he says. "That project saved \$40,000 to \$50,000. What person doesn't like saving money?"

TRANSITIONING WELL

Ken Mangum, director of golf course and grounds at the Atlanta Athletic Club, started his career working at public facilities. He was an assistant at Mystery Valley Golf Club in Lithonia, Ga., for two years and a superintendent at Lagoon Park Golf Course in Montgomery, Ala., for more than three years. Working at a public facility is a great way to learn, Mangum says.

"At Mystery Valley, I learned how to work within a system," he says. "Everything had to go through a central processing system because it was county owned. I was ordering enough parts that it equaled the cost of one piece of equipment. The money was there, but there was no flexibility.

"Lagoon Park was the pride of the city and a top 25 public golf course at that time," he adds. "I received almost whatever I needed without too much difficulty. I did all the payroll and purchasing at Lagoon. It was great experience. I had a large budget and a huge staff – 25 people for 18 holes. I did some design and construction and started an overseeding program. I was able to use my ideas early and received attention for them throughout the state. I was involved in the GCSAA and did some early speaking. My eyes were opened to industry more through that job. I had a great job, but I wasn't making much money."

So that was a good time to look for another job and move up, Mangum says.

"I had a couple interviews before but nothing worthwhile," he says. "I turned down two jobs. It was a weird feeling because I didn't know if another job would come along. I learned to say 'no'. One job I turned down had a smaller budget and fewer people but a higher salary. Another job had old equipment and an old irrigation system. I held out for the job in which I had more to work with. I would have to go to a private club for the pay scale to change significantly. I don't remember feeling inferior because I was working at a public facility. I always believed if



I produced a great product with what I had, I would be rewarded."

Mangum's next job was at Idle Hour Country Club in Macon, Ga., where he stayed for seven years.

"It was a private club, but it was at the lowest point in its course conditioning history," Mangum says. "It was just awful. They gave me the opportunity. They had the money, but they needed the leadership.

"I had learned a lot about purchasing and dealing with people at the city operation," he adds. "Now I was working with boards at private clubs. I made a good presentation because I had to be thorough in the public sector. I transitioned well."

BEING CREATIVE

Mike Mongoven, director of golf at the semiprivate Shell Point Golf Club in Fort Myers, Fla., previously worked for the city of Fort Myers from 1990 to 2000, managing two public facilities: the Fort Myers Country Club and Eastwood Golf Course. He was the assistant director of golf. Before the city, Mongoven worked at Wildcat Run, a private club in South Fort Myers from 1984 to 1990. He left Wildcat Run to work for the city because he wanted to manage two courses, the environment was unstable and the city courses were closer to his home.

"You certainly can become creative working for a city because you have fewer resources," he

says. "You become more open-minded."

City finances were strict, and Mongoven had to deal with a purchasing department.

"I had a greater ability to purchase at the private club, but I was able to win over the purchasing department because I was financially responsible and communicated with them well. After two years, rather than putting in a request for a fertilizer purchase, I was able to submit a large bid package for the year. After a while, I got more flexibility by developing an annual bid, which made it easier for them. I didn't have to go to them every time because I had an agreed-upon price."

Mongoven also dealt with a regulated human resources department, which was different compared to a private club in which superintendents are their own HR manager many times.

"You had to go through a very defined process," he says. "I couldn't reprimand employees informally. I attended counseling sessions to get employees up to standard."

Mongoven moved to Shell Point because there was an opportunity for him to be responsible for the entire operation – the income and maintenance side.

"I could put my fingerprints on the place," he says.

With a semiprivate club, the revenue is directly attributed to play, Mongoven says. With a private club, there might be other mechanisms to bring people in. Shell Point has membership

dues, but it still depends on public play for income. The 250 members pay anywhere from \$500 for a partial year (off season) membership to \$3,500 for an annual membership.

"Your decisions are different than at a private club because play and the cash register are involved," he says.

THE PRESTIGE FACTOR

There's a perceived status working at a private club, especially in the eyes of young people.

"I worked at Windermere Country Club in Florida in the 1980s," Mongoven says. "The assistant came in and was wearing a nice shirt and slacks. When he went out on the golf course, I thought he didn't have to do any work but direct people. You're drawn to that.

"Some guys can portray themselves as being a better superintendent because they're at a private club," he adds. "But in reality, you can be a great superintendent at a public facility because you manage resources much better and don't have a blank check to solve your problems. You have to be more resourceful."

Even with all the prestige that comes with working at a private club, not all students coming out of college want to work in the private sector because of the pressures and demands that come with working in such an environment, Charlton says.

"I have an assistant right now who's working at his first private club," he says. "He's realizing this might not be for him down the road. But it doesn't hurt to do internships or be an assistant at a private club because it can benefit you if you move to a public facility.

"A lot of guys just focus on U.S. Open golf courses or Augusta National because they want to work there down the road," he adds. "However, they can get into trouble if they don't open up to other jobs because they might not be cut out for that. Students need to experience all the different areas, especially being exposed to different management styles at public and private facilities."

Working at private clubs actually can be detrimental to some, depending on the career track.

"It hurt me when I applied to public courses

because they thought I wouldn't be able to manage a smaller budget and would just drive up theirs," Charlton says.

Even though Charlton was able to make the jump from a public facility to a private one, it might not be as easy for others.

"It's harder for a committee of a private club to look at a public guy from out of state if they aren't familiar with the facility," he says. "They might dismiss him quickly. Public course applicants can be unjustly thrown out of a job search at a private facility because of committees who look for superintendents with private club experience."

Mangum agrees.

"Most people doing the hiring don't know the business, especially in the private sector because they want to brag to their membership that they hired someone from such-and-such a club," he says. "It depends on what type of facility – people recognize high-end, daily-fee courses and it might be easier for a superintendent to break into private from a facility like that. Sometimes people have a negative connotation of public facilities. I never saw that, but obviously when you're in a golf-for-profit situation, sometimes public facilities don't have the resources that private clubs have. With private clubs, sometimes conditioning takes precedent over making as much money."

Despite the challenge of moving from a public facility to a private one, Charlton says there are things superintendents should focus on.

"If you can show fiscal responsibility, can manage numbers well, have a larger crew or operating budget, capital projects and construction experience, and highlight the number of rounds played at your facility, then point out all these things if you want to go into the private sector," he says.

The public/private experience doesn't matter to Doolittle when he's looking for workers.

"I'm just looking for people with good work ethics and those who have been in the business for a while," he says. "Maybe the people that I've hired who have worked at a public facility seem to be happier, more grateful and have a little more motivation. For a guy at another private facility, more money might be his only motivation."

It's difficult for guys to break into the private club sector at the superintendent level, Mangum says.

"Nowadays there are so many more people in the business than when I made the switch from public to private," he says. "You can specialize much earlier in your career. If you worked at a private facility, you might have an advantage, but we need to look in depth at experience. We look for guys with good experience in general, and that can come in the form of public or private facilities. I like guys who come from a facility where they didn't have everything they needed. That creates the MacGyver in all of us, and it makes you appreciate what you have when you're at a high-end facility." **GCI**

Although young assistants can get caught up with the prestige of working at a high-end private club, it's not for everybody. Photo: Evanston Country Club

