



behind the decision

Facilities involve several people, have multiple criteria and use different avenues when hiring the right person for the job

KemperSports looks for hands-on people to be superintendents at its properties, such as Bolingbrook (Ill.) Golf Club. It looks for people willing to work alongside their crews. Photo: KemperSports



BY JOHN
TORSIELLO

Anthony Williams, CGCS, at the Stone Mountain Golf Club in Georgia, remembers the moment clearly. “I was leaving an interview and was actually on the pro shop steps when the owner stopped me and asked me to translate a conversation in Spanish for him,” Williams says. “I never faltered and finished the interview in Spanish, and I got the job. I learned a valuable lesson that an interview isn’t over until you leave the property, so be prepared for anything.”

Sound words of advice from an industry veteran.

At one time, if a person could grow and care for grass skillfully and was willing to work seven days a week 12 hours a day, he was qualified to be a golf course superintendent. However, the current demands of the job and skill sets owners and general managers need have changed dramatically.

“You have to remember my superintendent oversees a million dollar budget and has 25 to 30 people working under him,” says Gary Sciarillo, general manager at Great River Golf Club in Milford, Conn. “I look for the financial skills to manage a large budget and the people skills to communicate and motivate a staff. I want somebody who will nurture his staff and make them better at what they do, which is to grow grass and maintain the golf course and surrounding landscape.”

The hiring process for a superintendent position is often lengthy and exacting. The open position at Great River generated about 120 applications from all over the country. Sciarillo reviewed about 50 applications and reduced the number of potential candidates to 25 then 10.

“We went to all the courses of the final 10 candidates unannounced, and we wound up reinterviewing five,” he says. “The process took several months.”

The hiring process for a new superintendent at a Billy Casper Golf-managed property takes four to five weeks, says Bryan Bielecki, vice president of agronomy.

“It varies, and we’ll wait a little longer for the right person,” Bielecki says. “With the resources we have as a management company, we can move people around to cover a course until the person we want can leave his present position and come on board.”

Vienna, Va.-based Billy Casper Golf manages more than 70 properties.

Usually, an owner, general manager of a property or a high-ranking executive within a management company will serve as the point person for the hiring process, often involving a head professional, director of golf, assistant superintendent and, especially at private clubs, members into the process.

“We make it a collective decision when hiring a new superintendent for a course,” Bielecki says. “I often get the facility’s general manager and regional manager involved because I want to be sure, from a personality and communication standpoint, the person I hire will be able to work well with his team. And it’s always important to get input from members at individual clubs about what they would like to see improved at their course and what’s important to them.”

At an equity ownership club, the green committee might be involved in some part of the process, usually toward the



To maintain courses at its properties, such as The Wilderness at Fortune Bay in Tower, Minn., KemperSports wants people who are staff oriented and good team builders. Photo: KemperSports

end, and at a privately owned club that's run for profit, one is normally dealing with the general manager and owner, says Dave Wasenda, owner of Appliedgolf, a management and consulting company, and general manager of Knob Hill Golf Club in Manalapan, N.J.

The three-year-old, private Hollow Brook Golf Club in Cortland Manor, N.Y., involved the club's board of advisors in the process.

"The candidates were interviewed by the general manager and the board of advisors before their selection," says general manager David Fleming. "A Plotkin test (to measure personality characteristics) was requested of each of the final candidates, and the field was reduced to the top three. A final selection process was conducted with the general manager and the board."

DESIRABLE QUALITIES

Club members are becoming more demanding these days. According to a poll of more than 800 golf course superintendents conducted by the GCSAA, 66 percent of superintendents inter-

viewed said golfers have increased expectations of their courses. This attitude has been a key factor in increasing course maintenance budgets and superintendents' responsibilities.

"We always say we have five businesses at Great River: the learning center, golf services, food and beverage, the retail operation of the pro shop and the superintendent's business of growing grass," Sciarrillo says. "If you don't have a great golf course, none of the other businesses really matter. So it's vital you have the right person to run that business.

"Our superintendent, Sean Flynn, is out there at 3 p.m. or 4 p.m. with his crew syringing hot spots," he adds. "We're asking a lot from him, considering he's been at the course since 4 a.m., but that's the type of person we looked for. One with a great work ethic, and someone who wasn't going to delegate the work. We have enough bosses around here."

Northbrook-Ill.-based KemperSports is looking for hands-on people to be superintendents, people willing to get out there and work with their crews, says executive vice president Jim Stegall.

"Clearly, the person has to have the agronomic skills and a clear understanding of the type of environment he or she will work with," he says. "But we also want somebody who is staff oriented, interested in developing and maintain-

ing good relations with superiors and is a good team-builder."

When looking for someone to fill its superintendent position – now occupied by Tim Hetrick – Hollow Brook looked for expert knowledge in the field of agronomy and experience with growing and maintaining grass in the Northeast, Fleming says. Leadership, budget and planning experience was important, too.

"We wanted a self-starter," he says. "We needed someone who could communicate effectively with his staff, members and the board advisors. We also felt it was important to find a person with interests outside of the superintendent position. We needed an all around person with many interests."

Naturally, having a solid background with the types of grasses one will be asked to care for is always a plus, although not having worked in a particular geographic region before doesn't necessarily rule a candidate out.

"Obviously, having a working knowledge of the types of grasses that you'll be caring for is a plus, but we aren't afraid to take someone with one season's worth of experience in a particular region who has the right skill sets over someone who has worked with all types of grasses in all seasons but isn't the type of person we need on other levels," Bielecki says.

Superintendents are often asked to work long hours, perhaps every day of the week during growing season, so there are special circumstances they must be made aware of during the hiring process.

"Our course was built in an area that had many environmental and government restrictions because of a wood turtle habitat on the property," Fleming says. "There's also a creek running through the course that's a source of drinking water for the local community. Along with these restrictions, we had others that involved limiting the amount of trees that could be taken down during the construction phase and a strict monitoring of our pesticide and fertilizer levels by the appropriate agencies."

Also, technology plays an increasing role in the life of a superintendent, so it's no surprise employees look for that type of experience.

"Technology is playing a larger role in the jobs of all department heads, and the superintendent is no different," Stegall says. "We expect our superintendents to be as effective as possible to drive efficiency and quality. That person needs to stay up on the latest technology and have the ability to use that technology for staffing and project management."

SEARCH FOR THE ONE

Management companies aren't afraid to promote an assistant to a superintendent position if the person meets all the criteria they're looking for. Management companies such as Billy Casper Golf and KemperSports often have a large file of resumes they can access, but that doesn't stop them from advertising an opening with a state or national superintendents organization.

"Typically, when we start the process, we try to find someone in the local area, and that's done through the GCSAA's local chapters or our network of general managers," Stegall says.

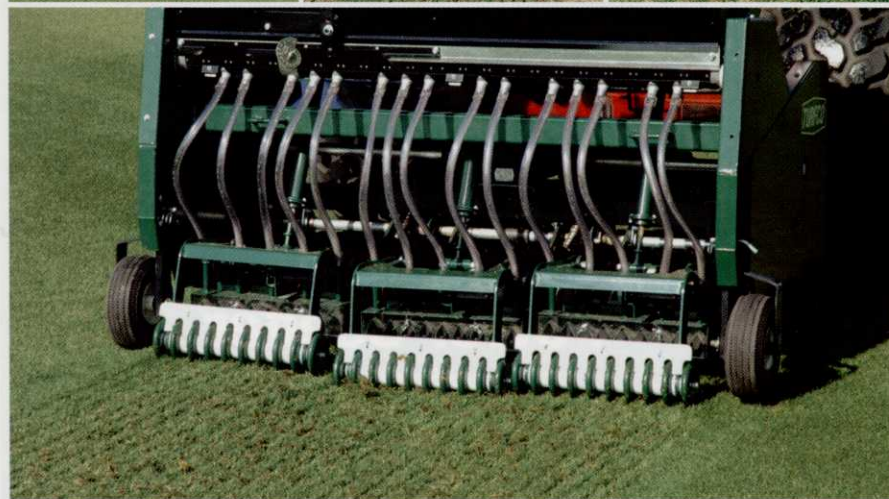
Appliedgolf will post a superintendent position with a local superintendent chapter to get worthwhile leads.

"Many times we find that an assistant superintendent who's looking to move up will get a letter from his current boss recommending him or her for a head superintendent position," Wasenda says. "They're a loyal bunch and work effectively to get one another promoted. Sometimes the person that fits the bill perfectly is working as an assistant and can slide easily into the head superintendent post."

Management at Hollow Brook placed ads in golf course periodicals and worked through headhunters who deal with finding and recommending qualified superintendents. The club also called regional chapters of the GCSAA and

ran an ad for the position on the association's Web site.

"We also received a great deal of interest in the position from people who heard about the opportunity from suppliers and companies the



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club had done business with throughout the year," Fleming says.

ADVICE FOR CANDIDATES

It's crucial for candidates to be prepared and

thorough when submitting an application and interviewing for a superintendent position.

"I received some applications that had 20-page booklets attached detailing their philosophy of course maintenance and pictures of projects

they had undertaken at their courses," Sciarrillo says. "That kind of information helps in the process because you get a good handle on who the person is and what they've done."



Stegall

Williams advises candidates to be prepared and demonstrate organization and leadership from the first contact until the conclusion of the hiring process.

"Research the company and/or management before the interview," he says. "Know what issues exist so you can offer solutions for them."

Cutler Robinson, director of golf operations at Bayville Golf Club in Virginia Beach, Va., recommends candidates research the facility, tour it and talk to the architect, builder, staff and managers.

"Have a prepared portfolio that's short yet thorough," he says.

Stegall likes the approach offered by Williams and Robinson.

"I'm looking for somebody who's open minded and can demonstrate good problem-solving skills. I want them to talk about the challenges they've had and how they went about solving issues. I like to see candidates who've done their homework on the property they're interviewing for."

Wasenda says it's a good idea for the candidate to walk the course before the meeting to find out if there are any questions he has about the facility. Sometimes, you might find that after the person sees the course, the equipment and financial allocations the club makes toward maintenance, they might make a decision the job isn't the right opportunity for them. You always want it to be the right fit for both sides."

One of the biggest turnoffs for those conducting the interviews is talking about money right away.

"If money is one of the first things a candidate wants to talk about, I'm not interested," Sciarrillo says. "I'm going to give somebody a fair wage, but I want someone who's passionate about the job first and knows that the money and benefits will come." GCI

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