

the BIG step up

*There's a lot at stake for young
assistant superintendents
transitioning into a head role*

By Margaret Hepp

You can almost feel him willing the golf course onto the ground. It's been five months since Michael Heustis was hired as golf course superintendent of the Chicago Highlands Club, but it'll be months before he's able to groom any grass. For now, it's dirt – and there's plenty of it.

The hazy Chicago skyline, just visible from the facility grounds, is a reminder that throngs of people and regular business hours aren't as far off as they seem. Until the course opens in 2009, though, it's touch and go. And while Heustis is as impatient as a kid on Christmas morning, he's loving every minute of it.

You might call it his first Christmas. Before he accepted the invitation from partners John Baxter, Tom Healy and Joe Hills to lead the golf course staff at Chicago Highlands, Heustis had spent his entire career pursuing roles just outside the spotlight. He's always been passionate about agronomy. As a teenager, he spent five summers at Indian Springs Golf Club in Saybrook, Ill., just outside his hometown. Once he earned his degree in agronomy from the University of Illinois, Heustis worked as assistant superintendent at Lake of the Woods Golf Course in Mahomet, Ill., before moving to Atlanta to become an assistant superintendent at Peachtree Golf Club.

From there, he says opportunity came knocking, but anyone who's been recruited for a superintendent position – or any leadership position, for that matter – knows that such opportunities are rarely happenstance. Shortly after Heustis volunteered at the 2005 Walker Cup at Chicago Golf Club, he was offered a job as assistant superintendent at the historic facility.

Once he became part of this integral community, Heustis began to expand his career. He became active in superintendent's associations throughout the Midwest, held instructional seminars and even built a career-oriented Web site. In short, as a



golf course professional, he reached out – and when you hold your hand out long enough, someone's bound to grab it.

Sure enough, Heustis landed his first job as head superintendent, and it's a big one. He'll be in charge of a maintenance budget around \$1 million, and the 18-hole, par-72 course set on 270 acres will pull its membership from the 4.1 million people within a 15-mile radius of the site, according to Baxter.

"My brother-in-law asked me, Did you ever think you'd be here?" Heustis says. "I hoped to. I just didn't know how it'd play out."

Construction of the Chicago Highlands golf course, orchestrated in part by superintendent Michael Heustis, is currently under way.

At 30, Heustis lacks the bravado that some of his peers in the business exude. There's a quiet drive in everything he does, and his halting, circumspect articulations about the golf course show an eager desire to succeed and please. He gives credit to every crew member who's helped him along the way, except, of course, himself. It's this self-effacing manner that will help him transition into his role as head superintendent. But personality aside, is he ready to lead the grow-in of a major new facility in one of the country's top golf markets?

SMALL TOWN HERO

Just north of Chicago, in the farmland of Wisconsin between Madison and Milwaukee, sits a little place called Watertown. Watertown Country Club welcomed Mike Upthegrove as superintendent of its 18-hole golf course and grounds in April 2006. He'd been an assistant superintendent at Whistling Straits in Kohler,



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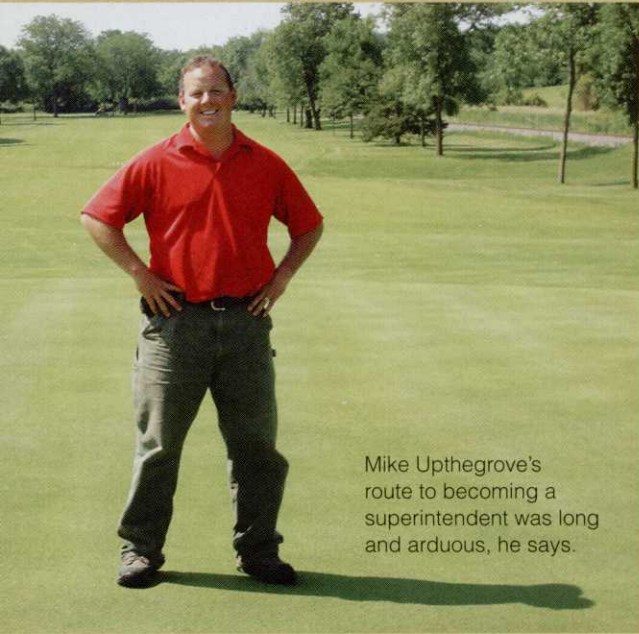
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Mike Upthegrove's route to becoming a superintendent was long and arduous, he says.

Wis., but unlike Heustis, whose path is about as linear as it gets, Upthegrove's route was, in his own words, long and arduous. Along the way, he acquired degrees in culinary arts and business management and worked as a chef for a short while before he felt called back to agronomy.

What's propelled Upthegrove to this career choice is an experience that's stuck with him since he was a young boy in Port Austin, Mich., a tourism-fueled town of about 700 people. The nearest golf course was a 9-hole private facility about 20 miles away. So his father and the rest of the Port Austin men's golf club rallied the community to build the 18-hole Bird Creek Golf Course on the edge of town. Golf course construction and volunteerism aren't two concepts typically paired together, but that's how the course came to be. Upthegrove often visited the site with his father, and remembers fondly learning to drive and helping to haul materials.

As fascinated as he was by the process of

constructing the golf course, the communication and leadership that fueled the project left a lasting impression on Upthegrove. Maintaining a golf course, he learned, involves a lot more than just turf knowledge – it requires a degree of finesse with peers and crewmembers.

SCHOOL'S OUT FOR SUMMER

Newly married and with two college degrees, Upthegrove changed directions and took a job as an assistant superintendent at the 54-hole Geneva National Golf Club in Lake Geneva, Wis. He was discouraged quickly by his lack of experience and knowledge. Unwilling to give up, he returned to college, this time to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he studied agronomy. As a student, he was hired as a crew foreman at Whistling Straits, and became the assistant superintendent after graduating. Now he's in his first job as head superintendent.

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of superintendents who bring a diploma and textbook turf knowledge to the golf course. There's a new pyramid of accomplishments in place for aspiring superintendents. At one time, it was about who you knew and how well you and the golf course held up to stress.

Those factors are still important, but the average superintendent is younger every year, just 43 years old in 2007, according to the GCSAA. More than 70 percent have at least a two-year degree, and 44 percent have a bachelor's degree.

But even with a degree under his belt, a young superintendent has his work cut out for him. Scott Egelhoff, the golf course superintendent at Glen Echo Country Club in St. Louis, arrived in 2006 to discover a failing 28-year-old irrigation system. He struggled to charm the membership and keep his job while pitching a multimillion dollar renovation in his first few months on the job. (See page S10 in the Smart Irrigation

supplement.)

"When I first got in here, there was a definite to-do list," Egelhoff says. "But before you can shape up a golf course, to get any kind of seed to germinate or sod to grow in, you have to have water, especially in St. Louis. When I first got here, I focused on the golf course and human resources, but I knew the irrigation system was something I needed to address right away."

At Watertown, Upthegrove took the same approach, focusing on the golf course and human resources, but he's also applying a different sort of education, the kind he learned as a 12-year-old boy. He strives to apply his people skills to the membership at the golf course. When he joined the Watertown staff in 2006, he made sure to introduce himself to every person on the course he didn't recognize.

"It helped open the communication lines, so if there was something the previous superintendent had done that I wasn't doing or didn't

know about, the members could approach me and say, 'This used to happen out here, and we really liked it,'" Upthegrove says.

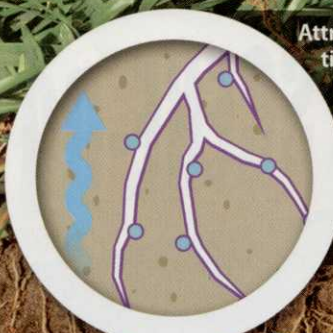
BIG SHOES

It's a daunting challenge to live up to the reputation of a predecessor, and an even greater challenge to build a membership's respect and trust as a newly hired superintendent. Upthegrove's position has a unique duo of pressures: the responsibility of a promotion as head superintendent coupled with immersion into an established community. Unlike Heustis, who will help build his membership from scratch, Upthegrove had to navigate through an adjustment period at Watertown. But it was a hurdle he was determined to clear.

"I felt I'd met all my goals as an assistant superintendent," he says. "If you have aspirations to be the leader, there's only so long you can stand not be in that position. Once I figured

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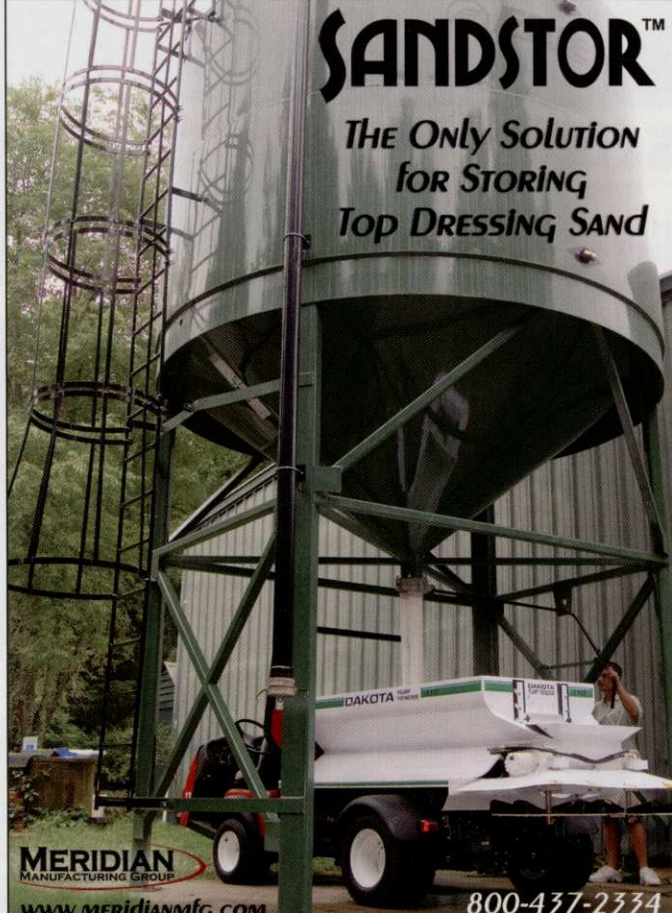
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that out and I thought I could handle it, I made my move.”

Fortunately, Upthegrove says, his predecessor, Oscar Peterson, who'd been at Watertown three years, was ready and willing to help him

through the transition. One particular challenge is maintaining a golf course with a budget of a little more than \$300,000.

“During the first few months as a head superintendent, your head's spinning,” he says.

THE BUCK STOPS HERE

Heustis is in the midst of a reality check: He's interviewing sidekick candidates for the assistant role. Between 12 and 15 candidates applied for the job before he narrowed it down to three. He hopes to become a mentor to the young man he hires. But Heustis has just begun to walk without an assistant's crutch.

“As an assistant, the buck doesn't stop with you,” he says. “You're able to lean on your superintendent. When you're the superintendent, it's all on you.”

For any new superintendent, there's a steep learning curve – but it can be difficult to stay grounded when you can't even visualize the grounds.

Heustis has been working to build the basic components of the course: seed, staff, irrigation, equipment. It's a task that requires endless research, but Heustis has done a lot of reading on his own at his new home just behind the golf course. Once the irrigation system is installed, Heustis will oversee the topsoil spread over the entire course, and then he'll plant grass seed.

“We're still figuring out where we're going to plant bluegrass, bentgrass, fescues – things like that,” he says.

In the meantime, Heustis is still working with Arthur Hills on the layout of the course. He's somewhat in awe of the lengths of perfection to which they've gone, tweaking the construction and making final adjustments for months.

“You've got to take the time to get it exactly as you want it,” he says. “It's silly not to.”

Heustis also is focused on building a great team, starting with his assistant and moving down through the chain of command. As a model exemplary employee, he calls to mind a laborer from the Chicago Golf Club.

“This man had never set foot on a golf course before,” he says. “He required a lot of training, but he always wanted to learn more. Whether it was learning how to operate a different piece of equipment or acquiring new techniques, he concentrated on doing things right – not doing things his way. He's now one of the best employees they have there.”

Heustis took this model to heart, and he's realistic about his position at Chicago Highlands. He's earned the job, but he has a lot to learn.

“Any decision for the golf course isn't going to be just a Michael Heustis decision,” he says. “It'll be a group decision, and that's a great thing for Chicago Highlands.” **GCI**



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