

At 34, Jon Lobenstine has climbed the career ladder more quickly than most. As director of agronomy for the Montgomery County Revenue Authority in Maryland, he's refining the image of the public golf course. Lobenstine, who has about three years of experience as a golf course superintendent, oversees nine municipal golf courses and is making his mark in the golf course management profession.

MOVIN' ON UP

After starting his career as a grounds crew member and then second assistant at the Chevy Chase Club in Maryland for four years – under the tutelage of Dean Graves, CGCS – Lobenstine was hired as an assistant at Falls Road Golf Course in Potomac, Md., in 2003. When he arrived at Falls Road, a course renovation project was half complete. Lobenstine learned a lot from superintendent Bryan Bupp, who oversaw the renovation, which included rebuilding and tripling the number of bunkers, tripling the square footage of tees and rerouting five holes. Lobenstine was getting the construction experience he wanted. The MCRA, which operated five golf courses, invested more than a million dollars into the clubhouse before the course renovation, which was funded through a multimillion dollar bond. The MCRA is self supporting and receives no funding from the country government.

In the spring of 2006, the MCRA was approached by another agency, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, which used to operate four muni golf courses in the county. The M-NCPPC was losing money – close to a million dollars a year on the golf courses – and went to the board of the MCRA

to ask for help. The MCRA's staff took over the management of M-NCPPC courses, still owned by the M-NCPPC, in April 2006 and finalized a long-term agreement in November 2006.

Lobenstine was promoted to superintendent after two years at Falls Road, when Bryan Bupp left for Bretton Woods in Germantown, Md. Then, in October 2006, Lobenstine was promoted to become the first director of agronomy for the MCRA. In addition to his superintendent responsibilities at Falls Road, Lobenstine oversees all superintendents at the other eight facilities.

When Lobenstine was hired at Falls Road, he had no idea the director of agronomy position was in his future. The position was created by Keith Miller, the executive director of the MCRA who came from Arnold Palmer Golf shortly after it began to lease the four park golf courses.

"Keith came to visit Falls Road, which generates almost 60,000 rounds a year, and saw the

condition of the greens," Lobenstine says. "He was very impressed and opened the director of agronomy opportunity to all MCRA golf course superintendents as part of his focus to improve course conditions at all nine of our properties. Ultimately, three of us were interested, and I was chosen."

Miller says it was impossible to have all the superintendents and golf pros reporting to him. The superintendents needed another support position. He considered looking outside the operation but felt it was important and possible for someone within the organization to step up.

"He was aggressive with his agronomic practices, such as aerification and topdressing," Miller says about Lobenstine. "I liked the way his employees acted. His property was the busiest and the best conditioned of all our courses. His focus on safety was impeccable. These are items all superintendents intend to do, but he had a

Making His Mark

Jon Lobenstine changes the face of municipal courses in Maryland

by John Walsh



Jon Lobenstine and his dog Poa oversee nine municipal golf courses run by the Montgomery County Revenue Authority. Photo: Mike Olliver

focus on safety and was still getting everything done. It all added up to his ability to manage.”

TRANSITION TIME

It's rare for someone to move from a job at high-end private club to a job at a public golf course, and it even can be looked down upon, Lobenstine says. But he saw an opportunity to implement new ideas. He also wants to defy the stereotypical image of public courses: inefficient processes and mediocre conditions. He wants to change that perception.

“I felt I could bring a lot of that refinement from the private club to the public golf course,” he says. “We've done that. My crew wears collared shirts. I'm trying to make them feel like professionals and show them new ways to do jobs. Private club experience prepared me to raise the bar at a public golf course fairly easily.”

Adding director of agronomy to his title required Lobenstine to put the right support team in place at Falls Road.

“The support of good assistants and a good mechanic can give you great peace of mind,” he says. “My current responsibilities take me away from the golf course part of every day at the least. I need to have security here. It has taken me a few years to find the right assistants. I have a very qualified team in place, so I don't have to worry about much when I leave the property. I know things are taken care of. I set the table

each morning, and we plan our schedule days in advance. Of course situations come up and we do a good job changing gears when necessary, but having a good game plan in advance makes us successful.”

When Lobenstine transitioned to director of agronomy, he also went from peer to management among his eight fellow superintendents.

“There's a certain level of tension that comes with that move,” he says. “When I was at Chevy Chase, I was promoted to second assistant from the grounds crew. All of a sudden one day, I was their boss. Some people were bitter about it because they felt they should've gotten the job. In the case of the superintendents, it was much easier because I had a group of professionals who were happy for me. I've had the complete support of all of these guys as we work together to put new programs in place to improve our golf courses.”

Another challenge for Lobenstine has been time management.

“There are only so many hours of daylight, and I've got to manage one golf course and oversee the other courses' operations,” he says. “That's something I'm still working on.”

Delegation is part of Lobenstine's difficulty with time management. He's delegating much more now to his assistants, who are always willing to help.

“But I still feel like there are times when I have

to do certain things myself,” he says.

As director of agronomy, Lobenstine oversees the operations of nine courses, developing purchasing programs that will save money by reducing the number of vendors he deals with. He also makes sure the cultural, equipment maintenance and safety programs are in line, and is responsible for signing off on the hiring and firing of all of the employees that work for the golf courses.

“I'm making sure we're set up for success,” he says. “I'm trying to get the tools that provide the support we need to do the job properly.”

Lobenstine created an equipment program director position – one mechanic who oversees all other mechanics at the courses. Stanley Kapulka, the mechanic at Falls Road, is responsible for overseeing a new preventive maintenance program he developed. He works with the other mechanics to lengthen equipment life and maintain equipment records.

Lobenstine also oversees capital projects, approves and monitors golf course budgets and assists development of the MCRA's long-term planning strategies.

So far, Miller has been more than happy with Lobenstine's job performance.

“I just can't say enough about his progression,” he says. “It's beyond my expectations. His vision is getting through to all our courses. He's an incredible manager. His prioritizing, communication and organization skills are incredible.”

[Where it all started]

In December 1999, Jon Lobenstine started his turfgrass career on the grounds crew at the Chevy Chase Club in Maryland, working for Dean Graves, CGCS. Now, Lobenstine is the director of agronomy for the Montgomery County Revenue Authority in Maryland.

“He's a great motivator,” Lobenstine says about Graves. “He made me want to get into this industry, and I saw how enjoyable and fun it can be. He felt it was worth spending time to help me develop into a turf professional.”

About a year after Lobenstine started at Chevy Chase, he was promoted to second assistant superintendent. About that time, Lobenstine enrolled in online classes at Penn State University. He took one class at a time, applying each class to the golf course and doing as much as possible during the seasons. He completed the two-year program while at Chevy Chase.

“I continued to give him more responsibilities, and he was happy no matter what he did,” Graves says about Lobenstine, who speaks fluent Spanish. “I'd keep challenging him, and he'd keep rising to the occasion.”

As a second assistant, Lobenstine's primary responsibilities were irrigation and developing and overseeing a safety program, which he touts as one of his prouder moments at the club.

“There were many employees and quite a few minor incidents,” he says. “After implementing my program, we reduced the number of accidents by 35

percent. That was very satisfying.”

After four years at Chevy Chase, Graves agreed with Lobenstine that he should work at another facility to benefit his professional development. He learned as much as he could at Chevy Chase about being a course manager.

“It was time for me to move on to see a new facility and a new way of managing and dealing with different turfgrasses,” Lobenstine says. “I began looking for an assistant's job. Because of my development, rapid increase in responsibility and good performance, Dean felt I needed a different perspective to be the best I could be in the turf industry. I didn't necessarily have to go to a public facility to see a new way of managing things, a different crew size or a different budget. Just getting that different experience ultimately made me a better manager.”

Working at Chevy Chase, with its large staff and big budget, was valuable experience for Lobenstine before moving to the 18-hole Falls Road Golf Course in Potomac, Md., where he had a much smaller budget and staff.

“I was looking at two assistant jobs – one at a private club – but I just didn't feel the energy I felt at Falls Road,” he says.

Lobenstine is glad he joined the facility when he did.

“Falls Road was undergoing a renovation project and going through the rigors of construction, and that was a wonderful experience,” he says. **GCI**

BIG SAVINGS

Each MCRA course has its own operating budget: The nine-hole facility has an operating budget just less than \$350,000; the 18-hole course budgets range from \$550,000 to \$900,000; and the two 27-hole courses operate in the \$750,000 to \$850,000 range.

Because of the purchasing power of nine golf courses, Lobenstine is saving a considerable amount of money on chemicals and fertilizer.

His plan was to pick three or four vendors and seek aggressive price cuts. When he received chemical bids from 10 vendors, pricing of a gallon of herbicide ranged from \$335 to \$550. Looking at the low bids on a sheet of about 200 products, he found as much as a 30-percent variable in pricing.

Lobenstine chose four vendors that had the lowest bids on the bid sheet as his primary vendors, and he's conducting all of his chemical

business with them. He did the same thing for fertilizer in 2007. But he chose to do a separate fertilizer bid this year because some vendors were much more competitive with fertilizers than with chemicals.

"I'm getting some of those basic products for half the price I had been getting," he says. "With some of our common chemicals, such as chlorothalonil, we just chose four products we saved the most on and went from brand names to generics, and we're still getting the same control. After an analysis of these few products, we saved more than \$100,000 in one year as a company. Instead of spending all the money we save on fertilizer, I can spend more on my topdressing program to get smoother, faster greens, for example, as well as help offset some of the crazy price increases we've seen in fuel and utilities."

One of Lobenstine's goals is to have the best greens in Montgomery County – public or private.

"It's a lofty goal," he says. "I don't know if we can compete with the guys who have a \$3-million dollar budget, but we're going to try."

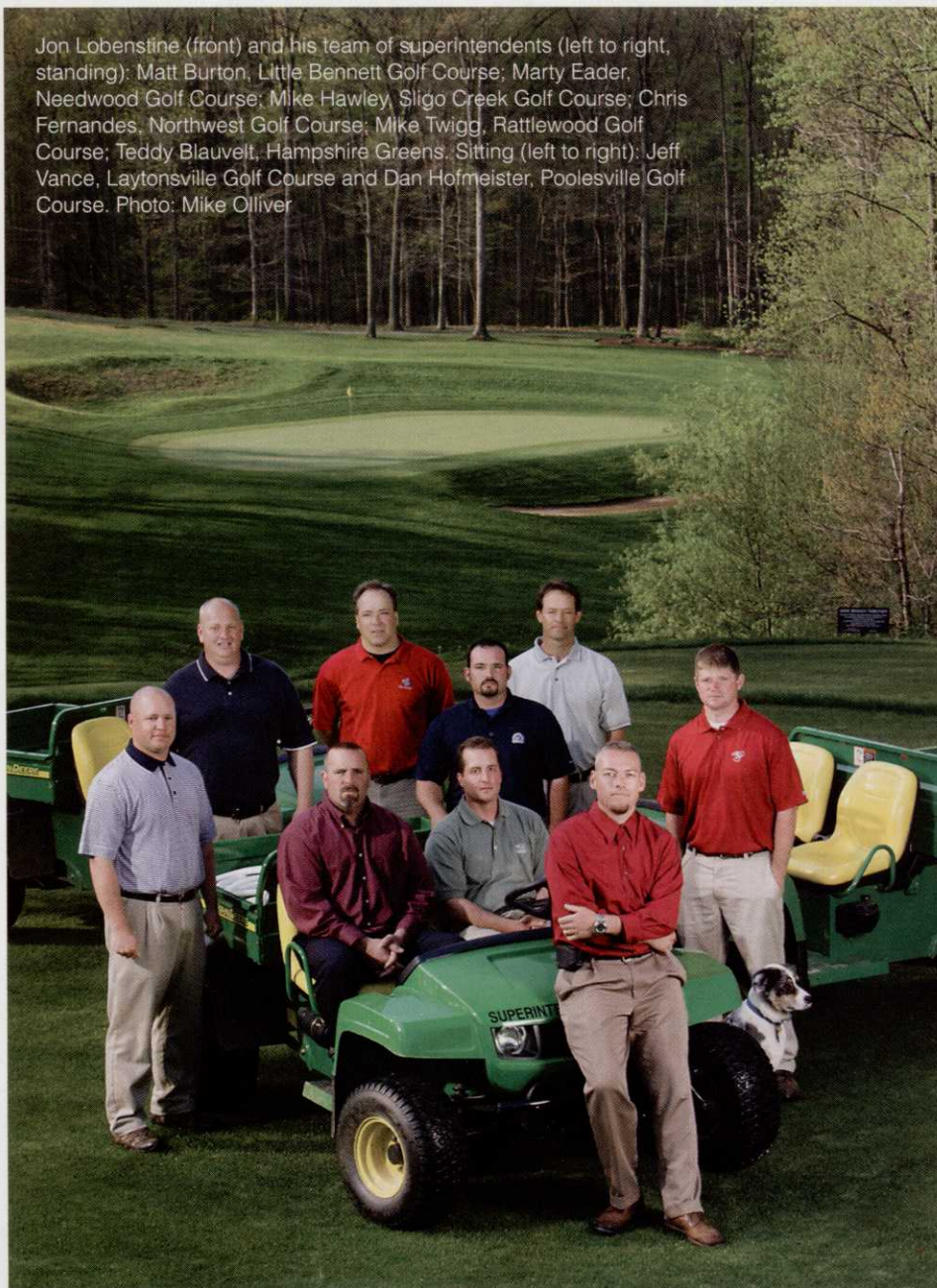
A BETTER OPERATION

On the equipment side of the operation, Lobenstine created a five-year equipment replacement program and has committed to getting better topdressers, rollers and aeration equipment to help meet the MCRA's goal of bettering the golf experience. He's also trying to replace much of the aging, run-down fleet of mowers, utility carts and sprayers so operational efficiency can be maximized, reducing downtime and equipment maintenance costs. Lobenstine is also seeing more price competition among preferred equipment vendors.

But to improve the success of the MCRA's municipal facilities, Lobenstine's top priority is improving course conditions, focusing on greens, fairways and tees.

"If I can get my greens, fairways and tees perfect, golfers will return because that's what they'll remember," he says. "They aren't going to remember their ball was in a thin area of the rough or if there were a few dandelions out there, but they're going to remember how the greens were. I've got guys coming to Falls Road from local private clubs, saying how nice our golf course is. It's a good feeling."

Among the nine courses, Falls Road is performing the best from a revenue standpoint. That's because of course conditioning and



Jon Lobenstine (front) and his team of superintendents (left to right, standing): Matt Burton, Little Bennett Golf Course; Marty Eader, Needwood Golf Course; Mike Hawley, Sligo Creek Golf Course; Chris Fernandes, Northwest Golf Course; Mike Twigg, Rattlewood Golf Course; Teddy Blauvelt, Hampshire Greens. Sitting (left to right): Jeff Vance, Laytonsville Golf Course and Dan Hofmeister, Poolesville Golf Course. Photo: Mike Olliver

The Montgomery County (Md.) Revenue Authority's nine golf courses

- Falls Road Golf Course in Potomac (18 holes)
- Hampshire Greens in Silver Spring (18 holes)
- Laytonsville Golf Course (18 holes)
- Little Bennett Golf Course in Clarksburg (18 holes)
- Needwood Golf Course in Rockville (27 holes)
- Northwest Golf Course in Silver Spring (27 holes)
- Poolesville Golf Course (18 holes)
- Rattlewood Golf Course in Mount Airy (18 holes)
- Sligo Creek Golf Course in Silver Spring (9 holes)

location, which is in the middle of an affluent neighborhood surrounded by private clubs, Lobenstine says.

“For these residents, an affordable, \$65 or \$70 round of golf at a place that offers a good golf experience is better than going to a private club sometimes,” he says.

The courses struggling most, based on revenue, are Rattlewood Golf Course and Poolesville Golf Course. Location is part of the reason for the struggle. Poolesville is in a remote location in the far west part of the county where population density is low.

“There’s a lot of farmland around there, and typically, anyone who wants to play there has to drive 20 miles,” he says. “Because of that, our rate is around \$30 at peak.”

Rattlewood is located in the far north part of the county, but one of its additional challenges is water – it doesn’t have access to well or city water, just a small irrigation pond.

“Almost every summer, Rattlewood loses its fairways,” Lobenstine says. “That’s a challenge we’re trying to find a solution to. We just upgraded the pump station with submersible pumps that allow access to more water in the pond. We’ll also be investigating additional locations to drill wells this year.”

The MCRA also is adjusting pricing to increase revenue.

“Instead of having one fixed green fee for each golf course, we’ve completely taken away our pricing board and are basically operating on supply-and-demand pricing,” Lobenstine says. “You might call up for a tee time at 7:30 in the morning on the weekend and it’s \$65. That same round at 10 o’clock might be \$49, and at three in the afternoon it might be \$29. Ultimately, because we’re trying to fill our tee sheet, if we can’t fill a 3 o’clock time slot at \$65 and can’t fill it at \$45, then the golf pro is going to put \$35 out there and have a better chance to fill it.”

The supply-and-demand pricing has been successful, Lobenstine says. The average rate has declined, but revenues have increased about 3.5 percent from 2006 to 2007, well ahead of national and regional averages. The MCRA also managed to increase rounds overall in their system by more than 8 percent last year.

The MCRA e-mails golf specials every week to its list of 20,000 golfers to attract them to the different golf courses, and the golf pros choose their pricing every week.

“The tee sheet can be described like an airplane,” he says. “The airline doesn’t fill all those seats for the same price. Depending on where you buy your ticket, you’re getting it for \$250 or \$125, or you’re getting the \$49 special, but they’ll fill that airplane. We look at our golf courses the same way.”

BEING FLEXIBLE

Lobenstine tries to visit each MCRA golf course



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every two weeks or so. He says there's a very competent superintendent at each course, and because of that, he has a comfort level that allows him to take care of his home course and get to the other courses a couple times a month.

"I have a golf course to manage, too," he says about Falls Road. "The goal is to visit everybody every two weeks or so throughout the growing season. If issues arise, superintendents give me a shout."

With a few years under his belt, Lobenstine believes he will be in the role for another 10 years if he's fortunate.

"I love what I do and feel like I do a good job," he says. "It never gets boring. Every day, there's something new. Every day, I try to give my crew at Falls Road a different job if possible. I help prioritize different jobs for my crew and identify training needs. I'm helping my assistants get focused before I move on to things that need to be addressed at the other courses."

The director of agronomy has to be able to devote a lot of time to the job, as well as be flexible and change gears rapidly, Lobenstine says.

"You have to love being busy and have a lot of energy for change, while keeping your staff and superintendents motivated and feeling good about what they're doing," he says. "It's easy to be a nit-picker every time you visit a golf course, so it's important for me to have highly positive visits. Just like with your grounds crew, you can't keep giving people a difficult time for not doing what's expected of them. You have to motivate them, make them feel good and give them the confidence to keep going."

There are days where Lobenstine wishes he was only working on one golf course, but he's a self-described adrenaline junkie, so the crazier things get, the faster he moves.

"I'm always shuffling my priorities," he says. "Throughout the day, you might have 10 different No. 1 priorities that need to be addressed. You

keep changing gears and address everything you can in a timely manner."

Lobenstine also wishes he could spend more time with his supportive family, yet he says they understand he's in a new role and it's important to them that he's successful.

"I'm fortunate to have the right support team in place that allows me to have many weekends off," he says. Having a full day or two with my wife and two girls helps me recharge for the next week.

"That's why I'm up at 3:00 in the morning, so I can still get home reasonably close to dinner," he adds. "I've got so many things going on that if I don't get up that early then I'm going to be coming home at 8 or 9 o'clock at night. I much rather make the sacrifice first thing in the morning when everybody at home is still sleeping."

Lobenstine has a great balance between work and family, Graves says.

"Jon knows what's important in life," he says. **GCI**



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