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NICHE RECOVERY

The higher they climb, the further they can fall. I've known few golf course superintendents who have had to recover from a more precipitous fall than Steve Renzetti, CGCS. There can be no better case study for superintendents to learn how to recover from a job loss. But first, let's look to see how effectively Steve Renzetti built an exemplary career.

Steve first was employed as a golf course superintendent at Burning Tree Country Club, a well-respected private golf club in Greenwich, Conn., in 1989. Three years later, he moved on to the nearby Wykagyl Country Club in New Rochelle, N.Y. Wykagyl recently enjoyed a No. 87 national ranking in Golfweek's Top 100 Classical Courses. It was consistently independently rated within the top five golf courses agronomically throughout the region's 200-plus courses during Steve's tenure. Wykagyl also hosts the long-running PGA Tour's popular Sybase Big Apple Classic (formerly, the JAL Classic). This affiliation with Wykagyl led the PGA Tour to engage Steve in 1999 as its exclusive (part-time) consulting agronomist to ensure the turf quality of the golf courses it visits throughout the year.

Having earned the respect and recognition this career path generated, Steve regularly found himself on the short list of candidates invited to apply for the country's better vacated golf course superintendent jobs at such renowned U.S. Open venues like Winged Foot, Baltusrol, Congressional and the Baltimore Country Club (U.S. Women's Open). Always a finalist, Steve turned down an offer from the Baltimore Country Club to accept an offer from the Quaker Ridge Golf Club in Scarsdale, N.Y., in 1999. Quaker Ridge is an A.W. Tillinghast design that has hosted the Walker Cup and peaked at a No. 14 national ranking in Golf Digest's America's 100 Greatest Golf Courses.

After six mutually rewarding years at Quaker Ridge, Steve got caught in the middle of the classic political debate between

the old guard and the new guard factions at the club. Trying to accommodate both member elements distracted him. The quality of his work suffered, which predictably led to a mutually agreed decision that he would leave club employment at the end of the 2006 season.

Steve immediately set about arranging priorities for developing his future career path, which drove him to quickly complete the preparation of his personal career Web site (www.stevenrenzetti.com), which, once done, set a new standard at the time for superintendents' personal Web sites. While the quality of Steve's Web site guaranteed he would be interviewed when he applied for jobs after leaving Quaker Ridge, the pitfalls of losing a highly visible prominent job consistently trumped the situation.

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Realizing he would have to develop an alternate career plan for the coming years until the dust settled around his Quaker Ridge departure, Steve quite wisely identified the following set of issues he felt he had to address effectively if he was to succeed at developing a second career:

1. The predominant thought Steve had as he looked to define his future was that he would succeed only if he would be doing something that he enjoyed. He quickly realized the one thing he enjoyed doing beyond all else was helping golf course superintendents solve problems through access to new ideas and better products.

2. Next, Steve queried sales reps, course

operators and golf course superintendents and asked each what they liked and disliked about what they were doing and what they expected from each other? The predominant answers that surfaced were (i) that superintendents wanted access to new thinking and better products and (ii) that golf course superintendents and sales reps readily identified with the concept of independent, mobile, socially conversant, knowledgeable salesmen providing products/services that make a difference.

With these insights on board, Steve made the decision to start a company that would provide exclusive, cutting-edge products and services to the world of the golf course superintendent. Following necessary due diligence, he partnered with the following companies to provide support for his newly formed company, Pinnacle Turf (www.pinnacleturf.net): the International Turf Sports Research Center (ITSRC) to provide physical properties analysis services; the Tri-Terra Co. to provide a unique system for delivering beneficial microbes; and the Floratine Products Group to offer premium foliar and soil nutrients.

Because Pinnacle Turf has been successful to date, Steve no longer thirsts to return to golf course superintendency. He has effectively reinvented himself in a tough, competitive world.

The primary lesson to be learned from Steve's recent journey is that when looking to develop an alternate career, it's essential to identify a niche that will address defined market needs where one's experience and talent will directly apply. The corollary that flows naturally from this lesson is that there's no need to wait until a job is lost before looking to develop an alternate career. Employed superintendents (especially the more veteran) can work in partnership with retired superintendents and/or other freelancing qualified individuals to develop start-up companies that would run parallel to the superintendents' jobs until each superintendent elects to retire.

Steve Renzetti reminds all superintendents that career glass ceilings can be a thing of the past. **GCI**