

# A HEAVY HEAD

Staff, weather and budgets are just a few of the worries that weigh on superintendents' minds

BY MICHAEL COLEMAN

**L**abor shortages, overdevelopment, reduced budgets and pressing agronomic issues – among others – worry golf course superintendents. But as expected, most of them are rising to confront the challenges like seasoned professionals.

The top 10 concerns reported in a Golf Course Industry survey of 200 subscribers (see info box on page 30) include staff, irrigation, members' expectations and the U.S. economy. Of course, every situation is different, and like politics, all concerns are local.

Jeff Staeger, who has been the golf course superintendent at Wildwood Golf and Country Club in Cape May Court House, N.J., for eight years, says overdevelopment in the area has gotten to the point where clubs are reducing rates and giving away memberships at considerable discounts.

"Development has been unbridled," Staeger says. "Whoever has money can build a golf course."

With many traditional members in the area finding less time to play golf and having less cash on hand, a one-two punch of high supply and low demand is putting the bottom line on the canvas. Wildwood has lost 15 percent of its

membership during the past two years.

"Clubs in the area are offering memberships that would acclimate them to a certain group of people," Staeger says. "The thinking is that once new members make some friends and enjoy playing the course, hopefully, cost won't be a factor when the discount expires."

The membership committee at Wildwood plans to focus on retaining younger members during the next decade. Meanwhile, Staeger must deal with high expectations of the players who arrive during summer – visitors who are used to playing in Philadelphia and New York much of the year.

"People compare our course with their course back home," he says.

Some newer courses in New Jersey aren't owned by experienced golf people. Campground owners and other investors outside the golf world built golf courses searching for profit, Staeger says. But even though course construction continues, the economy has caused people to feel strapped for cash and reduce their spending.

Much of the current economic woes are a self-fulfilling prophesy, says Josh Olinger, golf course superintendent at Stonebridge Golf Club in Lakeland, Tenn.

"A lot of this is in the American public's head," he says. "We're in a recession because we think we are."

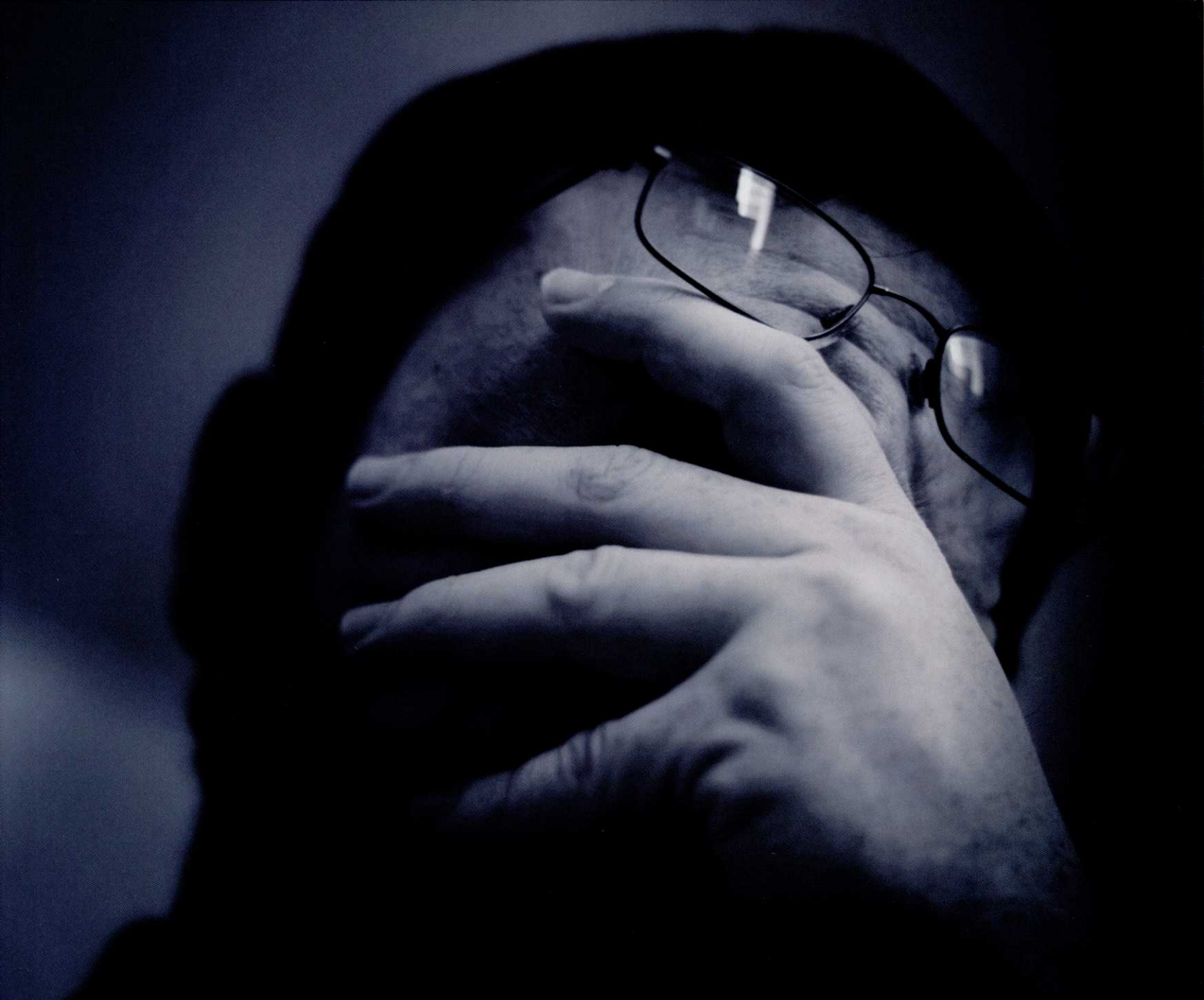
#### STAFFING/LABOR

While worry might be undue, the reality is that economic concerns trickle down to Olinger's budget when people spend less on golf.

"In turn, my budget suffers, and we have to cut employees out, and we have to cut chemicals, fertilizers, wherever we can cut to get that balance," he says.

Olinger isn't alone facing staffing issues. It tops the list of concerns in the GCI survey. For many, a narrowing pool of immigrant laborers recently has made hiring more challenging. Fewer workers coming to the U.S. from Mexico and South America mean some positions go unfilled.

Part of the worker shortage is because of a reduction of the number of H-2B visas issued this year. Congress failed to pass a provision that, during the past few years, has allowed returning H-2B workers not to count against the annual cap of 66,000 visas. Because the so-called "returning-worker exemption" hasn't been passed, many businesses didn't receive the



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seasonal workers they've come to depend on.

"Because it's more difficult for them to cross the border and get the work visas, we're not getting the volume of Hispanic labor like we did five years ago," Olinger says.

Olinger has been three people shy of full staff most of this year. Normally, he has a crew of nine. Still, all the important work gets done with the help of extra work by the smaller crew.

"I would put the small crew I have against any crew in the country," he says. "I feel like they're the hardest working crew I've ever seen."

Olinger's crew always wants more hours, so that helps compensate for the open slots.

"The course doesn't suffer because I'm short staffed," he says. "But it doesn't really benefit either. We're staying afloat."

Hiring also is affected by reduced visas and competition. John Cunningham, CGCS, at Four Seasons Las Colinas in Irving, Texas, is insulated a bit because of the extensive screening process conducted by the resort's human resources department. The resort completes multiple interviews before making any hires.

"We have a very strict policy about hiring a legal work force," Cunningham says. "It's becoming more difficult to find those employees that are legal, have good paperwork and are able to work in the United States."

The golf industry is negatively affected by the available labor pool because good employees are being siphoned off by other industries. The first hurdle is being able to hire a legal employee, and the second is finding a qualified person. Finding the right employees is a chief concern for Cunningham because they determine the success of

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his maintenance operation.

"They're the real heroes," he says. "You go to any well-groomed golf course or great-run golf course, and it's because of the staff."

### AGRONOMIC CONCERNS

Beyond staff concerns, Olinger's most pressing worry is the facility's aging irrigation system, which was installed in 1975 and last upgraded in the mid-1980s.

"We've gone actually weeks with it down completely," Olinger says. "The players and others at the club are good about the troubles, though. For the most part, they understand. If they see me out here, they know I'm doing everything I can."

Likewise, Olinger makes due with the irrigation system because he understands the significant investment the club would need to make to install a new one.

Drought conditions this year also haven't eased Olinger's mind any. While he has the benefit of an irrigation pond and two wells that he can refill with free ground water, he doesn't take water for granted because the rain clouds might not return for a long time.

"Everybody needs to keep that in the back of their mind," he says. "You never know when you're not going to have any more rain."

Good planning helps a maintenance operation run smoothly, but sometimes superintendents inherit challenges on day one and are forced deal with them right off the bat.

"A big issue that was here at the club before I started, and one that's becoming more common around the country, is earthworms," says Doug Brooks, golf course superintendent at Denver Country Club.

Brooks is trying to solve the issue through water management and strengthening the ryegrass turf's canopy, which is a top priority.

"I've learned where the bad areas are and when there's going to be more activity," he says. "I've really been on top of it this year."

Another concern for Brooks is a purely local one that took root – or failed to – after a renovation project. The club's driving range was changed from two levels to one. About 1,500 tons of material were brought in to level it out. But the

sod hasn't flourished because the soil struggles to supply enough oxygen and water.

"It's not recovering well, so that's a real focus to make some improvements," he says.

Ricky Craig, golf course superintendent at Shingle Creek Golf Club in Orlando, Fla., is concerned about the future without Nematicur because his Tifeagle greens are susceptible to nematodes.

Nematicur, a nematicide with the active ingredient fenamiphos, is in the process of a five-year phase out because of Environmental Protection Agency concerns.

"It's a concern with sand-based greens," Craig says. "But I haven't had to use a nematicide to date."

Craig's interest in staying ahead of nematodes shows in his topdressing program. He focuses on keeping the biomass healthy through aeration three times a year. He strives to keep the microbial population happy and moving so they decompose thatch. This should keep the turf healthy and the nematodes in check. If this doesn't work, however, the situation could deteriorate.

Users can apply Nematicur until supplies are depleted, but distributor sales will cease after May 31.

"Other than using Curfew, there's not a plan in place," he says.

### MONEY MATTERS

Skyrocketing fuel costs are a worry for superintendents, but some foresight keeps sleepless nights at bay. For example, Olinger readjusted his budget to accommodate for that.

"Fuel is a concern, but if you're prepared for it, it's not that bad," he says.

Other superintendents say they prepared for the higher costs this year by increasing their fuel budget considerably. Surprisingly, fuel costs didn't make the top 10 concerns in the GCI survey.

Unlike rising fuel costs, not all trouble can be seen in advance. Sometimes the issues keeping superintendents up at night seem like a rare disease. Other times they're like the common cold. Brooks has experienced both this year. Inflation is a common concern for him.



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### Top 10 concerns for superintendents

1. Staff
2. Weather
3. Family/home affairs
4. Irrigation
5. Budget
6. Turf
7. U.S. economy
8. Members' expectations
9. Pests/diseases
10. Job security

#### Other concerns for superintendents

- Gas prices
- Business plans
- Labor shortage
- Equipment
- Tournaments

Source: A Golf Course Industry survey of 200 subscribers

"Obviously, the cost of fuel and fertilizer has got everyone's attention, but we've been able to manage those," he says.

Brooks splits fuel purchases of unleaded and diesel over alternate months to help cash flow.

"We've paid attention to every part of our operation," he says. "We're careful with the money we're spending on labor and paying attention to our fertility, making sure we're not getting ahead of ourselves."

Tighter budgets have handcuffed many superintendents. Rounds played nationwide have been flat the past several years. For Staeger, a decline of members has hurt his nearly \$1-million budget, which was reduced 10 percent this year. Staeger, with a crew of 15, used ingenuity to trim back to the new funding level. For example, he cut \$45,000 out of his chemical budget by switching one chemical to a new product that lasts longer and requires fewer applications. He also has swapped several branded products for

generic ones. He hopes that strategy will save money and that no significant issues demanding costly reactive measures will crop up and burn through the savings.

Staeger also is concerned that the roughly \$85,000 in planned reductions he made won't be enough because of the higher-than-expected equipment and irrigation costs. He's keeping the financial team abreast of the situation.

"Hopefully, they don't get to the end of the year and their eyes pop out," Staeger says.

Because of these various operational concerns, superintendents have been working a lot of overtime, and that's not likely to change. Keeping a course in premium condition despite a barrage of personnel, budgetary and agronomic issues might require them to work even more hours than they already clock.

"It's going to be our cost to bear in upcoming years if this economy doesn't turn around," Staeger says. **GCI**



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