

SUPERINTENDENT PROFILE



Despite a high-flying career, Robert Waller's family – his wife, Heather, and children, Haley, 9 (right), Emma, 6 (left) and Jack, 2 – keeps him grounded.

By Pat Jones

A VIEW from the TOP

A patient Robert Waller plans methodically at Marriott Golf

If you're like most superintendents or course operators, you wake up in the morning worrying about how your 18 little babies have fared overnight. Robert Waller wakes up worrying about more than 1,000 putting surfaces around the globe.

Gulp!

Waller is senior director of golf grounds operations and development for Marriott International, the hotel and resort giant and longtime player in the world of corporate golf management. Waller and his colleagues oversee maintenance for 45 Marriott properties in 13 countries, including nine at plush Ritz-Carltons. The company's holdings range from marquee facilities such as Doral in Miami and Starpass in Tucson, Ariz., down to one that's essentially a city-owned course in Tennessee.

Like many, Waller started at a local mom-and-pop place with a blue-collar customer base and plenty of work opportunities for a kid who loved to be outside. He was a night watchman, worked in the golf shop, life guarded and rode a mower at a course in Austell, Ga. While there, the owner hired a new general manager who was a certified superintendent.

"That blew me away," he says. "I couldn't believe this was actually a career path. I just figured the superintendent was always the owner's son."

That superintendent, Roger Cagle, became Waller's first mentor and helped set him on the path that led him to the top of one of the nation's biggest golf organizations. From there, he went to Florida's Lake City Community College and earned a degree in 1992 after completing internships with Cagle at Eagle Watch Golf Club in Atlanta and at Pinehurst's No. 6 and No. 7 courses under Todd Biggers.

At that point, he met another superintendent who would shape his career and much of his management philosophy.

"Ken Mangum of the Atlanta Athletic Club came to Lake City to interview for assistants, and he was just amazing," Waller says. "I ended up working for him for five years and learned so much – not just about managing a course but how you should

carry yourself. Plus, he showed me how to treat people. He had the same demeanor with the president of the club or Rees Jones as the guy he'd just hired to rake bunkers. He's such a great example."

Waller calls his experience at AAC priceless, but after the club secured the 2001 PGA Championship and he fielded a few offers, he connected with Herman Vonhof, the developer of The Georgian Resort in Villa Rica, Ga., and became superintendent there in 1997. Vonhof had hired Marriott to oversee the project, so Waller joined the staff. He enjoyed working with Tom Schlick, his predecessor as senior director, and Claye Atcheson.

"They basically gave me a master's degree in golf course management and a bachelor's in business administration at the same time," he says.

Waller took the Frog Golf Club at The Georgian from ground breaking to grow-in and oversaw the course for three years, all the while learning about the Marriott way of operating. In 2001, he jumped to the company's corporate headquarters in Orlando and, eight years later, finds himself running the show.

Why should superintendents fear or embrace the typical management company?

I'll answer that in two ways. First, at Marriott, we're not a management company, per se. If XYZ Club opens, we're not submitting a proposal to run it. Our mission is to support Marriott International. We're an operations group, and we typically don't do short-term agreements at stand-alone facilities.

Second, what's different in corporate golf from other management models is we operate more methodically. We have more processes in place with regard to budgets, hiring, hierarchy and so forth. You have to be more patient and have a greater capability for planning. We've had superintendents who came from those other worlds who like that and embrace it, but some don't. We can't turn on a dime like they can, but more single operators are moving to our model more. It's evolving our way.

What drew you to Marriott?

I came to the corporate office when Tom Schlick (longtime head of maintenance for Marriott) was in charge. I looked at it like a doctorate degree in golf course management. It's a chance to touch so many golf operations. I've worked on construction projects in seven countries. It's broadened my horizons in terms of business, turf types, learning the operations side, retailing – you name it – and I've worked with so many experienced operators. I'm beginning to feel like I understand operations as a whole.

I'm a capitalist at heart. We shouldn't apologize for that in the golf business. You used to hear, "My expenses are fixed, and I can't change the way I maintain the course." You can't operate that way. It's about being profitable. That's the reality of every other business in the world. Anyone who thinks differently isn't going to survive long these days.

Everyone says money is tight in the corporate golf business. How do you deal with that?

We've gone to great lengths to build a structure around budgets. What's the competitive set, what are the core components – acreage, geography, etc. – and internal needs based on revenues and sales. That creates a window – or a template – for the budget. We have five or six general models based on those things and then, like always, it becomes an art based on other factors – water costs, local expenses, etc. Then, we have the purchasing programs that give us cost leverage, which helps us do more with less.

What should superintendents understand before going to work for a corporate golf organization like Marriott?

What we probably do most differently is require a higher degree of planning and justification. You have to have more patience than you would in a private structure. But that process produces more consistent, excellent results. Having the ability to plan, put it on paper and zero-base a budget is critical. Just because you spent X dollars last year doesn't mean you need to do that this year.

What drove Marriott to make the environmental commitment it has made?

Our superintendents are like most – we do an excellent job protecting and enhancing the environment – but we wanted a third party to validate our programs. And, because we're Mar-

riott, we wanted the gold standard. So, we went with Audubon's certification program. It's a comprehensive program in terms of wildlife management, chemical usage, water conservation, native areas ... you name it. The biggest thing is that we've done an organizational outreach program to communicate all the work we've done.

It was the easiest sale of all time internally because Marriott is already so committed to green policies. The company jumped all over it. It grasped the benefits of Audubon International program immediately. Frankly, it's great brand recognition that's meaningful to most people. It means something positive environmentally.

We just completed our mandate, achieving certification for 25 of our courses in 2008. That includes all of our domestic facilities plus one in the Caribbean. In 2009, we'll extend the program to the rest of our international operations (another 17 facilities) in places such as the Bahamas, Costa Rica and Spain. The Cooperative Sanctuary principles make sense everywhere on the planet. And it's good business because it's a cost-saving program. You can show year-over-year savings financially.

Describe your average week.

My typical week includes a lot of travel. I logged about 130,000 miles in the air last year and was on the road 115 nights. Usually, it's Monday in the office, leave on Tuesday morning, visit a few facilities and come back later in the week. I spent 30 days in Tucson last year working on our Ritz-Carlton Dove Mountain project. Most people would be overjoyed about the idea of spending 30 nights in a Ritz-Carlton in Arizona, but even the nicest place grows old compared to home-cooking and family after a while.

My office is in a five-story office building that's not directly connected to a golf course, so I don't get to spend as much time on green grass as I'd like. I do a lot of internal education within the group, such as conference calls with our clustered operations (Caribbean, Florida, etc.) comparing properties and best practices and new ideas. I've learned that whatever challenge you're facing, someone else has faced it before.

Communication between our superintendents is critical, and it's a big advantage. Superintendents by nature share information, and that's one thing that's great about our organization. We can do that internally regularly instead of sporadically over coffee or a beer at a chapter meeting.



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SUPERINTENDENT PROFILE

What would you prefer to do be doing instead of sitting in an office or on a plane?

I love what I do. I may be the last person on the planet who still gets up excited to go to work every day. That said, playing center field for the Braves would be nice.

What advice do you have for young people considering a career in the business?

First, make sure you're truly passionate. Be prepared for incredibly long days and years in this business. You can't fake the passion that great superintendents have for what they do. From a resume standpoint, earn a B.S. degree in turf but think about a minor in a business discipline. In 15 years, you'll be using that minor more than the major. Intern with the most respected club and superintendent you can find and focus on maintaining those relationships for the rest of your career. That's the key.

Also, intern or take your first job in the climate you intend to live in. Location matters. There's a huge learning curve otherwise. If I'm picking from two equal candidates, I'm going to lean toward the candidate who has experience in that region.

Next, play golf. I don't care how good you are, but you have to be knowledgeable and able to communicate about what's going on with the game. Never lose sight that golf is the business we're in. Be seen as an expert in all things golf.

Internally, it's important to become fluent in real Spanish – not just golf course Spanish. Build relationships with the whole team – no matter what language they speak – rather than dictating to people.

Finally, get experience in new course construction, renovation or a grow-in. At some point, it will make the difference and pay off.

Final thoughts?

I constantly focus on the idea that we need to transform our image from maintenance experts to all aspects of club operations. I use a baseball analogy. We had a pitching coach in Atlanta once – Leo Mazzone – who was a tremendous teacher, but he never became a manager because he was viewed as a specialist.

The same is true for us. Too many of us hit a clog in coming up through the industry because we are viewed as too specialized. We have to change that perception, because superintendents have tremendous skills in all areas of operations if they're given the chance. **GCI**