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MENTORING'S PAYOFF

In many ways my career in golf couldn't have been scripted any better.

I greatly enjoyed the golf club that employed me for 36 years, and its location in my home state was an advantage I appreciated almost daily.

Our golf course was only a short distance from our land grant University of Wisconsin. That means Big Ten sports, terrific cultural opportunities and alumni activities galore.

Maybe best of all, the UW-Madison has a four-year turf program that we think ranks with the best. There's my prejudice – I am a product of that program.

From my first year in 1973 to my final in 2008, my staff included at least one turfgrass intern. That offered rewards and advantages that cannot be overstated, but serious responsibilities were also part of the deal.

I mention this because I've been asked many times already what I miss most about being retired from managing a golf course. It might be easier to answer what I *don't* miss because there were so many pleasant and rewarding aspects to my daily work life. But, honestly, I miss working with the college kids most.

Proximity made it easy for me to attract turf students. They were able to work both ends of the summer and even, sometimes, in the shop in the winter. They usually kept the same apartment they had for the school year – no sublets – and the appeal of campus life extended into the summer for them.

I was a student intern myself once, and wise words of advice from my undergrad advisor and major professor – Dr. James R. Love – were the catalyst for my commitment to turf students. He said many times that the only way for us to repay the help we'd received was to help those who aspired to the

same; in other words, pay forward, not back. He was right on.

It would be nearly impossible to record all of the positives to establishing an internship program for a golf course, but at the top of my list is the enthusiasm for golf turf I saw in every turf student I ever employed. Their career choice wasn't a second choice; they loved the work, just as I did when I was their age. Always, it was more than a summer job; their motivation to do good work was endlessly impressive and inspired me not to let them down in any way.

And talk! For most of these kids, "talking turf" among themselves and visiting with the rest of us about golf and grass was not only instructive, it was entertaining and enjoyable. Being surrounded by students kept me young and on my toes. The questions and challenges came fast and furious at times, and it would have been irresponsible for me to try to dodge even one of them.

One of the most important requisites of a mentor is your ability to be an open book. "Keep no secrets," was my motto; every time someone had a question, he got an honest and sincere answer. More than a few times I'd confess, "I don't know but I will definitely find out for you."

Mentoring on a golf course provided an opportunity to be a teacher, one of the most noble of activities. Superintendents, at least in our four-year undergrad program, filled in the technical and practical aspects of turf student education. It's one thing to be able to integrate or differentiate a calculus equation and quite another to calculate quantities that go into the tank for disease control.

Our weekly meetings included relevant math problems, a few grammar lessons, equipment issues and a whole lot more of the down-to-earth

situations faced daily by golf course superintendents.

It's inevitable that interns will leave with some of your basic philosophy, things I like to think will help over time. Neatness, no tolerance for tardiness or absenteeism, teamwork, a real sense of committing to what's good for the game of golf and respect for the chain of command are but a few examples that may not be taught in a college four-year curriculum but were learned in our workplace.

A good internship plan isn't always fun; it's always a lot of work and has a significant time requirement. Occasionally you'll experience a student who's difficult or arrogant or who's quite sure he knows much more than you do. And there will be an individual who expects an internship means riding around with you all day and who's in a state of shock when given a shovel.

Having so many former golf course employees is like having a large extended family. We talk on the phone, exchange Christmas cards and visit about fun things when we meet. I get wedding invitations, birth notices, write letters of recommendation and both send and receive letters of congratulations and condolence.

More than anything, I'm proud of them all. They've accomplished great things in our profession.

Internships and students have enriched not only my career but my life, as well. The responsibility to instruct students is formidable, but it can lead to respect and a contribution to golf that can make a difference.

The great English golf writer Bernard Darwin, commenting on students and teaching, put it this way: "It is no small bond between two people or between a hundred that they have been at the best house of the best school in England." **GCI**