

A New COURSE

Former superintendents use their management experience in new careers.

“I don’t think many superintendents realize the skill sets they have make them very capable to do a lot of jobs.” – John Netwal, CGCS

A decade ago Kerry Satterwhite thought he’d retire from his job as the golf course maintenance director for the city of Bloomington, Ill. There he oversaw three 18-hole golf courses and a staff of 50.

But six years ago Satterwhite noticed a general decline in the golf course industry. At that time, Bloomington’s golf courses were generating about \$3.5 million in revenue. Last year, they brought in about \$3 million. Over the years city council members began asking, “Should we be in the golf business anymore?”

After 25 years in golf course management working more than 60 hours a week, seven days a week, Satterwhite asked himself the same question.

According to Golf Course Industry research, he’s not alone. Forty-five percent of superintendents have considered departing the profession. Half have not considered it, and 5 percent have left their superintendent posts for other positions, only to return.

Why have so many superintendents considered a career change? A bevy of reasons, including the long hours, unsuitable pay/benefits, and a lack of available jobs (see “GCI’s career change survey,” on page 36) are turning superintendents toward other professions.

Superintendents who’ve left – no matter what type of job they’ve taken – can’t complain about their new schedules, which for the most part have improved their quality of life.

“I don’t think I’d ever go back,” says Satterwhite, who’s now executive director and COO of STL Business and Technology Solutions, a company that hosts Web sites, sells computer equipment and provides network support to businesses. He’s proud to announce his family is planning its first ever summer vacation.

On top of a more flexible schedule, the biggest revelation for former superintendents is that so many of the skills they

acquired during their years in golf course maintenance are assets in any management position.

“So many people define themselves by what they do, not by who they are,” Satterwhite says.

Superintendents who are burnt out, unhappy or just seeking a change should rethink that mentality and flaunt their abilities in project management, effective communication, financial management and human resources, to name a few.

WHERE ARE THEY GOING?

GCI’s research sheds some light on where superintendents who’ve thought about changing careers have considered going. More than half have considered pursuing a new profession altogether, 43 percent have thought about working for a supplier in the turf industry and 27 percent have considered working for a service business related to the turf industry.

When Satterwhite first thought about leaving his job, he figured he’d stay in the industry and go into sales, working for a supplier. He interviewed for some positions, but worried the golf industry’s troubles would eventually affect the supply side, too.

He also considered going into business for himself when the opportunity to set up an organic fertilizer distributorship presented itself.

During his due-diligence process, Satterwhite talked with an acquaintance who’s an entrepreneur. Over the several months the two men talked, the business owner learned that Satterwhite had skills that would apply to any management position.

“Until then, he always thought I just cut grass,” Satterwhite says.

When a management position opened at his company, the business owner called Satterwhite and offered him the job.

“It was a quantum leap for me to go from 25 years of golf course management to this,” he says. “But you have the same types of problems anywhere, and it’s all about communication.”

Mark McCarel, former superintendent of The Country Club in Pepper Pike, Ohio, is several months into a job as an agronomic analyst for industry supplier Advance Sensor Technology, based in King of Prussia, Pa.

He works with facility managers to interpret data gathered by the company’s wireless soil sensors to see if they can produce favorable turf conditions while using less water.

He’d had his eyes open for a new opportunity for a number of years, he says, though he never looked outside the golf business.



McCarel

“Everything I looked at was in the industry, I just wasn’t quite sure what was available to me other than another superintendent position or a sales position,” he says. Turns out, at least several months into his new role, his job satisfaction is at a high level.

“If I’d written a job description for myself five years ago, this almost fits it,” McCarel says. “I’m doing agronomics, seeing a lot of golf courses and working for a company that’s fighting the good fight in conserving water. It’s really exciting.”

Former superintendent Darren Harris took another route. Earlier this year, he signed on to run a new irrigation company that’s an offshoot of a friend’s 12-year-old organic lawn care company in Dallas.

“My salary for the company is less than I was making as a superintendent, but it’s the freedom and the ability to be my own boss that are attractive,” Harris says. “I’m working five days a week and I set my own schedule based on how many clients I can serve. Sometimes I might have to work until 7 p.m., but I see a much bigger benefit to working longer hours now – it will pay off for me personally in the long run.”

WHY ARE THEY LEAVING?

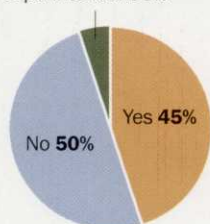
Superintendents leave the profession for many reasons – among them are stress about the job market, long hours and weekends and employer-induced pressure.

GCI'S CAREER CHANGE SURVEY

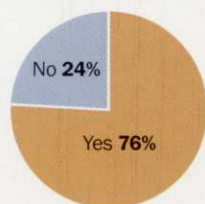
In April and May, Golf Course Industry magazine surveyed 297 superintendents and assistant superintendents via an online survey service. Here are the results:

Have you ever considered changing careers?

I changed at one time, but returned to being a superintendent **5%**



Do you know of any golf course superintendents or assistants who have changed careers in the last three years?



What are the reasons you've considered changing careers?

Lack of available superintendent jobs	33%
The profession requires too many hours (early mornings, late nights, weekends, etc.)	44%
Pay and benefits (health care, retirement, perks, etc.) aren't suitable	37%
I'd like to try something new	35%
Another opportunity presented itself	21%
Other*	18%

*Responses for "other" include: physical demands, self-employment, was fired, stress/pressure/discouragement, unrealistic expectations, too political, ministry, unhappy with current employer, lack of control over things like weather, availability of water over next 20 years, threats of reorganization, lack of job security.

What career options have you seriously considered?

Working for a supplier in the golf/turf industry	43%
Becoming a golf/turf consultant	22%
Starting my own service business related to the turf industry (lawn care, irrigation, etc.)	22%
Working for a service business related to the turf industry (lawn care, irrigation, etc.)	27%
Starting my own business outside of the golf/turf industry (franchise, restaurant, retail, etc.)	20%
Pursuing a new profession altogether	57%
Other*	10%

*Responses for "other" include: starting own supplier business, golf course construction, parks and recreation, being a boat captain, golf instructor, golf course general manager, wind and/or solar energy, working on the office/business side of golf course industry.

Satterwhite was no stranger to long hours. On Saturdays, he started work at 4:30 a.m. to squeeze in a couple of hours before driving 150 miles to his daughter's softball tournaments, after which he drove home so he could be back at work on Sundays. Over time, sustaining this routine throughout four years of his daughter's high school career didn't seem like a viable option.

It was the hours for McCarel, too. It wasn't the length or the weekends, necessarily, but the lack of control over the hours.

"Working a 70- or 80-hour week doesn't scare me," McCarel says, "I'm working about 65 hours now – but I have weekends off. Weekends and summer holidays are an absolute killer for a superintendent and their family." This year will be the first time McCarel has had Memorial Day, 4th of July and Labor Day weekends off in 17 years.

After 12 years as an assistant, Harris finally landed a superintendent job. When he was hired, he was told the owners wanted to improve the golf course. Eight months into that job – with four crew members and no assistant – he realized improving the golf course wasn't really the goal and the position was no longer the job he signed up for.

"There were tasks we couldn't just skip, so I ended up picking up the slack," he says. "I was there until 8 p.m. mowing fairways."

With a wife and a 22-month-old son at home, working 12 to 14 hour days six or seven days a week was wearing on him. He began interviewing for new jobs, but realized the superintendents in the desirable jobs weren't leaving.

"The prospect of finding a good job just wasn't there," he says.

LONG-TIME SUPERINTENDENTS REFLECT

Lack of stability and feeling "stuck" are concerns for long-time superintendents. The average superintendent's tenure is eight and a half years, according to the GCSAA. The longer you stay in a job, the more established you are in the area, and the more difficult it is to leave. If the golf market isn't thriving in your area, options for advancement as a superintendent are limited.

Gregg Blew, CGCS, has reached that point in his career. He's the superintendent at Wellshire Golf Club, one of seven facilities in the city of Denver's golf division.

He's a career superintendent and has worked for the city for nearly 16 years. After being turned down for a director of golf position, in part because he only has a two-year degree and the city requires a bachelor's degree, Blew feels stuck.

"It's a sort of disgruntlement – there's no room for me to grow here," he says. "The job market in Denver is getting tight, and at my current pay level, I can't go anywhere else."

At the same time, relocating isn't on the table. "I moved out here 16 years ago from Kansas," Blew says. "Denver's a great town. My three kids are in the area and I have a grandson now. Moving isn't an option."

What is an option for Blew and superintendents in his position is moving out of a superintendent role altogether. For many, though, that's a tough prospect.

Blew looked into sales positions at golf industry suppliers, but he's unsure about his sales skills. He's interviewed for management company positions, but he doesn't feel like it's a good fit.

"I don't know if they always look at the best interests of the golf course," he says.

SUPER SKILL SETS

Superintendents who've moved on to new careers paint a positive picture, and encourage their former peers who are considering a career change to tally their talents.

"Superintendents have an unbelievable skill set," says former superintendent Mark McCarel, an agronomic analyst for Advanced Sensor Technology. "We're businessmen and agronomists. We're accountants, managers, HR people, farmers. We know how to go from being in an agricultural setting to a board room to pitch a business proposal."

As such, any career search should highlight those management skills loud and clear, says former superintendent Kerry Satterwhite, executive director/COO for STL Business and Technology Solutions.

"All those things you're doing translate to any kind of management position," he says.

A strong work ethic is one of a superintendent's greatest assets. "I still come to work at a quarter to 7 a.m. and I think nothing of working 10-hour days and doing some work on the weekends," he says. "Most people aren't used to that."

And don't forget about any volunteering, association or consulting experience.

Satterwhite had experience reviewing advertising and scripts for golf industry marketing firm EPIC.

"That's a huge skill I've used in my current position, and it really surprised the company – they didn't know I had marketing experience," he says. "And now I'm putting out a monthly newsletter for our clients. A lot of that experience and those ideas came from volunteer opportunities I had as a superintendent."

For those moving over to the supply side of the industry, the technical and practical knowledge are invaluable.

"If a superintendent asks if there's an easier way to do

something, having that knowledge helps you out," says former superintendent Cory Blair, CGCS, irrigation manager for Marietta, Ga.-based Stovall & Co. "You earn credibility because you were on their side of the desk not too long ago. With some superintendents, that makes a big difference."

Having a superintendent's organizational skills makes almost any new career easier to do, Blair says. In his role, being organized and having a weekly plan – just like when he was a superintendent – has allowed him to do his job better.

Former superintendent John Netwal, CGCS, is now director of operations for North Scott Community School District in Eldridge, Iowa.

When he took on his new role, he surprised himself with all of the skills he developed over the 28 years he was a superintendent.

Because he'd focused on being a superintendent since he was a teenager, he thought his skills were specialized.

"I never thought I could do anything else," he says.

When he was tapped for his new role, he accepted the job to put his

family first. He discovered being a superintendent "prequalified" him for a number of other positions.

"I couldn't imagine many other people taking on so many tasks," says Netwal, who manages 80-plus employees, a \$65 million plant and funding streams in excess of \$3 million.

"One thing about superintendents is they're concerned about today, next week, two months from now, next year and the years to come," he says. "The ability to look into the future and the planning that takes has been very helpful for me and the school district."

He adds, "I don't think many superintendents realize the skill sets they have made them very capable to do a lot of jobs."

"I love the profession, the game of golf and I miss my peers. I'm proud as heck to have been involved in the GCSAA and to be a certified golf course superintendent, and the industry prepared me to do far more than I ever thought I was capable of doing." **GCI**

Outside of the golf industry, Blew surmises he could put his management skills to good use, especially if he learned another trade.

"But I'm not sure I'd like to give up working outside," Blew says.

His ideal position? Working as a superintendent on a privately-owned public golf course.

"I'd like to work hand-in-hand with the owners to really buy into making a profit," he says.

Though he has some options, Blew can't help but feel stuck.

"I guess it's about my comfort level after 34 years – I'm not sure what else I could do for equal pay," he says.

ASSISTANT STRIFE

Many assistant superintendents are in the same boat – teetering on taking the next step in their careers or switching gears.

Scott Verdun, assistant superintendent at the Merit Club in Libertyville, Ill., is feeling the stress of the swollen job market.

"The last two-plus years there have been a

handful of superintendent job openings around Chicago, but there have been as many as 350 applicants," he says. "It gets to be a numbers thing. There are a lot of talented people in this area, and there are a lot of people looking to move here. It's really competitive."

Several years ago, before he joined the Merit Club, he'd applied to go back to school to possibly teach high school.

"I was fairly burnt out at that point," he says, relating it to a several month stint working 90-hour weeks on a course construction project. "For a short while there, I was dead set on getting out of the industry, but there were a few months where I was able to relax, go back and work at my high school job – my first golf course job – and then it helped when I came to the Merit Club."

Verdun's at the point where he has to determine how long he's content being an assistant, whether he wants to expand the geographical location of his job search or whether it's time to move on.

He knows of peers who have moved on to sales jobs and love having regular

hours and weekends off. "Someday down the road, I may love that, too. But for now, as long as I'm single and I don't have kids, I still want that shot to run my own course."

"I know that I love doing this job – that 99 percent of the time I look forward to coming into work in the morning," Verdun says.

LETTING GO

Though McCarel is happy in his new position, he hopes other superintendents won't walk away from their profession as knee-jerk reactions to bad days, weeks or seasons. He'd been looking to make a change for several years, which made him confident his decision was the right one for him and his family.

"It's getting tough to do the impossible – better standards for less money," he says. "Guys are working harder than ever trying to do it, though."

Former superintendent Cory Blair, CGCS, sees the trend toward "doing more with less" as the reason for many superintendents burning out and looking to get out of the profession.

"Superintendents as a whole tend to be resourceful and can do things different ways to achieve similar results, but save money," he



Blew



Verdun

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says. "Owners want the same conditions, but they want to pay less for it. As budgets shrink, there's only so much you can do. You're asked to do more, but all of the things you need to do your job are



Blair

getting more expensive. That's stressful. And I think it's driving a lot of the burn out."

Blair knows a thing or two about burn out. Until December, he managed two golf courses as director of agronomy for Rarity Communities, a residential developer in Knoxville, Tenn.

At age 37, he was working 70- to 80-hour weeks, he'd been on blood pressure medication for five years and was always on edge.

"I was wound so tightly," he says.

After five years working for the company, he was let go. Blair's still not exactly sure what happened, but he does know money was tight and he was making a good salary.

Regardless of his circumstances, Blair and most people in the industry know of veteran superintendents who've been let go because their employer can find someone cheaper.

"A lot of guys are looking over their shoulders right now," he says. "And that's sad. For those guys, I'd say maybe it's time for a career change. It's always easier to find a job when you have one."

Through the connections he made when he was a superintendent, Blair landed a job as irrigation manager for Marietta, Ga.-based Stovall & Co. and reports that he's dropped 25 pounds, is off his blood pressure medication and happily wraps up his day by 5 p.m. His wife says he's a different person.

"It's nice being centered again as opposed to always being on edge," he says. "I carry my phone, and if I get a call from a customer on the weekend, I answer it, but it's not ringing a lot. It's just a completely different mind-set."

Though it took a while to recognize it, Blair considered being fired a "blessing in disguise."

"One of my old professors from Auburn told me, 'Everything happens for a reason. You might not see the reason right now, but keep looking.' And he was right. I'm in a much better place right now." GC1

To learn about how the superintendent and assistant at Greenville (N.C.) Country Club avoid burnout, visit the June Online Extras section at golfcourseindustry.com



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