

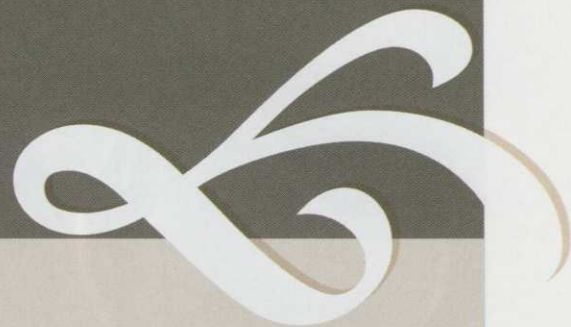
The Middle East is a growth area for golf, and finding qualified maintenance staff members has been a problem, says Mike Knudsen, golf project manager of Muscat Hills Golf and Country Club.



Hands-on learning

Managers at Oman's Muscat Hills hope an in-house turf maintenance academy will help foster a golf course work force in the Middle East.

BY MICHAEL J. HEALY, PH.D.



In September 2008 I travelled to Oman and met with Mike Knudsen, manager of Southern Golf Oman and golf project manager of Muscat Hills Golf and Country Club. Knudsen is developing a turf academy to train young Omanis in turf maintenance. The Muscat Hills Golf Course Maintenance Academy, believed to be the first of its kind in the Middle East, will deliver curriculum in three- to five-week segments to small batches of students. The vision is to have experienced professionals from around the world travel to Muscat Hills to teach them.

The demand for maintenance workers at Middle Eastern golf courses is expected to initially outpace the number of academy graduates.

Q. Give us an overview of your golf maintenance academy concept.

A. The Middle East in general, and Oman specifically, is experiencing a dramatic growth in golf course construction. To date, no facility exists to train the local population in the practices required to properly maintain these facilities. It's our aim to provide such a facility so that the level of maintenance is commensurate with the standards enjoyed in other parts of the world.

Q. Why do you believe the golf maintenance academy concept's time has come?

A. It has been brought on by the existence of these new facilities. For the longest time there was only a handful of top-level, professionally built and managed golf courses in this region with a majority of them in the United Arab Emirates. This number is expected to, at the very least, double, with a large portion of that growth expected to come from other countries. Oman itself has at least five to six top-level golf courses in various planning stages.





"We could not even contemplate this operation without Craig's support," Mike Knudsen (right) says of Craig Hanney, Muscat Hills' superintendent. "He has been instrumental not only in helping develop the program, but also in training most of the Omanis we presently have on staff and hope to use as translators, peer tutors or mentors in the program."

Q. What do you believe will be the mix of instructional techniques used?

A. Using Muscat Hills as essentially an 18-hole classroom, it's our intent to provide as much practical experience as possible.

The most sought-after skill for new or under-construction golf courses will be that of an experienced golf course equipment operator. The curriculum is still a work in progress, but we expect the preliminary modules to include:

- An introduction to golf with explanations of basic terminology related to the business of golf course maintenance and instruction on the basics of the game. The ancillary benefit of this is the creation of a local and region-wide golfing population. Students will be encouraged to practice on the driving range and academy hole.
- Equipment operations, including instruction in proper, safe operations of all equipment (mowers, utility vehicles, handheld equipment, cultivation and topdressing equipment, aeration and compaction equipment and manual

maintenance activities), as well as daily safety and maintenance checks.

- Irrigation repair, primarily focused on the sprinklers and the myriad issues that can arise with a new installation (most students will work for a new facility or a proposed facility). Items include: leveling of sprinklers and valve boxes in the field, basic operation of a gear-driven sprinkler, component replacement, electric solenoid valves, manual valve operation, electrical connection, PVC and poly pipe connection, swing joints and more.

The intermediate modules will likely include:

- Cultural practices/equipment operation, addressing mowing, topdressing, fertilization and aeration.
- Irrigation hydraulics and components, examining the basic principles of irrigation design as they relate to golf courses, including spacing, configurations, water velocities, types of pipe, thrust blocks and pumping systems.
- Irrigation control packages, including a

hands-on opportunity to work directly with a controller.

Q. Won't there be a language barrier problem, particularly between instructors and students?

A. English is quite commonly spoken in the Middle East, especially among the younger population. However, we will be using the existing Omani staff members at Muscat Hills as mentors to provide translation into Arabic if required.

Q. Who pays the academy per-student tuition charge? Do you have an idea of what tuition cost will be?

A. At this point, we're planning to significantly subsidize Omanis who are graduating from high school and are interested in a career in the golf industry. The estimate for the cost of each module will be in the \$500 to \$700 range. For students of other facilities and countries it's anticipated that the costs will be borne by their respective employers and/or countries. Their tuition will likely be \$1,000 to \$1,200 per module.

Based on initial feedback, we're expecting anywhere from 12 to 15 students for our first intake with the preliminary module being the only one offered in the first season.

Q. Do you believe this training concept would work in the U.K. or the U.S.?

A. The possibility of this sort of training can work in any market that's new to the golf course industry. Every country is struggling to find a way to find employment for its population. China and India are just some of the growth areas for golf that might be able to utilize this sort of training. I have spoken to a lot of Western golf superintendents who are active in these areas and they bemoan the lack of local golf maintenance talent.

Q. About prospective students, what qualifications must they have and how will they be recruited?

A. Because this is a new field of study we hope that most, if not all, students will have graduated from high school at a minimum. Judging by our experience in building Muscat Hills we are assuming that most, if not all, of the new facilities will be faced with the same lack of trained individuals as we did. Our feedback from developers and others in the industry in the Middle East has been positive and we do not expect that recruiting will be a problem.

We'll also prefer basic English, but that said, it's incumbent upon us to find a way to train all students who wish to advance their futures.

How about prospective instructors – do you expect to have trouble recruiting them?

We have definitely not had any difficulty in recruiting instructors. In fact, selecting from a list of interested candidates has been our

issue. It seems that the possibility of visiting a new country, imparting their knowledge for a few weeks and getting paid to do so is a popular concept. We've had contact with golf course superintendents and industry professionals from Australia, the southern United States, Europe and the Far East. As of yet we have not concluded any arrangements with anyone, but finding expertise does not appear

to be a problem. It will be a matter of who we disappoint.

Q. When do you hope to have the academy up and running?

A. We are hoping for our first intake of students to be in September 2009 and we're working towards that date. We have met with some leading industry suppliers regarding partnership and/or sponsorship of various components of the curriculum.

Q. How will you manage job placement?

A. We expect that a large portion of our students will be from new or underconstruction facilities and therefore will be returning to their respective sponsors or employers.

We hope to use this network of facilities in the region to place the other students who are new to the workplace. We anticipate their training will be an asset to any development looking for qualified individuals. In fact, we see the demand for our graduates outstripping the supply and therefore job placement will not be an issue.

Q. Any final thoughts on your golf maintenance academy concept?

A. Golf course construction, anywhere in the world, represents a huge investment of capital, time and effort. In many cases, we have no control over the standards to which the finished product is maintained. Muscat Hills is the first golf course of many in Oman and always will be one of the more high-profile courses not only in Oman, but in all of the Middle East.

We have a unique opportunity, and obligation, to get it right and set the standard for maintenance regardless of who builds the golf course. Many follow up maintenance operations in new golf markets are very well intentioned, but they lack the human resources to adhere to the standards you would find in other parts of the world. We see the maintenance academy as a positive step in addressing this issue. Our hope is that one day every golf course in this region can say it has a "graduate" of Muscat Hills on their staff. **GCI**

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