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**Ordinary, average guy**

Keith Noxon might be the “typical” superintendent – if there is such a thing – but scratch the surface and there’s nothing average about him.



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A few weeks ago, I was wracking my brain trying to decide who to interview next for our Q&A series. Should I call Ben Crenshaw or try again for Bill Murray or maybe go after one of the high-profile superintendents who lost a job last summer. Stumped, I told a colleague about my frustration and he had a simple suggestion: Why don't you interview an "average" superintendent for once. Just a guy who goes to work every day and does his job and fits the average demographic profile for most superintendents?

Great idea, but a problem remained: Where would I find Mr. Average?

The next week, I was at the Carolinas GCSA meeting in Myrtle Beach at an event for Green Resources, a big area distributor, when I met Keith Noxon. I quizzed him about his background and his course and he eventually just said, "I'm just an average working superintendent."

Problem solved.

Noxon has been superintendent at Pine Valley CC in Wilmington, N.C., for seven years – just about the average tenure for most supers. He's 47 – a little older than average but he got a late start in the business after serving in the military and working briefly in the warehousing business in New York and North Carolina.

As is often typical, he met a guy in the business who changed his career path. He got to know Dan Gurganus, who was superintendent at Bald Head Golf Club in the mid-1980s. Noxon hated being cooped up in a sweltering warehouse in the summer and Gurganus suggested he try golf course work.

"The next thing I knew I was taking a ferry to work every day and learning about turf," he says. "It was romantic..."

I absolutely fell in love with it. I asked Dan if you could make a living doing this and he said, 'Sure, if you get a degree.' I remember laughing at that. 'A degree? To grow grass?'"

At 26, Noxon's father died ("He was only 52... it was a kick in the butt.") and he got serious about life. He enrolled in North Carolina State's two-year turf program and started grinding away at his degree while also working at Carolina CC under Bob Rogers. "Bob showed me the camaraderie aspect of the business and I was really hooked."

He graduated in 1992 and worked as an assistant at several area clubs until he landed his first superintendent job at the Players Club at St. James Plantation in Southport, N.C., where he was reunited with Gurganus who, at the time, ran the facility's members club.

"It was a good place for a first-timer because there was such a good support system in place," he says. "There were two other courses on the property – each with a good super – and I could do my thing but had backup. I learned what not to do – like leaving your irrigation system on at night in December and coming in to find frozen greens in the morning."

In 2003, he moved to Pine Valley and became our Mr. Average. And – as is typical of every good superintendent – he credits his wife for his stability and success: "Kelly was a big part of me making it through school. We had just gotten married and she worked three jobs while I was in school and working. Any guy in this business who's married knows what a good wife and family means. She always says she was a single mom from March to October... and she's right. She's the best."

So, what does average look like in today's industry? Here's what we found out.



Noxon: "I always felt like I could be a superintendent anywhere, but Pine Valley is reality for me. I'm at a private club and doing my job, I'm a golf course superintendent maintaining a budget, a staff and a golf course. It's just that simple."

#### **Tell us about your facility**

Pine Valley – which is obviously NOT the one in New Jersey – was built in 1955. We didn't really have an architect. It was designed and built by some local folks who owned the property and wanted a course that emulated some of the local Donald Ross courses. The course is about 6,400 yards from the tips and it defends par well because of the small greens – we only have about 100,000 square feet of putting surface – and it's walking friendly. We also have a really nice tennis facility that gets a lot of use and a very active pool in the summer. Our swim team is awesome.

#### **Membership?**

Our membership is about 550

but we have eight different categories. We're struggling a bit right now like every other club, so we're trying to watch the budget numbers and keep our head above water. We're facing the same difficulties as everyone else.

#### **What's your turf situation?**

We have G6 bent on the greens, but we're getting ready to transition to an ultradwarf. The greens were ready for a new surface and, after this summer, we started pushing to go with the ultra. We recently signed a deal with Champion to do a no-till renovation with their Bermuda.

#### **Why the change?**

I love bentgrass and I've always been successful with it,

but this past summer was the worst I've ever had in my career and I'm looking forward to that Bermuda. We have push-up greens with native soil and I saw guys with newer USGA sand greens really struggle, so you can imagine what it was like for us.

#### **What's special about your "average" facility?**

The members really care. When we aerify, I'll get 20 or 30 members volunteering to help with plugs and sweeping. It's such a good experience. I really dig that about Pine Valley. Some guys at other clubs with average budgets should try to engage their members more. It's incredibly valuable in a bunch of ways.

#### **How about your budget?**

Our budget is \$550,000 including lease payments on equipment. We have well water, so that's free except for pumping

costs and we're not doing any big capital stuff except for the greens regrassing. We replaced all the old equipment when I got here. Leasing was a great solution for us. I gave them a presentation on how much more efficient we could be with updated mowing equipment and the conditions changed so much in a year! We got so much faster at mowing and weren't spending all of our time fixing stuff. We were able to stay ahead of play to mow tees and approaches first thing. We'd get done in four hours instead of a full day or day and a half. I also hired a part-time guy to mow fairways three days a week and he's still on our team.

#### **How big is the staff?**

My full-time staff is six plus me, one assistant and an hourly mechanic. Our only seasonal guy is our part-time fairway mowing guy. I'm battling to hold on to

every one of them. Changing over the greens next year will save us money in the long run, so we'll see. I want to keep my guys in place.

**How is the reality of your situation different from what you thought your career would be like when you started?**

It's not a whole lot different than what I thought. I always felt like I could be a superintendent anywhere, but Pine Valley is reality for me. I'm at a private club and doing my job, I'm a golf course superintendent maintaining a budget, a staff and a golf course. It's just that simple.

I always felt like wherever I was going to go, I was going to do a good job no matter how much money they gave me. I never had big grandiose plans of being at Pinehurst or Augusta. I'm also not one of those guys who wanted to bounce around. I like stability. I have two kids I want to get through high school and college. My reality was that I didn't have any fantasy version of what I wanted life to be like.

**What parts of your program have changed over the past few years because of the economy or other factors?**

We've actually done some things that cost money up front but save in the long run. We started a much better pre-emergence program, which was more expensive, but saves a lot on labor and product on post-emergence. We were in a constant battle with post-emerge weeds when I first got here. The golf course is a lot cleaner and we don't have to spend all that time and effort on post. My budget has actually risen from less than \$400,000 to over \$500,000, but a lot of that was new equipment and getting the right labor mix. We're getting to the point where we can find that right spending level and keep it there. We're hitting the wall because of the economy but we're already

close to where we want to be.

**How else are you being frugal?**

One thing I have done is to get to zero overtime, particularly this time of year. The members are looking at me to cut some, but we're already pretty bare bones. I am also using Quali-Pro products and generic alternatives because my experience has been as good as with traditional products. I know that's not true for everybody, but they're working for me. There are also lots of guys selling liquid greens fertilizers, so I shop that out, too. I've used several different things to see if there's a big difference and they seem fairly equal.

The bottom line is I really am price sensitive and I haven't seen any detrimental effects with generics. I feel bad because I know the big companies support the Carolinas (chapter) and such, but a guy like me just can't afford to spend the extra money. I'm a past president of the local turf association and I really understand what they do, but I just can't automatically buy the more expensive product.

**How about labor?**

The biggest thing is my (member) volunteers helping during aerification. We've never had the hurricane thing here – knock on wood – and that would be an absolute mess, but we did have a pretty good storm the first year I was here. I was amazed at the volunteerism and the can-do attitude of the members. I'm so lucky to have a membership that's passionate about their course.

**How do you communicate with members and how do they respond?**

I try to eat lunch at the clubhouse as much as possible. This summer, I could have stayed away and hidden as bad as it was, but that wouldn't have helped, so I was up there to take the heat. We

do have a website and our green chairman writes articles with input from me. We put schedule stuff up there for aerification, etc. I also have direct contact with members through e-mail and we'll do e-mails to members for projects.

The only problem I have is my Internet access is a bit sporadic. I'm on dial-up because my shop is in the middle of the course. My wife and teenagers commandeer my laptop at home, but I'll also work in the clubhouse. I also have a real basic cell phone. I haven't done the smart phone thing yet. There's a cost for that and better Internet and everything else. We're looking at it, but we weigh costs for EVERYTHING.

I try to be as high-tech as I can, but I was bummed out about the Green Section Record (going 100-percent electronic). I like having a print magazine. You can't take a laptop to the bathroom with you. But our club doesn't print a newsletter anymore, so I get why they did it.

**If money was no object, what things would you do to the course?**

I think I'd probably renovate if the members bought into it. It's a hidden gem... it's a mowable course but I'd like to see bigger tee boxes, walk-mow greens to improve greens surrounds, etc. I'd love to have USGA-spec green but not with an ultradwarf. It would be nice to renovate to have a clean, smooth canvas to work with. I'd clean up the woods more than we can now and do all the detail stuff. I wouldn't want to blow the course up, just clean it up. I definitely wouldn't want to make it too difficult. People don't want to get their butt kicked everyday on their course.

**What are your expectations over the next five years?**

I'm not the kind of guy that likes to bounce around. I want to stay here and keep stewarding this

place... and get my kids through school! I like to be a good employee, I like to manage things carefully on their behalf and I really like the membership here. But, the next five years scare me as far as the industry goes. I talk to a lot of guys who are worried about lower budgets and how that will impact quality and how members will respond to reduced quality. Not every board is going to support supers in that position.

I'm not scared, but I honestly hope to just have my job here and be able to do what we're doing now. We just need to hang in there and produce the best product we can.

**What advice would you give to a young person just coming into the business?**

Be absolutely sure this is what you want to do for a living. It's not the late '80s or '90s anymore. The business is shrinking. Be patient. Investigate where you're going to work and work for reputable guys that get it. Opportunities will come, but they need to be patient. Learn everything you can learn and get involved in your local associations as soon as you're able. If you're working for a guy who won't let you that might not be such a good situation.

**Final thoughts?**

I got no problem with being average. We're using that term loosely, but I produce a good product with an average budget, average staff and average resources. I'm fine with it. I think there are a ton of guys like me out there. I love where I work. My budget is adequate. As my brother Bob says, "Average is good, because less than average obviously isn't good." I have a good job, I'm raising a family and I'm doing something I like. If that's average, I'm good with it. GCI

*Pat Jones is GCI's publisher and editorial director.*