

# FITTING IN

While golf turf management remains a male-dominated industry, women are succeeding as superintendents. Three female supers discuss how some of the old industry stereotypes are disappearing. *By Jim Black*



“

As a young superintendent going to local association meetings, I wasn't able to attend the ones held at all-male clubs. That was a challenge for me as a woman. But many of the stereotypes that existed when I began my career have since gone by the wayside, which is great.”

—Tracey Holliday, Sterling Farms Golf Course

### According to Golf Course Superintendents

Association of America statistics, there has been an occupy movement going on in the golf course maintenance industry.

That is to say, the role of the golf course superintendent is occupied by men at the rate of 99-1, a trend basically unchanged for the past five years. Naturally, this begs the question, “Why aren't there more women in the role of the golf course superintendent?”

“I think it's partly due to the lack of exposure to the career opportunity,” says Tracey Holliday, superintendent of Sterling Farms Golf Course in Stamford, Conn. “If a woman has never played golf, caddied or been around people who expose them to the profession, then they won't ever realize such a career path exists. Being a golf course superintendent requires tremendous dedication, time, physical and mental toughness. It's not for everyone — male or female.”

Over on the West Coast, Patty Reedy, South Course superintendent at The Los Angeles Country Club, agrees with the hypothesis that through lack of exposure to the game, few women realize turf management is a viable career option.

“Women, and people in general, aren't typically drawn to this

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—Patty Reedy, The Los Angeles Country Club



sort of a career," says Reedy, who's been the top turf manager at Los Angeles CC for the last five years. "And like many, they probably don't even know it's a career possibility."

Given the odds, is the challenge for a woman to achieve superintendent status, not to mention at a top flight facility, insurmountable? Reedy says being a minority in any industry comes with challenges.

"I don't see that it's something one can't overcome with hard work, determination and an unapologetic attitude about being a minority," says Reedy, who earned her agronomy degree from Texas A&M University.

And perhaps a sign of more modern times, Reedy says her career path wasn't lined with naysayers offering discouraging advice about managing golf turf and achieving a superintendent's position.

"My experience has been overwhelmingly positive," Reedy says. "From my mentors and professors starting out in college to my current boss, Russ Myers, I have been encouraged, guided and supported. In fact, when my

own self-confidence was lacking, it was these men who saw something I couldn't see and urged me on."

On Mackinac Island, Wawashkamo Golf Club is Michigan's longest continuously operated golf course and in 1996 was named by Golf Digest as one of "America's Historic Golf Landmarks."

Superintendent Karen O'Dell, a 1993 graduate of Michigan State University's turf program, says she hasn't received much flak about being a woman in a "man's profession."

"It's never been an issue one way or another," she says. "I've worked hard just as the guys have throughout my career and have never asked for any special treatment. The grass doesn't know that I'm a female and it gives me fits and good days just like everyone else."

"Most people think it's pretty cool when I

tell them I'm a golf course superintendent," she says. "I get comments about how lucky I am to work on a golf course every day and get to enjoy Mother Nature. I have to agree with them."

Inside the clubhouse, players are often surprised that the role of the superintendent is being managed by a woman. Like the superintendent profession itself, memberships and clientele in general are predominantly men, so it can come as a bit of a surprise for some that the 'keeper of the green' is a lady.

On the island at Wawashkamo, which in Indian literally means "walk a crooked trail," O'Dell says, "Having such a small staff (we joke and say we are the "maintenance two" – not the maintenance crew – just me and my assistant Ron Morden), we love the club and the his-

**“**  
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 —Karen O'Dell,  
 Wawashkamo Golf Club



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tory behind it. The members treat us very well and appreciate our efforts. We even play in the Wednesday mixed couples, which gives me a chance to talk with the membership about the course and mention things they need to be doing to help out.”

However, it's a different age for women in the turf profession. Some of the old stereotypes and professional biases are today relics of a bygone era, says Holliday, who studied turfgrass management at The Stockbridge School of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

“As a matter of fact, as a young superintendent going to local association meetings, I wasn't able to attend the ones held at all-male clubs,” she says. “That was a challenge for me as a woman. But many of the stereotypes that existed when I began my career have since gone by the wayside, which is great.”

Over the past few years, golf course superintendents as a group have started to trend toward working until a certain age or a professional milestone has been reached, then to migrate into allied sales or some other type of associate role in the golf industry. For female superintendents, these career trends impact them the same as they do their male counterparts.

For most, Holliday says the ability to remain in golf course management and retire as a superintendent is a matter of choice.

“Some women may want to start a family and want a more balanced social life,” explains Holliday. “Some may want to work a regular work week and have weekends off, so some prefer the more social aspects of sales.

“Being a golf course superintendent can be extremely lonely at times – especially for women, because there are not that many of us to commiserate with,” she adds. “Absolutely, it is possible to retire as a superintendent if the circumstances align themselves.”

“As far as sales being an eventuality for me, I can say confidently that it's a possibility - but so is moving to Africa and putting my agronomic knowledge to work for me,” says Reedy. “Truth is, I'm leaving myself open to anything with my primary goal being to siphon as much ‘life’ out of this short life as humanly possible.”

O'Dell has had the experience of having a career that has come full circle, going from tending turf, then into a sales position and finally back into golf course management with her position at Wawashkamo GC.

While more and more golf course superintendents are thrust into the spotlight as their community's representative for responsible turf care, those critical of the industry could point that there aren't enough women managing golf turf.

However, Holliday doesn't believe the issue should be about filling quotas. Rather, the important question is whether the right person for the job is in the position and managing the turf.

“The industry only gets better when gender is not an issue and the right and dedicated people are put in place,” she says.

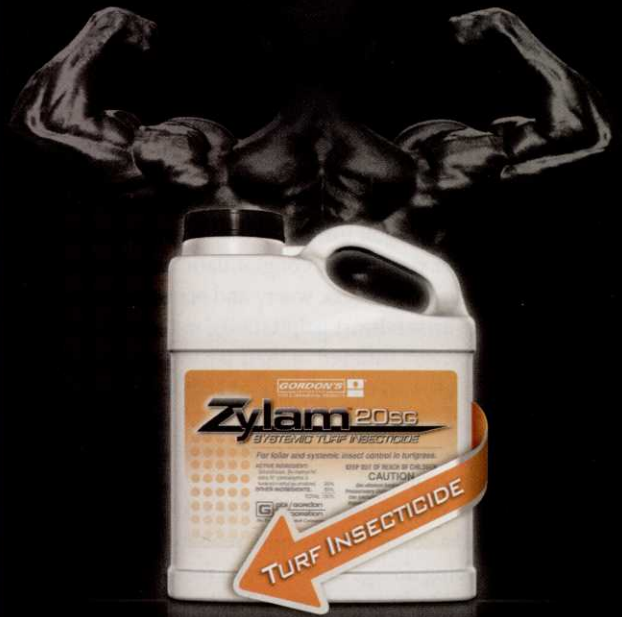
“The industry isn't worse off for not having more female superintendents,” Reedy says. “It's better for having some female superintendents.”

The disproportionate number of men to women in golf course management has less to do with closed doors or blocked career paths and more about women not entering into turf management.

“It seems particularly extreme in this industry,” Reedy adds. “But I think it has more to do with a general lack of women's interest in this field rather than being purposefully singled out because they are women.” **GCI**

*Jim Black is assistant superintendent at Walden Country Club in Crofton, Md., and a frequent GCI contributor.*

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