

THE WAITING GAME

As opportunities continue to constrict, assistants discuss the uphill climb to their ultimate goal. Plus, tips to land that first superintendent's job. By Mike Zawacki

Assistant superintendents are a long-suffering lot. There are the early mornings, the long hours and the myriad thankless tasks that make up the routine day.

Then there's the waiting. The career uncertainty. The rejection and ensuing frustration.

More than ever before, the obstacles are stacked against the nearly 4,000 golf course assistant superintendents vying for a handful of superintendent opportunities each year. For them, it's the critical next step in their careers, the milestone that reflects a sense of place and permanency in the industry.

However, a prolonged economic recession and crawling recovery, combined with fewer and fewer superintendent opportunities and a reduction in the number of U.S. golf courses make it seem like an insurmountable summit to reach.

For the previous generation of young up-and-coming assistants, their mantra was "Superintendent by 30." Today, though, the average age for an assistant is 35, according

to recent research data provided by the Golf Course Superintendents Association.

Opportunities are short and the wait is long, so what keeps assistants in the game?

Nate Jordan is sort of the typical example of today's assistant superintendents. He's nearly 27 years old. Five years out of turf school and Jordan has completed internships and assistant's positions that have helped diversify and expand his portfolio of professional experiences.

Now, Jordan is ready to make his move. And he's fortunate, too, to have an iron in the fire with a Chicagoland golf course engaged in a hiring search (though by press time, Jordan had not been offered the position).

However, if this opportunity doesn't pan out, Jordan admits he'll feel frustrated.

"I don't think I'll feel like there's this big black cloud over me, and I don't think I'll be ready to throw in the towel just yet, but yeah, it'll feel like setback," he says during a recent lunch break at Mt. Hawley Country Club in Peoria, Ill., where he works. "However, it

will leave me with the desire to pursue other opportunities, maybe even a lateral move that will expose me to experiences that will make my desirability greater in the market."

Through the sheer overwhelming number of candidates vying for so few superintendent's positions, Jordan understands the odds are against him. "I recently applied for a superintendent's position in Central Michigan and I was one of 170 'qualified' applicants," he says. "The course narrowed its pool down to five (candidates)... I wasn't one of them."

Jordan has learned a lot in his pursuit of a superintendent's job. For one, he doesn't agree with the notion that the only assistants landing superintendent jobs are those from big-name facilities.

"The name of the facility is only going to carry you so far," he says. "I believe it's your skill sets that will carry you through to the finish."

Instead, the key, according to Jordan, is to use an assistantship to build a resume full of outcomes. "In this industry, everyone knows

“I don’t think I’ll feel like there’s this big black cloud over me, and I don’t think I’ll be ready to throw in the towel just yet, but yeah, it’ll feel like setback.”

—Nate Jordan,
Mt. Hawley Country Club





The hard facts

Industry veteran and GCI contributor Bruce Williams give it to you straight, and offers some key tip to secure your first superintendent's job.

There is surely a new normal in employment in the golf turf industry. Most who attend turf schools aspire to be golf course superintendents.

A decade or so ago the path to reach that goal was a bit smoother to travel upon. After graduation a year or two were spent as a superintendent in training or an assistant and then it was time for moving on up to that first superintendent's job.

Today, this road of ascension is quite longer and bit more treacherous. Many assistants find themselves with the same job title 8 to 10 years – or longer – after graduation from turf school.

The reason for this is a simple mathematical explanation. Using very conservative numbers we have at least 50 land grant universities that offer training for prospective golf course superintendents. If 20 people graduate from those programs a year that would mean 1,000 people entering the work force.

With negative growth in golf course development we are actually losing more golf courses than we are building in the U.S. Superintendents are like the rest of the population in that they are living longer and also working longer. In fact, many are staying in their jobs into their 70s. Add downsizing of staff and management positions and you can see that it is simply a matter of more supply than demand.

I would not want to dissuade anyone from entering this wonderful profession, but I would advise that they understand the timeline and competition for jobs that awaits them. There is always room for the best-qualified candidates if people prepare themselves properly.

Whether it is a student looking for an assistant job after graduation, or an assistant looking for his first superintendent's job, there are a few key points to consider that might help a person gain the competitive advantage.

- Always have your resume updated and ready to send out.
- Use action verbs in describing what you did at previous jobs.
- Always include references. You either have them or you don't and never put 'Available Upon Request.'
- Old-school resumes state career objectives. I prefer stating what you can do for the prospective employer.
- All resumes have the standard items of education, employment and such. Be sure yours covers any and all skills you have that the job requires.
- Know the facility you are applying to. With Google and other Internet search engines there is a ton of information you can glean. Align it to your cover letter.
- Consider hiring a career counselor who can help you with your resume, interviewing skills and overall career path. It could prove to be the best investment you ever made.
- Have a plan for your career and evaluate it annually.
- Know the steps you must take to accomplish your career goals.
- Develop a broad skill set as it will lay the groundwork for attaining you next position.
- Establish a network. People who are connected get the jobs.
- Volunteer and participate in chapter functions, turf club, a chance to speak and/or write for an industry trade publication.
- Continuing education never ends and prospective employers recognize its value.
- Develop a packet to bring to an interview that helps you to sell yourself.

Bruce Williams, CGCS, is principal for both Bruce Williams Golf Consulting and Executive Golf Search. He is GCI's senior contributing editor.

“It's the ability to keep your nose to the grind stone. It's a rare characteristic and it weeds people out of this industry. It's also an incredibly valuable asset because you make yourself into a human multitool.”

— Clinton Starkebaum,
The Glacier Club

what jobs an assistant does,” he says. “So I want to differentiate myself focusing on the outcomes of what I've been involved with – how I may have helped eliminate a cost, or reduced a labor input.”

And contrary to popular belief among assistants, Jordan remains optimistic about the availability of superintendent positions.

“The way I see it, as course condition standards continue to rise and budgets continue to shrink, they will weed out (existing) superintendents who are not willing to make changes,” he says. “This will start to create vacancies for younger folks who are coming up in a time of tight budgets and limited resources and who have the potential to excel under those conditions. It's all my generation really knows.”

Clinton Starkebaum finds himself in a holding pattern.

The 25-year-old is hedging his bets for advancement and molding his career path around an opportunity that may present itself at the course where he's been an assistant for the last three years, The Glacier Club in Durango,

Colo. The club is looking to add another nine holes to make it a 36-hole facility. When that happens, there's a solid chance the club will need to hire another superintendent. Starkebaum hopes to be the main contender for that position.

"I really haven't tried branching out (to pursue superintendent opportunities) yet because I feel like I have a good chance to advance from within," he says. "What I'm trying to do right now is learn as much as I possibly can and position myself as a key assistant... to be indispensable."

This scenario is a double-edged sword for Starkebaum. On the one hand there's a sense of security in the prospects of an opportunity. On the other hand, if this doesn't transpire, he's put many of his eggs into one basket. But filled with the vigor of optimism and youth, Starkebaum doesn't see failure as an option.

"I've told my boss a number of times that I have a strong desire to continue to learn and grow and to be the key choice when an opportunity presents itself," he says. "But I also understand that this is no guarantee."

Starkebaum has identified three keys to keep him on the right path to a superintendent's position – strong people skills; leadership skills and having an intimate knowledge of his course.

"The people skills are critical to keeping crews motivated and to work for you," he explains. "Leadership comes from leading by example, of displaying a strong work ethic, to motivate my crew during the season's doldrums.

"And I need to display consistency on a day-to-day basis," he adds. "There's a high expectation (among the club's membership) to deliver. What worries me the most – what keeps me up at night – is that the staff will be unmotivated to do the highly detailed work."

The Breakdown

Some facts and figures about assistant superintendents.

3,813

Number of assistant superintendents

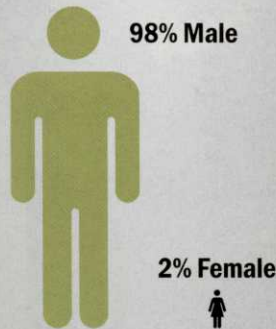
35

Average age of an assistant superintendent, the youngest is 18 and the oldest is 77.

4.3

Average number of years they spend as assistants before becoming superintendents.

Male vs. Female



Sources: Golf Course Superintendents Association of America

Focus and perseverance to deliver on all three of these key elements are rare commodities, and it's often what separates the wheat from the chaff among assistants. Starkebaum understands this and describes it as "managing the pressures of working on a course so that it doesn't cause you to crack." It's the a constant trait among successful superintendents, he says, and therefore should be a key asset in an aspiring assistant. "It's the ability to keep your nose to the grind stone," he says. "It's a rare characteristic and it weeds people out of this industry. It's

also an incredibly valuable asset because you make yourself into a human multi-tool."

Unlike the traditional turf school career path, Carole Townsend, assistant superintendent at Southwood Golf Club in Tallahassee, Fla., started out with a degree in health sciences and working for a company cleaning up contaminated sites in North Florida. "It's pretty gross work," she says.

After a few years she was done with that career path and enrolled in Florida Gateway College (then Lake City Community College) to study turf. Townsend had worked part-time at a golf course to earn money during her undergraduate studies.

And like many of her up-and-coming colleagues throughout the golf industry, the 38-year-old remains positive about her prospects for advancement. In fact, Townsend maintains a rather clear outlook about her career path.

"I believe for quality people, the opportunities will be there," she says. "So right now I'm doing what it takes to be one of those quality candidates... that and hopefully be in the right place at the right time."

Townsend is on version 3.0 of "The Plan," which she says is healthy.

"I think as you learn more about your profession, and get better at the job you do, it's only natural to reevaluate where you want it to take you," she says.

In talking with her colleagues in the industry, Townsend says for some people the path is too cut and dry. "They believe that you come out of (turf) school, work X number of years as an assistant and then become a superintendent. But it's much more complicated than that."

"My next position may not be to move up to a superintendent's position," she says. "For me, it may make more sense to make a lateral move if it means work-

ing under a superintendent who can teach me more and better prepare me for a superintendent's job.

"A turf professor told me this about being a superintendent: 'Grass will grow itself, it's everything else that's hard.' This is so true... and I need to learn those 'other' things. That's why I'm willing to make a move to another assistant's position if it exposes me to someone who is willing to teach me about club politics and environmental regulations and who is willing to mentor me. That's what I'm working for now."

And being in the slim minority of female assistant superintendents isn't a career ceiling in and of itself, Townsend says.

"From my experience, (sex) is not an issue unless it's made into an issue," she says, adding that there may be some cultural issues with male crew members who are not used to answering to a female superior.

"Twenty years ago, I believe your sex was more of an issue," she says. "I feel like in today's society it's not a big deal anymore. If you prove you can work hard, then it never becomes an issue."

Above all else, one thing produces the most anxiety for Townsend about taking that next step and becoming a course superintendent. "How will I know when I'm ready?" Townsend says. "How will I know I'm ready to go forward and succeed as a superintendent?"

More than the number of applicants or their unique credentials compared to hers, it's these particular questions that haunt Townsend the most when an opportunity presents itself to vie for an open superintendent's position.

"Then again, I'm sure every assistant submitting for that same position is wondering that, too," Townsend adds. "And of course, we really won't know that answer until we have the job." **GCI**