

# THIS IS HIS TIME

AFTER BIDDING HIS TIME FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS, **RONALD MCWHORTER** SHED HIS TITLE AS A CAREER ASSISTANT AND TOOK ON THE MANTLE OF SUPERINTENDENT.





## BY TRENT BOUTS

**R**onald McWhorter had been through some “closed door moments” in his time as an assistant golf course superintendent. The kind of moments when the latch clicking behind you signals a bullet is on its way. You know the boss is taking aim. The only question worth asking is whether you will survive the hit.

Until this particular day last November, McWhorter, 46, had survived the worst of these encounters with little more than bruised pride and his ears ringing. He was too good at what he did, too dedicated, too conscientious, to slip up so badly he should be fired. Sadly though, that standard is not always insurance enough these days. He knows good people can lose jobs to bad times.

McWhorter had 27 years in the business and every single one of them on The Landing course at Reynolds Plantation in Greensboro, Ga. He’d helped build the course, starting as a laborer barely out of high school then slowly but steadily working his way through the ranks. No one on the planet knew that acreage better than him. He’d been an assistant since 1991, the first assistant since 1998.

Still...

So when his golf course superintendent, Lane Singleton, closed the door behind him that day, McWhorter swallowed hard. He remembers thinking, “Oh, oh. I didn’t know what to expect.” He’d been on course when his phone buzzed. Singleton’s text was short, maybe sharp? He wanted to see McWhorter in his office. McWhorter texted back explaining that he needed half an hour to finish what he was working on. He asked if that was ok. Singleton didn’t reply.

They were 30 unsettling minutes and after a couple more, once he’d arrived and Singleton started talking, McWhorter was on the verge of tears. He hadn’t been fired. He’d been promoted — to golf course superintendent. He was overwhelmed.

“I felt like a little kid,” he says. “I almost started crying. It was definitely a shock. We’d had some closed door moments before. Sometimes good. But sometimes for, let’s say, corrective measures. But this really caught me by surprise. I was in awe. I didn’t know what to think.”

After 27 years, who would?

Typically, only monks invest that kind of time in one place without complaining.

That parallel is not so crazy, because McWhorter has always seen his work, his purpose, as service. It helps explain his patience, which should not be taken for a lack of ambition. “I wasn’t pushing hard to get that title,” he says. “That’s not because I was complacent. I just wasn’t going to go knocking doors down to get it. I felt time would bring about the change. My purpose is just to be a servant, to serve my company and my co-workers.”

He lives by the same philosophy outside of work. Heavily involved in his church, McWhorter also occupies a seat on the Greensboro city council, winning election in 2002. He is chairman of the Greene Country Recreation Department and the Lake Oconee Area Development Authority. He was invited to run for

council. He was appointed golf course superintendent. When service itself is your ambition opportunities present themselves, eventually ... maybe.

McWhorter is African-American. Statistically at least that puts the chances of him becoming a golf course superintendent at about the same as an African-American playing on the PGA Tour. Like it or not and for reasons the golf industry has tried various means to address, the game looks like less of a mirror on American society than it does a filter.

The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America has no definitive numbers on the ethnic make-up of its mem-

bership. The association no longer asks about race on application forms and even when it did those questions were optional and therefore often left blank. Still, GCSAA's director of member relations, Scott Woodhead, CGCS, says it is fair to describe African-American membership as a "very small percentage."

This month, the World Golf Hall of Fame and Museum launches a new exhibit "Honoring the Legacy: A Tribute to African-Americans in Golf." Among the individuals celebrated is John Shippen, who in 1896 became the first African-American to play in the U.S. Open and later became the

first black greenkeeper. Now here we are in the 21st century yet McWhorter is an anomaly as much for the fact he is an African-American superintendent as he is for waiting 27 years to get the title.

Last decade, GCSAA launched a committee to "identify barriers to" and "develop programs to attract" diversity. The GCSAA diversity task group operated over four years before falling victim to cutbacks driven by the recession. Rafael Barajas, CGCS from Hacienda Golf Club in La Habra Heights, Calif., served on that group.

Barajas moved to California from Mexico at 16 to help

support his family. Today, he is a GCSAA director and says diversity remains part of the association's mission. His own experience as an immigrant, his observations over nearly 35 years in the business and his work with the task group lead him to make a significant distinction when it comes to the question of diversity. Rather than ask why there are not more African-Americans or other minorities among golf course superintendents, he argues, the real question is "Why don't they want to be?"

"It's difficult to pinpoint," he says. "But it's not the profession's fault. The industry is not excluding anybody. You could





Ronald McWhorter, third from left with Jim Thompson, Brandon Hayes and Tad Hopkins, all from Reynolds Plantation; Chris Thornton, from Athens Country Club; and Tom Howard, from The Creek Club, at the Georgia GCSA assistant superintendent championship in 2012.

be bright pink for all we care. We want you as a member. But how do you bring people in if they don't want to come in."

"No, you don't see many African-Americans in turfgrass

management," McWhorter agrees. "But I am seeing more and more black people playing the game. I definitely hope that me being a golf course superintendent helps open some eyes

for young African-Americans. But it's not just for guys. We have career days where the company sends us to speak at schools and I tell them this can be for ladies, too."

"Obviously it was long overdue," Lane Singleton says of McWhorter's promotion. "It was a great time for our crew, for Reynolds Plantation and the community. Whether it's with his church, or the number of committees he's on, Ron is a very, very busy guy. I can't say enough about him. He hardly ever takes a day off. I don't know when he sleeps."

"Some of the guys say I'm out of my mind," McWhorter laughs. "But I get in here some-

times at 4:30 a.m. just to have my quiet time and get ready for the day." Getting ready includes planning tasks for the day but often includes "a few chapters of the Bible" or whatever else he is reading at the time, most recently, Rick Warren's "A Purpose Driven Life."

McWhorter's workmates wanted to take him and celebrate his promotion and that of Brandon Hayes, who was elevated to superintendent of the Great Waters course the same day. Singleton's responsibilities had increased steadily in recent years and with the new title of vice-president of agronomy there was room for both Mc-

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Whorter and Hayes and step up a notch.

A celebration seemed reasonable but McWhorter said, "No, thanks, I'm good." Instead, he texted his brother and his sister then later told his mother. "She was like a kid in a candy store, all excited," he says. "Then she says..., 'So what does that mean?' My dad didn't know what it would mean for me either." Golf had never been part of the family experience. McWhorter only took up the game itself in 1991. Today his handicap hovers around 10.

Perhaps there was a need for McWhorter himself to have some time to process the news. While he'd been in golf nearly three decades, he hadn't always entertained the prospect of being the main man. The spark came during a career development meeting led by Billy Fuller, the former leading superintendent who now runs his own golf course design company.

"That was the first time I had any inkling," McWhorter says. "I was content but still hungry to learn. With every promotion comes more expectation. It has led me to look now with more of a magnifying glass. Before it was okay to say, let me get back to you. Well, the buck stops here now so I have to have all the information at hand at that moment. You're like a doctor on call all the time."

In 2008, McWhorter completed a Principals of Turfgrass Management course at the University of Georgia. He is a regular at Georgia GCSA seminars but the overwhelming weight of his education has come on the job.

"I've had great teachers," he says, rattling off superintendents he has worked under: Butch Foust, Steve Brady, Dennis Echols, CGCS, and of course Singleton,

who arrived at Reynolds Plantation 14 years ago and was a co-assistant with McWhorter

Echols speaks of McWhorter with similar regard as Singleton. "I have had the pleasure of working with many good assistant superintendents throughout my career," he says. "I have been honored to work with a few great assistants, too. Ronald is definitely one of the great ones. He is a true gentleman who exemplifies honesty, truthfulness and integrity...with his solid foundation of golf course management, and personal commitment of being a Godly example, he will continue his career, making positive impacts on others and the golf industry."

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— Ronald McWhorter

McWhorter certainly regards himself as part of the industry, not merely a passenger. He hopes to one day serve on the Georgia GCSA board of directors and is quietly mindful that he is breaking ground with the potential for "making positive impacts on others."

This spring he played in a fundraiser for the Georgia Golf Environmental Foundation at TPC Sugarloaf in Duluth, Ga. A story announcing his appointment as superintendent appeared in the Georgia GCSA magazine shortly beforehand. McWhorter was touched by the greetings and congratulations he received from colleagues. Still, he wasn't running about high-fiving anybody. Indeed, he still hasn't celebrated with his workmates from Reynolds Plantation.

"I'm sort of low-key when it comes to that sort of thing," he says. "I celebrate within." GCI

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