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ASSESSING TOUGH TIMES

They don't last, as the saying goes, but tough people do. Two veteran turf pros reflect on the challenges they faced during the **Great Recession** and the **COVID-19 pandemic**.

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ASSESSING TOUGH TIMES

They don't last, as the saying goes, but tough people do. Two veteran turf pros reflect on the challenges they faced during the **Great Recession** and the **COVID-19 pandemic**.

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WHAT BOTHERS YOU?

I'm older. I'm also more laid-back.

The people responsible for producing this magazine are likely thinking two things. Absolutely, he's older. See those gray strands in his hair? But no way is he more laid-back! My response? If only they knew me in my late 20s and early 30s.

Attempting to climb the career ladder turned me into a hyper-motivated and narrow-focused person. Great media and publishing gigs—or ones that pay all the bills—are tougher to snag than a sailfish on a one-day excursion. Every story and interview once mattered more than actual life stuff that should have mattered the most. I struggled to sleep when I made mistakes. I failed to understand why others didn't care as much about their careers or the products we were producing as I thought I did.

I took it personally when somebody didn't want to chat for a story. I took it personally when somebody didn't like a story.

Something unexpected happened once I settled into this role: I stopped caring as much. You'd think trying to keep your dream job would make you care even more. The stakes become higher with each promotion. More can be lost in your 40s than your early 20s or 30s.

I changed, I think, for the better. I joined a golf league and leave a few minutes early on Wednesdays. I try to take most of my vacation time. I still loathe mistakes, but secretly enjoy learning from gaffes. I admire those who are less work-driven than me.

I remain hyper-motivated and narrow-focused. I learned the other day there are podcasts and books about topics other than golf, turf, publishing or media. Who knew? Once you obtain something you want more than anything else for longer than you can remember, the focus shifts to helping others achieve their life or work goals. Notice which word comes before the other at the end of the last sentence.

Wisdom accompanying age also makes you more tolerant of others' actions.

Conversations with the City of Overland Park (Kansas) manager of golf courses and grounds **Doug Melchior** and Angel Park (Nevada) Golf Course director of golf course maintenance **Brett Chaney** (page 26) were enlightening. Melchior and Chaney work at non-stop golf operations. Slow days at Overland Park's 54 holes and Angel Park's 48 holes are huge-play days elsewhere.

When you receive a lot of play, you see a lot of unrepaired ball marks and divots. You notice trash on grass and enough human footprints in sand to confuse the greenside bunker on 14 with a soccer field. You'll often glance across the course and see a foursome of perfectly fit males turn a green surround into a Walmart parking lot.

The enormity of Melchior's and Chaney's jobs don't allow time to address every golfer-caused issue. They carefully select their spots. More often, though, they roll with what they see, because experience teaches them that turf recovers quicker than humans. Combative interactions are a bigger golfer turnoff than tire tracks or footprints. And good luck yelling at an employee and then retaining him or her. This is 2022, not 1962. If you need a refresher of integrating kindness into your management programs, we offer one beginning on page 34.

Being somewhat laid-back and nicer doesn't mean sacrificing quality or excellence. It means shifting attention to what you can control and realizing not every golfer, co-worker and boss wants the same result or experience as you do.

Tolerance becomes trickier in August. Heat and fatigue mess with the mind. The course receives little rest and the physically fit male golfers who park near greens are seeking major championship conditions for their Wednesday-night league playoffs. Never mind their average league handicap rests at 19.7!

Annoyances are abundant. Striving to expand tolerance will help you handle them.

It doesn't hurt to reevaluate what really bothers you. **GCI**



Guy Cipriano
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NOTEBOOK

FASHIONABLY FANTASTIC

Great turf and a congenial vibe. A tournament rookie shares impressions from a pleasant walk around a famed venue.

By Cassidy Gladieux

“So, what happens if they hit it outside of the rope?”

One of the many questions I asked my co-workers when we visited Firestone Country Club for the Bridgestone Senior Players Championship.

Having never been to a golf tournament, I didn't know what to expect. In fact, I had absolutely zero expectations. What I wasn't prepared for, though, were the stunning, aesthetic stripes on the South Course fairways, the large trees lining corridors and dozens of thoughtfully placed bunkers. Of course, I looked up photos of the famed Akron, Ohio, club and did my research, but nothing compares to seeing it in real life, especially on a cloudless summer day.

I snapped a picture of the Rolex clock on the first hole to post on social media, making all my friends and family who *actually* play golf insanely jealous and then headed to meet some of the maintenance team.

Director of golf course operations **Larry Napora** and his wife, **Bonnie**, and South Course superintendent **Tim Gruber** provided a warm welcome. Hearing I had an interest in fashion, Larry joked about his team's uniform color options: blue or blue. It is a nice shade of blue, I might add.

We walked around the maintenance grounds, mentally calculating just how much it truly costs to keep a 63-hole facility like Firestone looking and playing the way it does every single day.

I learned a lot. I learned that striping the fairways takes an immense amount of labor and time, something I decided was worth it in Firestone's case because of how clean it looked. I also learned that they double cut the greens twice per day during tournament week, bunkers have a “drainage” system and the more shade on a golf course the harder it is to maintain the grass.

You may think I should have already known all these things. Well, I'm trying, OK! I'm learning more about the industry every day, reading about it, listening to podcasts,



calling my grandpa (I did this before anyway — don't worry) so I assure you I am coming to understand why the industry and golf, in general, is so popular.

After lunch, we began walking the 18 holes and I found a calmness settling over me. The chaos of the world and my life felt mundane for a moment in time. I wondered if this was the feeling all golfers experienced on a course. I loved the ability to look out onto a hole, see the trees lining it, the hills and bunkers adding depth and contrast, the stripes (I loved those stripes) perfectly parallel to one another.

From a golf perspective, I recognized one person playing in the tournament, but I think if I told my bosses I didn't know who **John Daly** was, they would have reconsidered why they even hired me in the first place. Despite that, I found myself



getting into the game, standing on my tippy toes to see the hole or squinting when a putt just misses.

Turns out, the overthinking I did beforehand — “What if I wore the wrong thing?” or “What if I accidentally talk when someone is hitting the ball and then I get banned from any PGA Tour-sanctioned tournament for the rest of my life?!” — was all for nothing. I partially have my co-workers to thank for that second one. My worries slowly dissipated after each hole as I became more fascinated

with the turf and the game being played.

Overall, Firestone Country Club wasn't the most subtle introduction into the tournament golf world but, then again, no one ever described me as such either. Now, given the option between a fashion show and a golf tournament? What if the fashion show was on a golf course? Problem solved!

Cassidy Gladieux is a Kent State University senior participating in Golf Course Industry's summer internship program.

Tartan Talks 73

A podcast series that has lasted six years creates potential for catch-up conversations.

Michael Benkusky returned to Tartan Talks to describe life as



▲ Benkusky

a golf course architect since he first appeared on the podcast in 2017. “It’s been a wild ride over the last five years,” he says.

Wild, in the Chicagoland-based Benkusky’s case, means bouncing between projects in the Midwest and Florida. His recent work on the Champions Course at Palm Aire (Florida) Country Club presented the opportunity to restore elements of **Dick Wilson’s** and **Joe Lee’s** original work while ensuring golfers of all levels can meander the layout. Enhancing member enjoyment involved creating playing options ranging from 4,466 to 7,132 yards using Wilson’s runway tee concept. “Golfers are realizing golf is supposed to be fun and we’re getting more and more people saying, ‘I want to play a tee I’m going to have fun on,’” Benkusky says.

In addition to tee placement, Benkusky provides practical perspective on topics spurring projects such as bunkers and practice facilities. There’s no shortage of courses that can improve in those areas, so expect another busy five years.

The podcast is available on the Superintendent Radio Network page of all popular distribution platforms.



INDUSTRY BUZZ

Toro director of strategic golf **John Lawrence** is the 2022 recipient of the ASGCA Donald Ross Award. Lawrence will receive the award Oct. 3 at the ASGCA Annual Meeting in Providence,

Rhode Island. The award, given annually since 1976, is presented to a person who has made a significant contribution to the game of golf and the profession of golf course architecture.



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produce ammonium sulfate granules coated in humic acid and can be used on cool- and warm-season turf species. ... Profile Products hired **Justin Olmstead** as market development manager-golf. Olmstead worked as superintendent at Glen Flora (Illinois) Country Club before moving into industry sales and support roles.



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Scott Rohlfen
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COURSE NEWS

The new Landmand golf course in Homer, Nebraska, will open for public play on Sept. 3. The course is the first 18-hole effort by the firm of King-Collins Golf Course Design, which created the popular 9-hole Sweetens Cove in Tennessee. Developed by the Andersen family, which has farmed the surrounding land for four generations, Landmand (the closing 'd' is silent) is named after the word for farmer in Danish, reflecting the family's Scandinavian origins. The Andersen family already owns the nearby 9-hole Old Dane course, which it built in 2012. Everything about the **Rob Collins** and **Tad King** Landmand design is big. The 7,200-yard course has almost 84 acres of maintained turf through the green, with close to four acres of bunkers and nearly 277,000 square feet of green surface. Four greens are over 25,000 square feet, including the 17th, a tribute to **Alister MacKenzie's** legendary Sitwell Park green, which measures 30,340 square feet. Grassing finished in September 2021. Greens are 007 creeping bentgrass, while the through-the-green areas are a drought-tolerant mix of Kentucky bluegrass and ryegrass. ... Architect **Gil Hanse** and partner **Jim Wagner**, who were responsible for renovations at both Southern Hills prior to the PGA Championship and The Country Club prior to the U.S. Open, are preparing to unveil their extensive work at Lake Merced Golf Club, just south of San Francisco.



installed a two-wire irrigation system using flexible, no-leak HDPE piping. According to Heritage Links vice president **Oscar Rodriguez**, the final four greens were seeded on June 15 and the course will reopen on schedule in the middle of October. ... Gamble Sands in Brewster, Washington, announced plans to build a second 18-hole, **David McLay Kidd**-designed course. Construction on the new course, which will be located north of the existing clubhouse, begins this fall with a scheduled summer 2025 grand opening. ... Pinehurst No. 8 will reopen in September following agronomic and infrastructure enhancements, including new TifEagle greens, bunker restoration with fresh sand, improved drainage, and the removal of invasive trees. ... Wigwam Golf in Litchfield Park, Arizona, started a four-month bunker enhancement effort on its Red Course focusing on refreshing the 48-year-old course's 44 fairway and greenside bunkers. Pro Turf International and Wigwam ownership JDM Partners expect to conclude in October. GCI

Starting in October 2021, Hanse Golf Design has collaborated with course builder Heritage Links on a comprehensive, nuanced, hybrid restoration of the Alister MacKenzie original, restoring many of the 18 holes but also creating several new ones in homage to what Wagner calls "the MacKenzie vibe." Hanse Golf Design

and Heritage rebuilt all 18 greens, created a 36,000-square-foot, Himalayas-style putting course, new short-game practice areas, turf research nursery, refurbished 150,000 square feet of bunkering, restored then expanded all 18 tee complexes, moved the practice facility from one end of the property to the other, and

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


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Jennifer Torres

SUPERINTENDENT, WESTLAKE GOLF AND COUNTRY CLUB

When the 77th playing of the United States Women's Open Championship commenced earlier this summer, **Jennifer Torres** was where she wanted to be, standing alongside her "turf sisters" at the Pine Needles Lodge and Golf Club in Southern Pines, North Carolina.

Torres, the superintendent at Westlake Golf and Country Club in Jackson, New Jersey, was one of 32 women who traveled to Pine Needles that week to assist director of golf course maintenance and grounds **David Fruchte** and his team with preparations for and the execution of the championship.

Their contributions were essential. Fruchte and superintendent **Chris Mintmier** were working with a crew of no more than a dozen in the weeks leading up to the Women's Open. Torres and her female colleagues stepped right in.

"By Day 2, David was basically telling the rest of his guys 'Just follow the girls,'" Torres says. "This group just injects energy. We were infectious, some of the guys were saying. I couldn't imagine what it was like for his crew of eight to 10 to get ready for such a big event and they did it. We were just there to put the polish on the diamond."

Roughly half the group also volunteered at the 2021 Women's Open at the Olympic Club, a watershed event in terms of the impact of women on the turf industry. While Torres could not be on hand for that tournament because of her responsibilities at Westlake, she spoke of its significance with **Rick Woelfel** on the Wonderful Women of Golf podcast.

"Those women who had the opportunity to be there said, 'We broke the grass ceiling,'" Torres says. "And they did. It was a monumental step for women in this industry. It's not that we weren't accepted before (but) it's given us an MO to get out there and be seen and try and invite more people into an industry that we all love and are encouraged to bring other people into. That event definitely kicked things into overdrive."

For the women who volunteered at the Olympic Club, the 2022 Women's Open was a reunion, an opportunity to spend time with other women who shared their passion for turf. The corps of volunteers was both a workforce and a support group.

"It was the goosebumps, the feelings," she says. "Getting that many people in the same room that get it. We go home and we talk to our spouses, and they think we're all nuts. But you have a room with 30 other women that get it, and don't get together very often, and for the longest time didn't even know that each other existed. Now we know that they're out there, we talked about everything."

The veteran professionals in the group took time to counsel their less-experienced colleagues. "We were there for one another to lift them up," Torres says. "We talked to some of the younger women. Some things were going on that they were talking about possibly leaving the industry, and the week that they spent at Pine Needles made them realize that they had this support system they never knew they had and changed their decision. It was a great place to bond and encourage our relationships to grow."

In order to make the time for the trip to Pine Needles, Torres had to be sure everything would be in order at her club. Fortunately, she has a support system in place that takes care of situations that arise when she's not on the property. Her crew includes her son **Ricardo**.

"I'm fortunate to have a couple guys that live within five minutes of the course," she says. "They've come to me and said, 'There's no sense in you having to drive 45 minutes to come in and turn off a head or something really simple, so could you show me how to do it?' They're eager to learn and I said, 'No problem.' It's monumental, having staff that gets it, that I can trust and that gets things done. That allows me to do the things I want to do to further my career." **GCI**



It's great to have a staff that can step in and allow me to have that time away.

It's monumental, having staff that gets it, that I can trust and that gets things done. That allows me to do the things I want to do to further my career."



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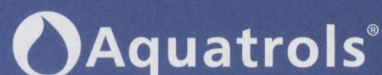


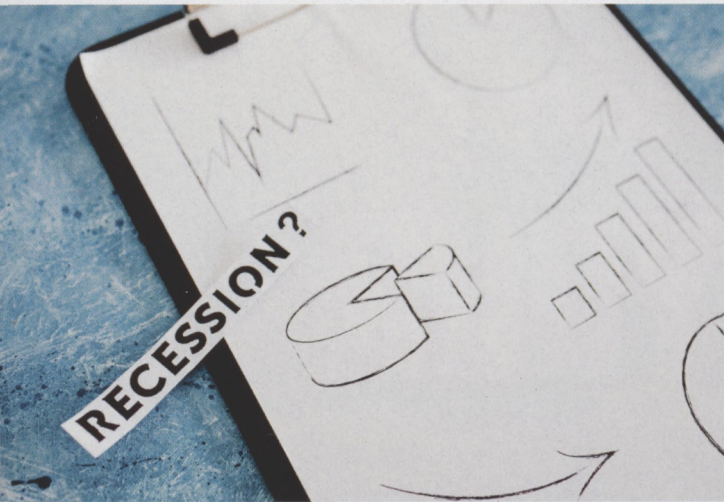
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RECESSION PREPARATION

Economists are notorious for hedging their bets. On the one hand, things might get better. On the other, they might get worse. It was this proclivity for equivocation that reportedly led **President Harry Truman** to yearn for a one-handed economist.

But with record inflation, geopolitical turmoil leading to \$5-a-gallon gasoline and impending interest rate hikes that would make borrowing money more expensive, economists are agreeing that a recession is on the horizon.

According to a recent poll by the *Financial Times* and the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business, 70 percent of 49 economists polled said they thought we would hit the recession threshold in 2023. A recession is a significant decline in economic activity that is spread across the economy and lasts more than a few months, according to The National Bureau of Economic Research, which officially declares recessions.

While calling recession "certainly a very, very high-risk factor," Goldman Sachs chairman **Lloyd Blankfein** hedged his comments recently by saying the Federal Reserve "has very powerful tools" and a recession is "not baked in the cake."

Of course, whether the pessimism of many or the optimism of a few proves correct remains to be seen. How's that for hedging? In either event, we should be prepared for the consequences of mounting costs and continuing thin labor supply.

MANAGE SUPPLY AND DEMAND TO CONTROL COSTS

Oil and gas prices will remain high and volatile. The factors driving this circumstance—limited supply and surging demand—significantly influence the superintendent's success. Those

who manage the supply and demand imbalance will prosper. Watch for these steps that can improve your results:

- Monitor your storage capacity and do not hold heavy supplies during your offseason or low utilization periods. Purchase what you need and avoid temptation to speculate on price fluctuations.
- Begin switching to battery-powered equipment and hybrids where feasible. Electric blowers, trimmers and push mowers can now be cost-effective alternatives.
- Monitor futures prices and trends through professional oil and gas organizations, such as the International Association of Oil & Gas Producers (www.iogp.org) and the Independent Petroleum Association of America (www.ipaa.org).

BECOME AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE TO WIN TALENT WAR

Labor supply, which began dropping after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, is now growing. According to the June 2022 report from the Department of Labor, "The number of persons not in the labor force who currently want a job was little changed at 5.7 million in May," above its February 2020 level of 5.0 million.

This means that superintendents are in position to begin restoring their bench strength. Three actions will be beneficial:

- Pay retention bonuses. Reward those who work for you and stay with you. Increase your retention bonuses each year to ensure that your retention rate is dependable.

- Maintain staffing levels in the event of a downturn. As demonstrated in the Great Recession and again in the Great Resignation, loyalty works both ways. Keep your team together and emphasize that people are a powerful weapon.
- Recognize your crew for team-leading performance. Recognition doesn't have to be elaborate or expensive. Sincere gestures in front of teammates and management build enthusiasm and loyalty. When possible, involve workers' families in staff celebrations; they are the people your crew is working for.

IN TOUGH TIMES, PLANNING BECOMES MORE IMPORTANT

More and more superintendents use an agronomic plan to control costs and forecast labor needs. Among the elements of your plan that need renewed focus in today's economic climate:

- Fertility plans and schedules. Supply chain factors require that superintendents plan and schedule fertility programs to ensure timely applications and adequate concentrations.
- Capital investments in turf maintenance equipment. Economic uncertainty and supply chain irregularity threaten capital replacements. Plan ahead of budget and procurement cycles.
- Employee benefits. This is the year to increase and improve benefits for your team. In addition to retention bonuses, consider upgrading healthcare benefits. **GCI**








HENRY DELOZIER is a partner at GGA Partners, trusted advisors and thought leaders. He is currently Chairman of the Board of Directors of Audubon International.



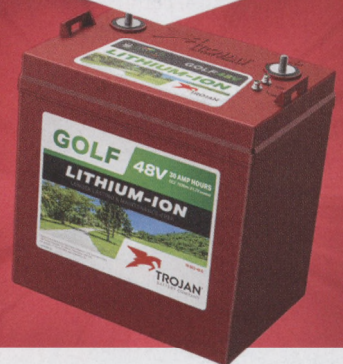
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We started examining many of the maintenance practices we had been taught and executing for years.

A lot of self-assessment began to happen within the industry.”



GOOD? BAD? EASY? HARD?

Ron Furlong has worked at the same course through the **Great Recession** and **COVID-19** eras. How do the challenges compare?

The resurgence of golf in the last couple of years has meant many different things for superintendents worldwide. But to call it good, bad, easy or hard is not really accurate, nor would just labeling it as one of those things be totally correct, either. To call it a roller-coaster ride is much more on the money. And, let's be honest, the resurgence is mostly due to a global pandemic.

The current situation, I suppose, contrasts another tumultuous time for superintendents when a global recession hit golf hard about a decade and a half ago. That period, certainly for superintendents who lived through it, was more cut and dried. It was less of a roller coaster and more like riding the subway. You went down ... and you stayed down.

But a comparison of the two periods seems in order here, certainly for we superintendents who have managed golf courses through both historic periods.

Having been the superintendent at the same course through both ordeals, I might be well-suited to offer a comparison not only for my situation and what each period meant for our staff and me, but also for what

many superintendents experienced. The challenges we faced with the recession and the different obstacles the pandemic has brought us — and is still bringing us well into 2022 — are starkly different yet eerily similar.

The Great Recession rocked most industries and sectors. Golf felt a tighter squeeze than most. Casual golfers found the game was one of the first things they could eliminate in their suddenly money-strapped lives. Losing the casual golfer for a half-dozen years nearly derailed our industry.

Avalon Links, our course here in western Washington, is about a 90-minute drive from Seattle and a similar distance and drive from Vancouver, British Columbia. Owner **Ron Hass** built and opened the 27-hole **Robert Muir Graves** design in 1991. Ron and his family have owned the course since its inception.

“One thing that made the recession

especially hard was that the golf industry was already in tough shape before the recession,” Ron tells me. “With the overexpansion of the supply of courses lingering from the ’90s, the recession was like a double hit against the industry as it tried to reach equilibrium.”

I remember pre-recession budget meetings from the mid-2000s when our staff tried to determine what was happening with the game and how to navigate the numbers moving forward. There were many discussions about the direction to go, whether it was putting more money into the course and trying to stay ahead of the curve by offering a product golfers couldn’t resist, or cutting the budget and trying to stay afloat as the game struggled by offering golf to the masses at an affordable price. Living through the uncertainty proved stressful.

“One of our responses was to reduce labor at a time when we really needed

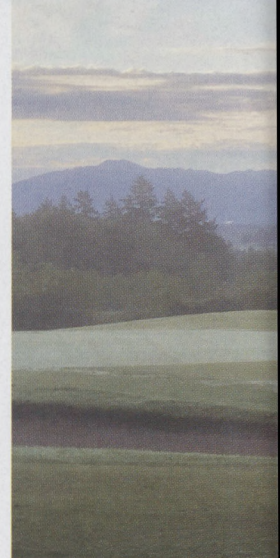
to improve our product to grow the game,” Ron says. “It was particularly tough on community courses that are typically where new golfers are introduced to the game at affordable rates. With fewer people having the time, money or opportunity to learn the game, our industry outlook at that time was rather bleak.”

The hardest thing as superintendent during this period was figuring out how to do more with less. And when I say less, I mainly mean less labor. Creativity and the ability to change one’s outlook on what is acceptable reigned supreme. Tolerance levels suddenly became a hot topic.

Managing a property with anywhere from 25 to 35 percent less resources — as prices for labor and supplies remained the same or increased — caused much strife for superintendents. The ability to communicate these concerns to the powers that be became extremely vital. You had to let people know that the traditional ways of managing golf courses needed to be altered or, if you will, reined in.

Superintendents got creative and started looking outside the box. We started examining many of the maintenance practices we had been taught and executing for years. A lot of self-assessment began to happen within the industry.

I don’t think all of these changes we made were necessarily bad. In fact, many of them were needed, even though we didn’t realize it at the time. Many changes made for financial reasons dramatically improved our environmental responsibility. If not directly made for all the right reasons, they were certainly a positive byproduct to how we manage golf courses now. They were and still are the silver lining.



NUMBERS TO KNOW

Number of unemployed Americans per open position 2007-13

Month/year	Unemployed persons/opening
June 2007	1.4
June 2008	2.2
June 2009	5.9
June 2010	5.2
June 2011	4.0
June 2012	3.2
June 2013	2.8

Number of unemployed Americans per open position 2019-2022

Month/year	Unemployed persons/opening
June 2019	0.8
June 2020	2.9
June 2021	1.0
June 2022	0.5

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics



Watering less, creating large no-mow zones, acceptance of brown fairways in late summer, acceptance of weeds at a certain level, reduction of fungicides and elimination of antiquated plant protectants, to name a few, all began to come into play. The effort to keep playability somewhat the same but do it for significantly less money became the main focus of the job for several years.

Losing available resources during the Great Recession was stressful and scary. But the ups and downs of managing the course through the pandemic are amplified on all fronts.

Initially, you would think packed golf courses are nothing but a good thing. If you are only looking at the bottom line, I guess you'd be right. From the owner's view, it's been a savior.

"COVID dramatically changed the trajectory of our business," Ron says. "It restored budgets. It essentially restored the local industry. The exposure golf got from people being attracted

and reattracted to the game was strong to say the least. I'm just hoping there is some longevity to their interest."

However, managing a golf course through the pandemic has not been

such a clear-cut, positive experience for the superintendent. The number of rounds played represents the biggest challenge most superintendents face stemming from the pandemic. Suddenly being busier is a simple, yet complex issue.

In fact, the great spike in rounds played from the spring of 2020 to the summer of 2022 is, for the most part, the root of several subdivisions of problems that we've encountered. The amount of traffic on the golf course is really the cause of most managing headaches and issues golf course maintenance staffs have dealt with throughout the pandemic.

There's less time to get the course ready in the morning because many courses have moved up the first tee time to accommodate demand. Cart and foot traffic issues arise. Compaction issues, especially on the greens, are apparent. Trying to keep divots filled and seed sprouting on the tees

because of all the divots, and to a lesser extent on the fairways, is tricky. More play has meant smaller windows for mowing and rolling, as well as for applications of plant protectants and irrigation windows.

Compaction on greens has meant corrective responses such as less mowing, higher heights of cuts, more fertility, and increases in verticutting, aerification and topdressing. The reliance on long-lasting fungicides, plant growth regulators and wetting agents is unprecedented. Making the most out of applications has never been more vital.

On top of all the daily maintenance problems, the very real difficulty of finding and keeping labor has also been at the forefront of the pandemic challenge. For the most part, I can find workers to fill seasonal positions, but keeping those workers can be more challenging. Labor retention is not limited to golf course maintenance and it's a challenge many companies and businesses have been facing throughout the pandemic. But that doesn't make the issue any less intense or any less real.

The extreme difficulty in worldwide product inventory also contributes to making the pandemic more challenging for superintendents than the recession. Almost everything we try to order comes with backorder delays and longer-than-long waits. Future planning for purchasing has never been so complex and worrisome.

The increase in prices and stretching of the dollar are the greatest commonality between the two periods. That means even more emphasis on finding creative ways to complete tasks.

What will ultimately make the pandemic the more difficult of the two periods is the very real prospect of another recession on top of it. This doubling down might eliminate any real comparisons between the two periods.

Let's hope not. **GCI**

Ron Furlong is the superintendent at Avalon Links in Burlington, Washington, and a frequent Golf Course Industry contributor.

◀ Finding and retaining quality labor has proven more challenging during the COVID-19 era than perhaps any other point in a superintendent's career.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

Median weekly earnings of full-time and salary workers


Period/year	Earnings
Q1 2002	\$607
Q1 2007	\$687
Q1 2012	\$764
Q1 2017	\$858
Q1 2022	\$1,030

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics



“

A smaller labor pool dried up even more. Courses absorbed more traffic as record rounds were being played and single-rider carts made some fairways look like racetracks.”



BETWEEN TOUGH PLACES

Anthony L. Williams reviews filled notebooks to answer a loaded turf question about two career-defining eras for superintendents.

There's an old saying, "caught between a rock and a hard place" that I have heard my entire career in reference to two things that are both difficult to compare and are tough experiences. In my nearly 40 years in the industry, I have seen many peaks, valleys, opportunities and tragedies, but today we are going to dig a little deeper to look at the question: What's been a more challenging period to be a golf course superintendent: 2008 to 2013? Or 2020 to the present?

We should start by giving a little context. I was a director-level golf course superintendent from 2008 to 2013 at a multi-course facility in Georgia and I have been a director-level golf course superintendent from 2020 to the present at a multi-course facility in Texas, both with warm- and cool-season grasses and a diverse staff supporting a membership component and resort play. I kept pretty good notes during these periods of uncertainty and lived to tell this tale. So, let's examine the pressures of managing golf properties through economic and pandemic stresses.

THE GREAT RECESSION OF 2008 AND BEYOND

To understand the pressures of being a golf course superintendent from 2008 to 2013, you need a little historic perspective about what is commonly referred to as the Great Recession.

The Great Recession started in late 2007 but was in full impact by 2008. It was serious and far reaching. The causes of the Great Recession included a combination of things that developed in the financial system, along with a series of triggering events that began with the bursting of the U.S. housing bubble.

When housing prices fell and homeowners began to abandon their mortgages, the value of mortgage-backed securities held by investment banks declined in 2007-08, causing several to collapse or be bailed out by the government in September 2008. This phase was called the subprime mortgage crisis. The combination of banks unable to provide funds to businesses, and homeowners paying down debt rather than borrowing and spending, resulted in — you guessed it! — the Great Recession.

Historically, as with most other recessions, there seems no known formal model or prognosticator that was able to accurately predict the advance of this recession. There were some minor signals and a few warnings but for the average person in America it seemed as if business and the economy stalled rather suddenly, and times



got tough. Golf was no exception. The number of golfers dropped from a high point in 2003 of 30.6 million to only 25.7 million in 2011. In the first three years of the Great Recession, 510 U.S. golf courses closed.

MANAGING GOLF COURSES: 2008-13

Golf course superintendents were under extreme pressure to find ways to survive and keep the businesses open. Terms like “achieve more with less” were beginning to be fashionable. Online tee time services added convenience but caused some other newer pressures. I remember standing at the bag drop many times during those days and watching guys drive up and wait for the club to drop the daily rate and then set the tee time or set one at another course that had adjusted their rates lower and simply drive away. Competition for rounds was fierce and it was difficult to choose between more rounds at a lower rate or fewer rounds at higher rates.

Our maintenance budgets, especially at public courses, were tied directly to revenues as a percentage so if revenues went down, so did our budgets. Every dollar was stretched and we fought weather, *Pythium volutum*, and almost no capital expens-

es were available for equipment or renovation as extended ROIs were considered too risky. It seemed that we were trying to outlast two storms: the declining interest in golf and the overall slowdown in the economy.

The clubs that did the best had the best human capital. Staff that could get another year or two out of equipment and stretch every application to maximum length were essential. There were some legendary golf course superintendents who shined in those years, but there were literally entire crews that were put out of work as the loan for overbuilding in the 1990s came due.

Personally, this period of golf history provided some of my highest achievements demonstrating that even in difficult times there can be opportunity. My notes from those years show that we had more and higher quality labor available... if you recruited well. People were looking for full- and part-time work but our budgets were tight, often being adjusted weekly. If you had a rainout on a weekend day, it affected the entire month.

We had advances in chemistry, irrigation and communications, and things like moisture meters and sensors gave us better data for water decisions. In Georgia, we had a 100-year flood event in September 2008, which broke a Level 4 drought and pushed our water BMPs into the spotlight. I served as president of the Georgia GCSA in 2010 and 2011, and we focused on getting our members the skills to improve their professional and personal work/life balance. It was the synergy of people working

NUMBERS TO KNOW

12-month Consumer Price Index percentage change as of June 2021

Items	Change
All	9.1%
Food	10.4%
Energy	41.6%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

together and sharing solutions that made the biggest difference between success and failure.

THE UNIMAGINABLE 2020 PANDEMIC

I could not possibly find the words to accurately describe the events within the 2020 pandemic and the years immediately following. I will say for the purpose of context, COVID-19 changed everything.

Businesses were closed starting in March 2020 and we understood the word “quarantine” like never before. No March Madness, no concerts, and shortages of things like toilet paper and paper towels. Supply chain issues and the Great Resignation and, of course, the loss of life. When the first of our co-workers and/or family died from COVID-19 complications after weeks on a ventilator, it was beyond real — and still is. Memories from masks to vaccinations to virtual GIS are still vivid. I could have never imagined this brave new world in 2008, yet golf found a revival when it was most needed.

MANAGING GOLF COURSES: 2020-PRESENT

I was in Mexico evaluating a golf course with my boss when we got the word that the border was about to shut down due to COVID-19 and that we should return immediately.

Our operation in Dallas is big: 400-plus hotel rooms, 36 holes of golf, 12 tennis courts and state-of-the-art fitness facilities. We closed upon executive order and started to plan the unplannable on March 16, 2020. We kept essential workers (that was a new term), but our golf/grounds team was cut 70 percent in the beginning. We were given special letters to display on our dashboards to travel from home to work. It looked like a zombie movie, but it was real.

We adjusted and came together, although 6 feet apart. We followed protocols, took temperatures, washed

our hands and cleaned everything that could be cleaned. We removed bunker rakes and water coolers, and placed star-shaped (How 'bout them Cowboys!) pool noodles in the cups for a minimum-con-

tact golf experience. Single-rider carts and record rounds greeted us when we reopened. An already shallow labor pool dried up.

The bright side is that golf proved its value in the brave new world as you could be outside in nature and safely get exercise and socialize. It was a welcome change.

It also brought challenges. A smaller labor pool dried up even more. Courses absorbed more traffic as record rounds were being played and single-rider carts made some fairways look like racetracks.

Money was flowing and we were able to renovate and still move forward with BMPs. We started to focus more on managing personal stress and mental health. Ironically, I found myself in Texas as the president of the North Texas GCSA in 2021 and serving with some amazing golf course superintendents as we managed our chapter through the pandemic and ensuing recession related to the pandemic.

My two GCSAA chapter presidencies were 10 years and 1,000 miles apart. They spanned two recessions. One of many odd events that happened was that our property hosted the Major League Baseball bubble for the 2020 playoffs and World Series, won by the Los Angeles Dodgers, who stayed with us for a month. We split the property into two halves. A fence defined the bubble on one side for MLB players and families. The other

side was for members/golfers. I had not seen security at that level since the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

Managing a golf course these days is still tough because we will always have limited resources and seemingly unlimited expectations. But one thing remains the same. The synergy of people working together and sharing solutions makes the biggest difference between success and failure.

CONCLUSIONS

That was a lot to take in and I'm sure that you noticed I really did not answer the question posed at the beginning of the story. Here goes:

Each period was difficult and surprisingly rewarding in its own way. However, given the state of global unrest, loss of life and the complexities of the Great Resignation coupled with supply chain issues, I think it's more challenging to manage a golf course now than during the Great Recession. I also think it will get worse before it gets better. Take heart, though, because there's always a way to succeed and golf course superintendents and their amazing teams have historically been the trailblazers who help golf not just survive but thrive. **GCI**

Anthony L. Williams, CGCS, CGM, MG, is the director of golf course maintenance and landscaping at the Four Seasons Resort Club Dallas at Las Colinas in Irving, Texas, and a frequent Golf Course Industry contributor.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

Number of golf rounds in U.S. (in millions)

Year	Total
2017	456.0
2018	434.1
2019	440.6
2020	501.8
2021	529.0

Source: National Golf Foundation

BEST PRACTICES FOR: CONTROLLING GRUBS, CATERPILLARS AND BILLBUGS ON GOLF COURSES

By **Matt Giese** M.S., TECHNICAL SERVICES MANAGER FOR SYNGENTA



As you plan to protect your course from insects, it's important to follow best practices and proven results. Acelepryn® insecticide continues to be a trusted solution for golf course superintendents across the country for season-long control of **grubs, turf caterpillars** and **billbugs**, with only one application.

When it comes to insect control, keep these best practices in mind:

1. Find a solution that will provide season-long control with just ONE application

An insecticide offering long-term residual control will save valuable time and provide peace of mind that your turf is protected. Acelepryn provides the **longest residual control in the turf market**, allowing you to make one early application when the conditions are right for your course.

"Acelepryn let us **go from three insecticide treatments per year on our greens to one**," said JC Petersen of Indian Hills Golf Course in Okemos, Michigan. "[It is] a product you can apply almost anytime, anywhere, [and] controls surface and soil pests with one application. We used to get three waves of cutworms each year, [but] haven't seen one since we began using Acelepryn."

2. Make sure it provides application flexibility and that you are confident in the results

To maximize the value of your insecticide investment, choose a product that is labeled to control several pests and is proven to perform well. In addition to providing flexibility,

Season-Long Control with Just One Application

Target Insect	Target Timing	Acelepryn Rate	Notes
Grubs	April	8 fl.oz./A	
Grubs + Turf Caterpillars	May-June	8 fl.oz./A	To help control fall armyworm, roughs should also be treated.
Grubs + Turf Caterpillars + Billbugs	April-June	12 fl.oz./A	
Fall Armyworm	July-September	2-4 fl. oz./A	Apply at first sight of damage for rapid knockdown, plus up to 6-8 weeks of preventive protection.

this will also help limit the need for multiple products and applications, saving you time and money.

"I continue to use Acelepryn year after year because it's a flawless product," said Mike Salvio, CGCS, of Ocean City Golf Club in Maryland. "With the Acelepryn, I'm **actually spending less money and making less insecticide applications because it works so well.**"¹

With Acelepryn, early applications drive the best results. Its wide application window gives superintendents the freedom and flexibility to apply it based on their specific course needs.

Due to its flexibility and season-long control of key pests, superintendents turn to Acelepryn for an early-season application they can trust. "Acelepryn is one of the first products we put out in the springtime," said Jon Urbanski, Director of Golf Courses and Grounds at the Wilmington Country Club in Delaware.¹

"[Acelepryn provides] great control of grubs," said Kurt Utecht of Superior Country Club in Kansas. "In five years, I have seen **zero** animals tearing up my course digging for grubs late in the year."¹

Additionally, Acelepryn works without irrigation or rain requirements after application. Exceptional control, with minimal reduction in efficacy, takes place without water.

"It is the **only product** that we use **on every square foot of our maintained turf** on our property," said Michael Quigney of Lindenwood Golf Course in Pennsylvania.¹

3. Choose a solution that has minimal environmental impact

It is important to work in harmony with the environment, especially in places where preservation of beneficial and non-target organisms is a concern. Acelepryn continues to be chosen for its studies showing organisms like honey bees were not adversely affected by Acelepryn.² This held true even when worker bees were directly exposed to areas sprayed with product.

"I made the switch to Acelepryn to be more **pollinator friendly**," said Shane Miller of The Club at Twin Lakes in Lehigh County, Pennsylvania. "It has a **low use rate** with a wide window for control with no signal word."¹

Getting started

Join many other satisfied customers and incorporate Acelepryn into your treatment plan. Use the application rates and timings, noted in the chart above, to control a range of target insects.



To learn more about Acelepryn visit **GreenCastOnline.com/Acelepryn** or scan the QR code to find more user reviews.



For more information, see our Turf Caterpillar Solutions sheet by scanning the QR code.

¹ Source: Survey of 572 golf course superintendents conducted via TechValidate in March 2021.

² Source: Jonathan L. Larson and Daniel A. Potter, GCM, November 2013, 85-88.

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Has shown no adverse effects on beneficial and non-target organisms like honey bees*



Offers the flexibility to apply early without the need to water-in

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   @SyngentaTurf #Time4Acelepryn

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*Jonathan L. Larson, Carl T. Redmond and Daniel A. Potter, SCl, September 2011.

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FIRM AND FAST: GONE AT LAST?

Most people watching the recent 150th Open Championship at St Andrews saw a thrilling contest that concluded with the crowning of the “Champion Golfer of the Year” and the awarding of the Claret Jug. What I saw — and likely what you did, too — was “firm and fast” taken to ridiculous extremes.

Granted, there’s been a severe drought in the UK this summer and climate change is upon us. But really? Must we turn a great course — and one of the cathedrals of our game — into a piece of burnt toast to evaluate the world’s best players? And because we all know that what average golfers see on television is what they expect at their home courses, that over-the-top example of “dry and deranged” is going to make our already difficult jobs that much harder. Blasphemy, you say? This is how golf should be played? It’s a bounce-and-roll game and players enjoy seeing their shots roll farther down the fairway (or in the case of St Andrews, into the rough grass)?

Stop and think about your membership/customers. Think about the new golfers who’ve come to the game the last few years. Do you think they’ll accept — much less understand — applying a scorched-earth policy to where they play? Both the 2014 (Pinehurst No. 2) and 2015 (Chambers Bay) U.S. Opens shocked viewers: Countless club officials and golfers since then have said to me, “Don’t think for a minute we want that! We like our course the way it is.”

I’ve been saying for years that despite what golf’s ruling bodies have been preaching, brown is NOT the new green. Certainly not for the vast majority of golfers who already lack control over where their shots will go. They want “reasonable and playable.” And not pricey.

Consider this if you think emulating the Old Course is good for your job security:

- Attaining such conditions over the long term is not feasible at most courses in America. Especially now, when we’re dealing with labor shortages, rising costs and available materials, and tough economic times.
- The optics of overly “stressed” turfgrass is far worse than the over-maintained, super-green, unnaturally lush look of Augusta each spring.
- Think about where you are. In Hilton Head, where I live, we get more than 60 inches of rain annually, so firm and fast conditions are unattainable except in winter when turf is dormant.

Now think about how your players will be affected:

- The Open was a showcase for six-hour rounds. Pace of play is a key factor in enjoyment.
- Firm and fast fairways send balls into rough, bunkers, and hazards, places most golfers can’t recover. Besides making players angrier, their rounds get longer. More slow, pissed-off golfers? Yeah, that’s what you need.
- Forget trying to “protect par.” Par is an unfamiliar concept to most golfers. What shouldn’t be unfamiliar is fun and enjoyment.

The current golf boom has shifted the reality from “brown is the new green” to “green is the new green” — as in cash flow. All the facilities I’ve visited or spoken to lately are happy to report substantial increases in play. We’ve hooked thousands of new golfers: Now we’ve got to figure out how to keep them playing . . . and paying. It’s cer-

tainly not with tougher course conditions, unrecoverable situations around greens or green speeds well into the double-digits. Well-struck shots bouncing off putting surfaces is going to bounce these new golfers right onto pickleball courts.

Scrape off the burnt toast and move toward sustainable golf and water conservation. Try to achieve “firm and fast” that’s appropriate to your climate and your customers. Keep the long-term health and economics of your golf course foremost in your plans. These types of conditions will be better received, and easier to explain, to those NARPs (non-agronomic real people) who have their doubts. Stick to your moisture meters, and remember the following:

There is nothing to be gained by making a course harder to play. For the club championship? Maybe, but even then, be careful. You don’t want the course deciding who wins. Less “green” turf is much more attractive than total brown, both to the observer’s eyes and the long-term health of the course.

There will always be a few low-handicap golfers who think they are better than they are and think they can handle true firm-and-fast conditions. One, they can’t. Two, keep bringing back the 18-handicap and you’ll always have a solid customer base.

You don’t live in Scotland, your course probably isn’t along the water on a sandy base, you don’t have The R&A funding maintenance and it’s unlikely you’ll be hosting the Open Championship anytime soon.

And I haven’t even mentioned wind. **GCI**



TIM MORAGHAN, principal, ASPIRE Golf (tmoraghan@aspire-golf.com). Follow Tim’s blog, Golf Course Confidential at www.aspire-golf.com/buzz.html or on Twitter @TimMoraghan



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MIDWEST

The numbers don't seem real, especially for a cool-weather golf operation. How one city's turf team tactically and mentally handles abundant play.

By **Guy Cipriano**

GOLF MANIA

Astonishing play numbers and tight maintenance windows are all **Doug Melchior** knows. A Kansan since age 5, Melchior worked a pair of college internships at Sykes/Lady Overland Park Golf Club while attending Kansas State University. Melchior steadily progressed through the City of Overland Park's golf ranks and today serves as manager of golf and grounds. He oversees the maintenance of the city's 54 holes.

Overland Park boasts the busiest golf operation in Kansas. The 27 regulation holes and 9-hole par-3 course at Sykes/Lady supported 115,000 rounds in a cool-weather environment in 2021, according to Melchior. The city's other facility, nearby St. Andrews Golf Club, supported more than 60,000 rounds on its wooded layout, making it one of the more crowded 18-hole courses in the Midwest.

A quick drive through the St. Andrews maintenance facility with superintendent **Marc Szablewski** in early May revealed a giant outdoor recycling bin next to the sand bin filled nearly two-thirds of the way with used beverage (mainly beer) cans. On the same gloomy spring afternoon, with temperatures failing to leave the 40s, Sykes/Lady superintendent **Tom Storey** struggled finding a gap in play to show a visitor the massive greens

his team maintains.

For Melchior and his team, it was just another day in Overland Park, where the parking lots aren't always big enough to handle all the players, practicers, diners and drinkers, where the city's golf eblasts reach more than 40,000 subscribers, and where 5,000 regular customers participate in the patron card program. "I only know one way," Melchior says. "The OP way."

Melchior relies on Szablewski and Storey, who have experience

◀ St. Andrews Golf Club in Overland Park, Kansas, attracted 60,000 rounds in 2021.

IN THE FIGHT AGAINST SPRING DEAD SPOT AND DOLLAR SPOT...



PEST & DISEASE

Angel Park Golf Course in Las Vegas is one of the busiest golf facilities in the Southwest.



Desert frenzy

Constant golf activity doesn't fluster **Brett Chaney**.

"I actually think about it sometimes," says Chaney in a rare reflective moment away from the crowds his team strives to satisfy. "If my career ever went back to an 18-hole golf course, it might be kind of boring."

Chaney is the director of golf course maintenance at Angel Park Golf Course, a gargantuan public facility in Las Vegas. Angel Park features the 18-hole Mountain and Palm courses, the 12-hole Cloud Nine par-3 course, a putting course, a wedding lawn and a practice range. With nine illuminated holes on Cloud Nine and play beginning around sunrise on the regulation courses, Angel Park resembles many of its Las Vegas entertainment neighbors: it nearly never rests.

More than 130,000 golfers were entertained at Angel Park in 2021, with 106,000 of those rounds coming on the 18-hole courses. "We stay busy," Chaney says. "Fortunately, we have a good bunch of guys, so it makes life easier. Some days are more challenging than others. But we seem to get it done."

Delegation, loyalty, early starts and consistent weather help Chaney's team handle the frenzy. Palm superintendent **Jorge Rodriguez** and Moun-

working elsewhere, to remind him that Overland Park represents a cool-weather golf anomaly. The trio leads a crew of around a dozen full-time employees preparing 54 holes for more than 1,000 players on ultra-busy days. Instead of chasing perfection, they are chasing completion. And their completed product is so good that Melchior, Szablewski and Storey play in the city's

weekly golf leagues.

The courses exist for a basic reason. "Our No. 1 goal is to provide recreation to our patrons and the citizens of Overland Park," Melchior says. "We aren't after green speeds of 12, 13, 14. We just want good, quality core conditions." That philosophy makes Overland Park a terrific example of municipal golf success.

Sykes/Lady opened in

PEST & DISEASE

tain superintendent **Mateo Guzman** have spent 33 and 32 years, respectively, at Angel Park, where all the golf opened between 1989 and 1993. They are responsible for leading a lean crew. Hiring challenges mean the crew has hovered around 20 employees in 2022. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Angel Park had a crew of 26. "Our superintendents are invaluable, and we have a lot of guys who have been here for a decade or more," Chaney says. "We have a seasoned crew. They get a lot done."

The department runs as a seven-day-a-week, eight-hour-per-shift operation. Shifts begin at 4 a.m. and end at noon. "We have a short window to get things done," Chaney says. "We get 2½ hours before play starts. Balls are in the air at first light."

Angel Park consumes around 300 acres, including 178 acres of turf. Overseeding occurs in late August, although one 18-hole course remains open throughout the process. The open course will handle close to 200 rounds per day despite temperatures that can exceed 100 degrees. Spring represents a busy maintenance period, because the ryegrass, Chaney says, grows at its fastest rates in April and May. An aggressive PGR program slows the growth, thus reducing the frequency of mowing. Like numerous facilities in the desert and elsewhere, Angel Park has experienced significant play spikes the past two years. "When it's busy and bustling around here, you can kind of feel the energy," Chaney says. "It's exciting because you want to produce the

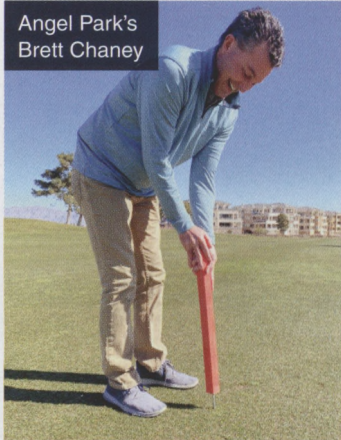
best product you can to let the customers have the best experience possible."

Chaney is in his second tenure at Angel Park, an OB Sports-managed operation. He returned to Las Vegas in fall 2019 with a mindset equipped to handle the unexpected and sudden increase in activity.

"We want people to have a good time," he says. "You'll see a cart parked 10 feet from a green. Earlier in my

career, it used to bother me. It doesn't bother me anymore. As long as they are having fun, ... we want them coming back." — *Guy Cipriano*

Angel Park's
Brett Chaney



1971, one year before Overland Park unveiled St. Andrews. The city's golf operation has existed entirely without subsidization. The operating budget hovers around \$7 million for 54 holes and two clubhouses, including the trendy structure at Sykes/Lady with plentiful indoor and patio dining space and a sophisticated grab-and-go section. City officials had hoped for \$800,000

in food and beverage revenue when they unveiled the new Sykes/Lady clubhouse in 2019, according to Melchior. The possibilities presented by a new clubhouse weren't noticeable in 2020 because of COVID-19 interruptions. But the golf surge carried into 2021 and the clubhouse yielded \$1.8 million in food and beverage revenue, with Melchior adding that the \$2 million mark could be

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SPOTLIGHT

► From left: architects Brent Hugo and Todd Clark and Overland Park's Doug Melchior, Marc Szablewski and Tom Storey.

reached in 2022.

Producing a golf experience with a modest staff that entices customers to stick around for food and drinks isn't for the timid. Peak-season play on the North, South and West nines at Sykes/Lady occurs in three waves, with the first one at 7:27 a.m., nearly two hours after Storey's team begins its day. The second and third waves begin at 11:30 a.m. and 4 p.m., respectively. A frost delay

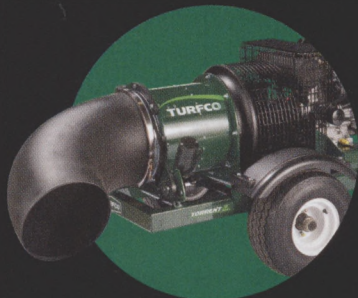
means the first wave doesn't happen. "It's organized chaos," Storey says. "At that 7:30 mark, we are trying to get to our second jobs. I don't think anybody thinks about it a whole lot.

You move onto the next thing and go from there."

Storey's team is adept at working through play and everybody responsible for maintaining Overland



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Park's golf turf doesn't have time to fret over golfer-created issues because there are seemingly golfers everywhere all the time. "You see so much that you become numb to a lot of stuff that makes people upset," Melchior says. "You see people driving close to the greens all the time. If you stop and talk to everyone, you wouldn't get anything done."

Sykes/Lady has a 300-acre footprint and holes on both sides of a busy road. The city owns another 190 acres at St. Andrews. So, how does everything get done?

Melchior says it begins with Szablewski and Storey. Formally, the superintendents and Melchior meet once per week. Informally, they are always chatting and supporting each other. Szablewski, a Kansas State

alum, joined the Overland Park team in 2008 and became St. Andrews superintendent a decade later. Storey, a native Iowan, attended Iowa State and worked at several courses in his native state before moving to Overland Park.

"The dog days of summer become a challenge," Melchior says. "That's where the three of us are good co-workers, but we've become great friends. It can be 8 o'clock at night or 6 o'clock in the morning and I might get a phone call from one of them and they just need to rant and let it all out. It happens and that's what we are here for."

Those calls were frequent early in Storey's tenure as superintendent at Sykes/Lady. "I was at an 18-hole course in Iowa where we were lucky

to get 8,000 rounds a year," he says. "I got hired in March here and we might have had 8,000 rounds in my first month."

The unique relationship between the trio becomes apparent during a lunch conversation in the Sykes/Lady clubhouse.

Szablewski: "I would say I feel bad for Tom, but I worked here for nine years and know what this place is!"

Melchior: "Tom was a seasoned superintendent. We were really, really lucky to hire him. His first eight months here his head was spinning out of control, there were multiple times I would go to the shop and ask Marc, 'Is he OK? Is he going to make it?' because this place is a beast."

Szablewski: "Tom and I had many conversations that we will probably

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SPOTLIGHT

keep to ourselves.”

Storey: “That first month I was *real* quiet.”

Storey is in his seventh season at Lady/Sykes and the underlying challenge of his job remains unchanged. “It doesn’t slow down here,” he says. “It never slows down.”

Melchior instills a down-the-middle maintenance philosophy. Flowers and landscape beds are almost non-existent except around the clubhouse. Greens, fairways and tees are the focus. Melchior describes the fertility programs as “higher” than most golf courses because of the significant cart traffic. Areas that fail to withstand the pounding are

resodded. Greens on both courses are aerified in April and September. Nine greens are aerified per morning, with that nine reopening for league play at 4:03 p.m. The Overland Park team attempts to minimally aerify every fairway every other year, with at least half of the city’s fairways being completed each year.

Reliable equipment helps crews execute tasks ahead of play. The city decided in 2003 to put its golf maintenance equipment lease package out to bid every four years. The service component of the leases is vital because Overland Park doesn’t employ a golf equipment technician.

“Our full-time staff isn’t as specialized as you normally would think of,” Melchior says. “We don’t have spray techs, we don’t have irrigation techs. All of our full-time staff are cross trained to do everything. Not one person is specialized, therefore we lease all of our equipment.”

Revenue the city generates from the courses goes back into the courses. Kansas City-based architect **Todd Clark**, who grew up playing golf in Overland Park, has guided projects to improve both courses, most notably quickly creating six new holes at St. Andrews in 2009 to replace six holes lost because of the construction of

a community soccer complex. St. Andrews is finishing a multi-year bunker renovation. During the Sykes/Lady clubhouse project, Clark and his partner **Brent Hugo** crafted a plan to ensure safe and efficient golfer flow throughout construction. A bunker renovation at Sykes/Lady is also in the works.

Continued infrastructure improvements will likely ease the maintenance burden. But they also could make Lady/Sykes and St. Andrews even more popular.

“By the end of summer,” Szablewski says, “it’s one big blur. You’re like, ‘Thank God everything is still green.’” **GCI**



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THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE POST-PANDEMIC SUPERINTENDENT

The surprisingly positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the golf industry has been widely documented. Less clear is its impact on the status of the golf course superintendent. A hunch tells me that in some ways their status has improved.

In terms of the rounds count, public facility tee sheets, equipment sales and the enrollment lists at most private clubs, the last two and half years have been an unexpected boom time after years of a slow decline in the golf trade. For a while, maintenance got easier in terms of course set up thanks to no bunker rakes, less emphasis on flawless grooming, and golfers simply thrilled to be outdoors, even if they were playing to a hole in the ground with a rubber collar around it.

Of course, the industry also had to put up with more golf cart traffic, much of it in the form of single riders trying to avoid infection from their golf mates. The day-to-day travails of simply managing labor were compounded by heightened attention to cleanliness as well as the need to keep laborers safe. And just rousing up a capable crew each day became increasingly difficult due to labor market dislocation and the pervasiveness of infection rates.

We're not out of the pandemic completely and probably never will be. But at most clubs I see and hear about, there's a clear sense

that folks are acting as if things are normal. Mask use is down. There is a lot more indoor socializing. Group events are back. And the still-very-strong number of major golf course renovations and restorations suggests that club managers have a lot more faith in the future than was the case three — or even 15 — years ago.

Yeah, it's still hard, if not impossible, to find qualified assistants in the recruitment pipelines. Positions now go unfilled for a year or more, and if filled, it's often by fresh-scrubbed turf school graduates who in the past would only have qualified as trainees. Course managers now also spend a lot of their time simply juggling schedules among staffers willing to work 30 hours a week and hardly, if ever, on weekends. At least there's comfort knowing retirees from other trades are often willing to work, and at an efficiency level derived from their own career paths.

I've also noticed that at many clubs the superintendent now has higher standing with the membership. Gone is the image of the greenkeeper as a dirt farmer in overalls. And even if most regulars couldn't find the maintenance building, they at least recognize the superintendent around the clubhouse or grounds, exchange pleasantries and even compliments, and appreciate their input on major decision-making.

Only serious data analysis can determine if superintendents are starting to be paid commensurate with their more elevated status. But I see at many clubs that their advice is

taken seriously. Their presence at green committee and board meetings is now standard. Their wisdom as to general course condition or the shelf life of various infrastructure elements (drainage, irrigation, sand, turf types) is weighed seriously before policy and spending decisions are made.

There's still a lot of mystery among golfers as to what goes into day-to-day maintenance. In part, that's because most golfers have unrealistic expectations about their own golf games and the hubris carries over into their expectations of how the golf course should appear.

The gap between the retail golfer's grasp of agronomy and what superintendents know to be the case is also due to the highly technical nature of the trade. There's also the inherent nature of the practice — that the success or failure of one or another turf type in a climate is due so much to microclimate, specific soil types, and conditions unique not just to this or that golf course but to small areas in corners of the property.

Golfers and decision makers on such matters want quick, simple, comprehensive answers. Experienced superintendents know this is never the case and tend to have to go into long, detailed explanations as to why things are the way they are out there. That basic dichotomy will never go away.

What has changed — marginally but strategically — is the esteem and value that superintendents are held to at facilities. They're not just essential workers. They have become essential professionals. **GCI**



BRADLEY S. KLEIN, PH.D. (political science), former PGA Tour caddie, is a veteran golf journalist, book author ("*Discovering Donald Ross*," among others) and golf course consultant. Follow him on Twitter (@BradleySKlein).



Do
you
have
the
nice stuff?

No matter your role on the golf course, kindness can make a difference in how others view your facility and team.

By **Cassidy Gladieux**

When you go through the drive-thru line at Chick-fil-A, you likely grab the bag and drive away, trusting that they got your order correct. But what about when you go to McDonald's? You probably grab the bag and at least peek in to make sure it looks like the right amount of food you ordered. So why do we treat these two fast food chains so differently and how does this even relate to golf course management?

For **Gautam Patankar**, vice president of culture and coaching at Bobby Jones Links, a Georgia-based golf course management company, the relation is simple.

"The reason why you wrap yourself around the building three times in the morning for breakfast or for lunch isn't because you really like the sandwich," he says. "But you think, 'They're nicer people in here, they're

going to treat me better.” The same goes for golf course management.

The concept of kindness may seem like a lesson you learn in kindergarten, not something you’re taught well into your career. Regardless, the concept of being kind is still the same and it can have many lasting benefits for a course.

KNOW YOUR IMPORTANCE

The first step in fostering a kinder environment is knowing your importance. Think about it. If someone wants to play a round of golf, their journey begins when they call to book a tee time. They then get to the course, check in, play and maybe hit up the 19th hole afterward. All those people they encountered impacted their overall experience.

“It’s the pro shop guy that picks up the phone, it’s the cart attendant that greets you at the car, it’s the bartender that serves you a drink, it’s all front-line people,” Patankar says. “So, during orientation, we should be super clear how important (the staff) are in the journey of the customer.

“Your job is the product. The name of what you do is in the name of the company. Something Golf Club or Something Something Golf and Country Club. You’re the ‘Country,’ you’re the ‘Golf’ part of that, so take pride in what you do.”

Scott Hare, director of golf course operations at Sapelo Hammock (Georgia) Golf Club adds, “For us, it starts with our staff. Everyone is just very friendly, outgoing people. Always showing a good attitude, positive attitude and willing to give good service to our members and owners and guests. So, it really starts with the staff. ... It’s important to have good staff.”

THE GOLDEN RULE

We’ve all heard it before. Treat others the way you want to be treated.

“What I told my assistants is just treat everyone with equal respect,” says **Morris Johnson**, who retired last December after two decades as superintendent at venerable River Oaks Country Club in Houston. “Regardless of if they’re a \$10 (an hour) employee or a billionaire member, we’re all putting on pants the same and everyone deserves respect all the time.”

This mentality has proved to be

beneficial even after retirement for Johnson, who started a role with Bunker Solutions earlier this year. “(Kindness) is now helping me as the national sales director,” he says. “So, all those people I met and have mutual respect for over the years, now it’s all just helping me later in life because they answer my calls!”

Johnson isn’t alone in this mentality. “The main thing is, always keep in mind you put yourself in the members’ shoes or the customers’ shoes,” Hare adds. “You treat them the way you want to be treated and I think everyone wants to be treated kindly and with respect so that’s the main thing.”

“I guess it’s really simple,” says Double Eagle Club COO **Todd Voss**, whose tenure at the Ohio club started as superintendent. “I mean it is so simple. Treat people like you would like to be treated and you do have to be a little bulletproof. You can’t take a bad day, bad weather, out on anybody.”

IT’S THE LITTLE THINGS

Seemingly small actions such as asking questions about families, offering an extra hand to another department that’s in a bind or even just a wave while on the mower can help foster a kinder workplace.

“It’s simple things,” Highlands (North Carolina) Country Club golf course superintendent **Brian Stiehler** says. When someone in their housekeeping department got a nail in their tire, instead of calling a tow truck, the Highlands crew took it upon themselves to patch the hole where the nail was, add air to the tire and even fill up the gas tank. “I mean, it was just like an example of something that just made that person’s day a whole lot better than they thought it would go,” Stiehler adds.

Sometimes you might have to get a little creative or go outside of your comfort zone to show kindness but taking the initiative can pay off in the long run.

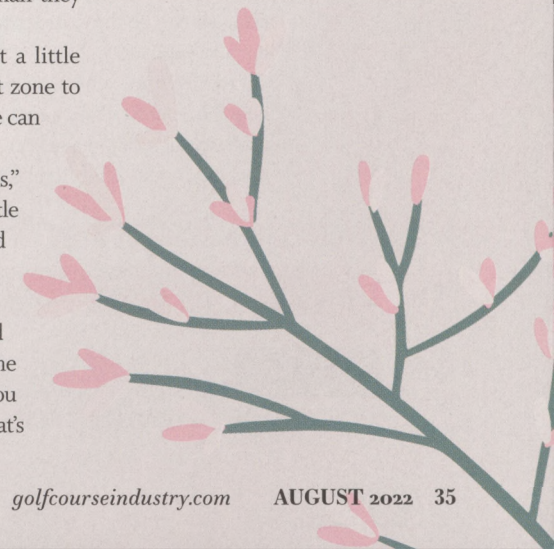
“It’s OK to give out a sleeve of golf balls,” Patankar says. “It’s OK to walk up to a little kid and give them some balls you found in the woods while you were out there rolling. It’s OK to do that.

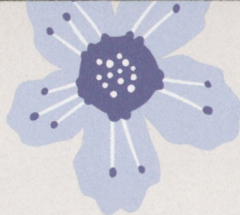
“Can you imagine playing golf and you lose your ball in the woods and some guy cuts off his mower and says ‘Hey, you just lost one ball, but here’s three.’ That’s



“**Your job is the product. The name of what you do is in the name of the company. Something Golf Club or Something Something Golf and Country Club. You’re the ‘Country,’ you’re the ‘Golf’ part of that, so take pride in what you do.”**

— **Gautam Patankar**





involving yourself with the customer side of business.”

Voss, who lives along the Double Eagle course, shows kindness by opening his backyard beach bar to golfers on certain days. “It’s amazing to me what I see,” he says. “We’re a non-tipping club and what some of the members will give for the end-of-the-year fund is just shocking.”

PUT PEOPLE FIRST

Of course, every golf course is a business at its most basic form. But transitioning to a more people-focused leadership rather than a results-based focus has been something that Stiehler has seen benefits from.

“It’s more natural for me to put people first,” he says. “When I was young, like a superintendent for the first year or two, I was very energetic. I was always respectful, but I was more focused on results than I was maybe on people, and now it’s totally people. If you take care of the people and you’re kind to your people, the results will take care of themselves.”

Some ways to begin the people-first mindset can be through active listening and validation.

“Facilitation, what you do is you help the person tell you and that just by itself is an act of kindness because then they don’t feel inhibited or judged,”

“**When you treat your customers with kindness and respect, take care of them when they come to the golf course, that means they’re going to come back, refer it to their friends — all of that helps and you have to show kindness to the customers.”**

— Scott Hare

says **Waguih IsHak**, clinical professor of psychiatry at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. “The next step is validation. An important part of validation is not only to take what the person tells you seriously but to actually validate how this concern is real.”

Rather than responding with clichés like “Oh, I understand, I hear you,” taking actionable steps to address that friend or co-worker’s concern can help foster that trusting and kind environment.

THINK LONG TERM

“We’re in the customer service business,” Hare says. “When you treat your customers with kindness and respect, take care of them when they come to the golf course, that means they’re going to come back, refer it to their friends — all of that helps and you have to show kindness to the customers.”

Not only can kindness be good from a business perspective, but it can also benefit your personal health.

“Immediate effects have positive aspects, like improved mood,” IsHak says. “Repeated actions of kindness do actually establish a pattern of improving emotional wellness, which is one of eight aspects of wellness. So, it

does boost emotional wellness aspects and overall quality of life, long term.”

Other dimensions of wellness include spiritual, intellectual, physical, environmental, financial, occupational and social.

In addition, conflict management can play a role long term with employee morale and therefore lead to acts of kindness.

“Stress plays a role that kind of creates a sense of entitlement,” IsHak says, “and we’re all taught and trained to be assertive, but under stress we kind of leave that assertiveness and start to act in an aggressive way or in a passive-aggressive way, and with that, kindness can dissipate.”

Lack of control, hard work with no reward and discrimination are also examples of tension in the workplace that can cause kindness to dissipate. Using a mediator is highly recommended for instances regarding conflict management. “The work I do is really encouraging people to address issues quickly and directly,” says **Melissa Brodrick**, ombuds and director at Harvard Ombuds Office.

Knowing what you hope to gain from an open conversation as well as being intentional about your approach to the conversations regarding the conflict are the first steps in managing it.

Although Chick-fil-A might not be perfect every time, their reputation remains the same. The same can go for your golf course.

“Kindness begets kindness, right?” Brodrick says. “If we’re kind, it’s easier for someone to be kind back to us.” **GCI**

Cassidy Gladieux is a senior at Kent State University participating in Golf Course Industry’s summer internship program.



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HEY, YOU'RE IN THE **HOT SEAT!**

A longtime program at a course in a college town is helping rising turf managers learn how to make decisions on their own. By **Cassidy Gladieux**

Colbert Hills director of golf course operations **Matt Gourlay** has continued a program his father and a colleague started in 2000. “Superintendent of the Week” allows the interns at the Manhattan, Kansas, facility to act as the real superintendent of the course.

“We try to build our internship so that when they leave this internship they could potentially be a golf course superintendent anywhere in the country,” says Gourlay, who started his version of the program in 2007.

Gourlay’s father, **David Gourlay**, and **Paul Davids** created the program more than 20 years ago. David Gourlay served as Colbert Hills general manag-

er from 1993 to 2013. Davids worked as the course’s superintendent from 1999 to 2003.

“Now obviously, you know, leaving a 12-week internship, it’s going to be extremely difficult for them to run Augusta National, but they could run theoretically a 9-hole operation or an 18-hole, mid-level golf club,” Gourlay says. “We’re building individuals who would excel at being a first assistant golf course superintendent anywhere.”

The interns, who this year all come from Kansas State University’s turf-grass management program, are each given one week to act as a full-time superintendent would. For **Logan Waite**, a Kansas State senior who has completed two prior internships, the program was an opportunity to take on more responsibility.

“I think what makes this one a little bit different than the rest of them is the amount of responsibilities

that most interns get to experience throughout the summer,” Waite says. “I’m not saying at the previous two internships there weren’t responsibilities, but there wasn’t a week where it was like, ‘Hey, you’re in charge.’ You don’t get that at very many golf courses or at very many internship programs, so I think it’s really cool of how Matt has done this at Colbert Hills.”

During the week, the interns are tasked with everything a full-time superintendent handles. They are responsible for making sure employees don’t work overtime, knowing when to spray fungicides, insecticides or wetting agents, and making task lists for the team that week.

“I’m just there to make sure they don’t make any detrimental decisions that affect the individual’s feelings, their performance on property or anything that’s detrimental to the operation, is what I’m basically there for,” Gourlay says. “I’m always conversating with the superintendents of the week. We communicate all the time, but I would always catch something before it would be bad. If he wanted to go spray a fungicide for dollar spot and there’s a chance of rain in an hour, I’m not going to let him do that.”

Every intern prepares for their week as superintendent differently.

“There’s some of them who plan beforehand and they ask questions the week prior to their superintendent of the week,” Gourlay says. “And then there’s others who just show up that day, and just kind of come in blind without tasks ready to go.”

Waite used a combination of prior experience from working at Colbert Hills as well as the mindfulness that not everything may go as planned during his week.

“I actually worked at Colbert Hills in the past, so I’ve kind of seen other interns go through it before and I kind of had an idea of what I wanted to do,” he says. “I can always plan for it and stuff like that but plans obviously change. You can go in there with a game plan and with this industry, you

don’t know what’s going to happen.

“That was the challenging thing for me because I was like, ‘OK, I want to get this, this and this done today,’ and then something happens and you have to readjust. Always be adapting to the conditions and being able to change plans one week. That was probably a challenge at first, but I think throughout the week I learned how to manage that and really adapt with the challenges that I’ve had.”

Some additional challenges Waite faced included keeping employees under 40 hours a week and placing them in the strongest roles.

“We have to keep everyone under 40 hours a week,” Waite says. “So that was kind of a challenge to keep track of everyone’s hours. It’s not stressful, but a little nerve-racking at times because we needed to get stuff done for the weekend.

“It was a good type of pressure. ... I couldn’t sleep at nights. I was always thinking of it, worrying about ‘if this doesn’t go the right way, if this doesn’t happen,’ but you just kind of form a game plan of how you can manage everyone in the most efficient way possible. It was really a nerve-racking challenge but also an opportunity at the same time.”

The rest of the crew has been supportive when the leadership structure changes during weeks when the interns take over.

“They’re very receptive,” Gourlay says. “Our oldest individual is semi-retired. He loves working with them. I make an announcement to let them know what’s going on and (the interns) give out their own cell phone in case there’s questions or concerns. Our team has been very receptive and are understanding that these individuals are given an opportunity to be superintendent for a week.”

Colbert Hills also has a par-3 course just for the Kansas State University men’s and women’s golf teams. During Waite’s week as superintendent, the teams held a camp and he was responsible for making sure the course



satisfied attendees.

“I was really pleased with how the par-3 course looked,” he says. “I really focused just that Thursday and Friday, really making sure that whole area was really presentable. I was really proud of how the staff worked and how they took everything seriously. They were really good to me that whole week.”

Waite hopes to graduate in December and obtain an assistant superintendent position. For Gourlay, he hopes to continue the internship program and help develop the new wave of future superintendents.

“It’s definitely something I want to continue because it’s just a tremendous opportunity for golf course management students to further their career and help them build the skills to succeed as golf course superintendent at another facility.” **GCI**

Cassidy Gladieux is a Kent State University senior participating in Golf Course Industry’s summer internship program.

▲ Logan Waite is a Kansas State University senior participating in the internship program at Colbert Hills Golf Course.

TRAVELS WITH TERRY

Globetrotting consulting agronomist **Terry Buchen** visits many golf courses annually with his digital camera in hand. He shares helpful ideas relating to maintenance equipment from the golf course superintendents he visits – as well as a few ideas of his own – with timely photos and captions that explore the changing world of golf course management.



SUPERINTENDENT'S MEMORIAL TRIBUTE

Eighteen-year director and superintendent of grounds **Thomas “Tom” L. DiFonzo**, at the Laconia (New Hampshire) Country Club died in 2018 at the young age of 49. Tom had a battle with esophageal cancer for two years and he passed at a hospice house. He served as president and board member and received the outstanding service award of the NHGCSA. He also served as the chapter liaison to GCSAA for many years. Tom’s three daughters were regulars

at the club for years while growing up because he wanted to spend as much time with them as he could. Tom still lives on, as the club started a scholarship in his name. Superintendent **Randy Weeks** installed green’s flags from every club Tom worked at along with photos of him with his three daughters and a “DiFonzo Strong” memorial flag

signed by all his employees at the time of his passing that resides in the employee lunchroom as a permanent memorial. Tom’s parking spot sign from in front of the clubhouse now permanently resides in the grillroom with the words “Always in our hearts” added by the membership. Assistants **Ryan Malloy** and **Brian Thompson**, crew foreman **Dana Pruet**, horticulturist **Shelia White**, and equipment manager **Jason Bryant** comprise a great team.



Terry Buchen, CGCS, MG, is president of Golf Agronomy International. He’s a 51-year, life member of the GCSAA. He can be reached at 757-561-7777 or terrybuchen@earthlink.net.



TWO-CYCLE MIXING & DISPENSING SYSTEM

Two 15-gallon (13½-gallon usable) Northern Tool tanks are mounted on heavy-duty shelf brackets with both tanks having grounding wires tied to the main fuel tanks to relieve static electricity. Ball valves were added to each tank’s drain point serving several purposes: closed for mixing, to use one tank at a time, and emergency shutoff. The hose and nozzle ASM are included with the tank. 87 octane fuel in an Echo Red Armor 50:1 ratio two-cycle oil mix, using three 5-gallon mix containers or six 2½-gallon mix bottles. One tank lasts one to three weeks depending on the time of the year, even less during leaf/pine needle removal. It cost \$340 in 2013 and moved to a new facility in 2016 using new mounting brackets, piping and grounding, which cost an additional \$110 at that time. It took about three hours labor time. **Brendan Parkhurst** and **Peter Rumery** are the superintendent and equipment manager, respectively, at the Cape Arundel Golf Club in Kennebunkport, Maine. **Bruce Hepner** is the restoration architect.

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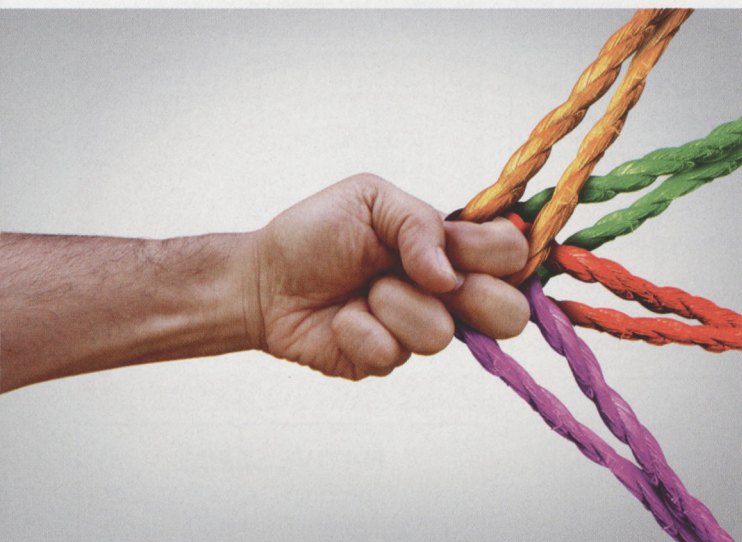


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TRUST, BUT VERIFY

I have lived by the above words for the majority of my career. Early in my current tenure, they were shared by a former club president. I think about them often when situations arise where I'm away from the facility. Folks don't send back food to the kitchen with a complaint to the sous-chef. They complain to the person whose name is on the restaurant.

Similarly, if someone has a complaint about course conditions, they don't complain to the assistant superintendent. They bring it to the attention of the head greenkeeper, superintendent or course manager.

If you can't trust your team with the "keys to the car" for a week, then either you have hired the wrong people or you have done a poor job training them. I understand some of you can't get away during the busiest time of year. But for a little over a decade, I have strived to allow myself and members of our team the opportunity to recharge.

Time passes so quickly nowadays; the week is practically over before we begin to stress about how to get things done without someone. Recently, I planned to take a Friday and Saturday off to participate in a hickory golf event. I have an affinity for hickory golf, but one thing I have yet to do is participate in an actual competition. I was looking forward to finally having that chance when the unthinkable happened.

Our pump station went down at approximately 2:45 a.m. the morning of the first round of the Carolina Hickory Open. I was sleeping two hours west of Charlotte, eagerly awaiting a 9 a.m. tee time. When I received the text message from our senior assistant, I immediately confirmed via email that the issue was a

phase imbalance, meaning the problem most likely resided with our electric service provider.

To make matters worse, not only were we dealing with this issue on the morning of what was forecast to be a typical summer day in the Carolinas, but my remote location inhibited our ability to communicate freely with each other. Unable to make or receive a call and relying solely on text messages with both our senior assistant and equipment manager, I found my anxiety level rising. I worked extra hours in advance of these two days to make things as easy as possible on our team during my brief absence.

I was now attempting to shoulder the burden from miles away by texting instructions, only to face the uncertainty of the unknown. When will our team be able to contact our service provider and explain the situation? When will our service provider arrive to correct the issue? How long will the repair take?

After about an hour and a half of back-and-forth, I decided to withdraw from the event and return to the course as quickly as possible. After about 20 minutes of driving, I finally had a clear enough signal to speak with our senior assistant and be briefed on the situation. He managed to contact our service provider and was waiting on their arrival, though there was no ETA.

We filled our greens sprayer and applied water to all greens to help hold onto whatever

moisture was present from the previous day. Rainfall had been scarce and ET rates were high. The days were the longest of the year.

I drove faster and waited to hear back. My mind continued to fabricate other strategies we could employ should the worst-case scenario emerge.

Then, about the time I would have been teeing off in the first round of the event, I received word our service provider was on site making the necessary repair. A few minutes later, I received word the pump station was back online and greens were being irrigated.

I was proud of our team ... and disappointed in myself. Did I not trust my team to bear the load in my absence? Had I not prepared them for these types of events? Why did I not trust they would handle it flawlessly and why did I not carry on with my plan to participate in the event?

I would like to think the inability to remain connected played a significant role in my actions, but we will never know.

Folks say all the time they desire the opportunity and ability to unplug. I believe that to be a false claim. I think what we desire is the ability to get away yet remain connected, because the ability to communicate openly and freely without interruption allows one to fully assess the situation at hand and know that everything is being handled accordingly.

Consider me in this category. **GCI**




MATTHEW WHARTON, CGCS, MG, is the superintendent at Carolina Golf Club in Charlotte, North Carolina and past president of the Carolinas GCSA. Follow him on Twitter @CGCGreenkeeper.





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
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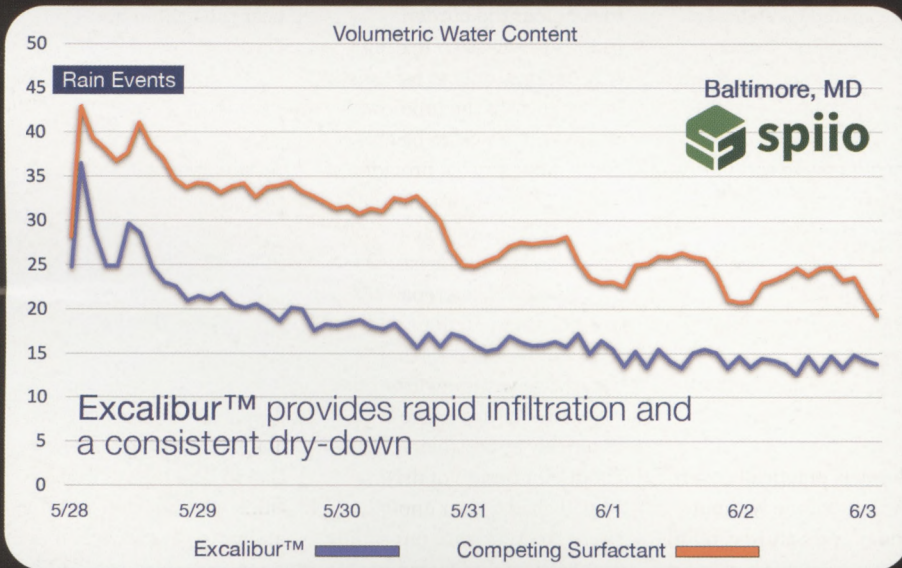


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