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GOLF COURSE INDUSTRY

Nicolas Garibay
The Club at Ibis

Inspirations

Immigrants, "idiots," challenges, changes. Four uplifting stories about turf pros who followed their own career and life paths.

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TURF TECHNOLOGY TODAY

GOLF COURSE INDUSTRY
2023 TURF TECHNOLOGY SHOWCASE

The golf course maintenance industry has neither shunned nor fully embraced technology.

In our travels, we notice soil moisture inside utility vehicles, offices and maintenance facilities. Computers offering real-time irrigation data are common sights, especially in the arid West and unpredictable Southeast. We encounter digital job boards in breakrooms. Industry companies are identifying early adopters for battery-powered handheld equipment and mowers. Some of you have convinced your bosses to purchase a GPS-guided sprayer. Nearly every one of you uses multiple apps to track the weather.

Turf technology is elevating the experience for millions of golfers and creating maintenance efficiencies in the heavy-play, tight-labor era. But lukewarm attitudes toward technology continue to permeate segments of the industry.

Snap the code to register for the **2023 *Golf Course Industry* Turf Technology Showcase**

Thousands of successful turf pros use solely their senses to determine moisture levels and disease pressure. A superintendent recently told us he can "smell what the turf needs." The grounds smelled as pleasant as smoked brisket on the day of that visit.

Messages still simmer in many inboxes, because a large portion of the industry meets or exceeds expectations without regularly using electronic communication. Thankfully, news and product information is still distributed via monthly printed magazines and annual catalogues. Email and social media, even in 2023, aren't for everyone.

We haven't spotted any chalkboards in recent travels, although dry erase boards and handwritten instructions still get crews to the right places each morning. Manual punch time clocks are still near office and shop doors. Labor hours and budgets are still tracked via pen and paper.

Earlier this year, we profiled courses that don't need irrigation computers to monitor water usage on fairways—because they don't have fairway irrigation systems. Operating without a fairway irrigation system makes it tricky to water in emerging plant protectant technology.

Compared to the lawn care industry, golf maintenance is in the primitive stages of adopting electric mowers and handheld equipment despite the threat of looming regulation and on-the-books noise ordinances. The hurdle? Many superintendents remain skeptical that electric equipment can perform at the same levels as gas-powered equipment. Similar skepticism surrounds robotic mowers. A few high-profile flubs involving electric and robotic mowers have curtailed superintendent trust.

Reasons why segments of the industry remain tech-resistant include:

- High upfront costs
- Perception that new offerings are only for "high-end" courses
- Personal intimidation
- Personal complacency
- A survive-the-day mentality that limits available time to learn and adopt new practices and products
- Industry failure to position itself as tech-minded
- Satisfaction with current results under given budgets
- Lack of awareness around new technologies

To help our readers, followers and listeners become better acquainted with emerging golf maintenance technology, we're launching the "2023 *Golf Course Industry* Turf Technology Showcase." The live online video event begins at 1 p.m. EDT Thursday, July 20. Register for FREE at events.golfcourseindustry.com/gciturftech/. Representatives from industry companies will comprise the presenter lineup.

Can't make the live broadcast? We have a tech-friendly, on-demand replay system. Sessions will be shared via the Fast & Firm newsletter and saved on the events section of our website.

We're confident both shunners and embracers can benefit from the showcase — and we're confident the tools discussed in the showcase will be spotted in more of our travels. GCI

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GOLF COURSE INDUSTRY

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To provide an independent, innovative and inclusive voice for today's — and tomorrow's — golf industry professionals.

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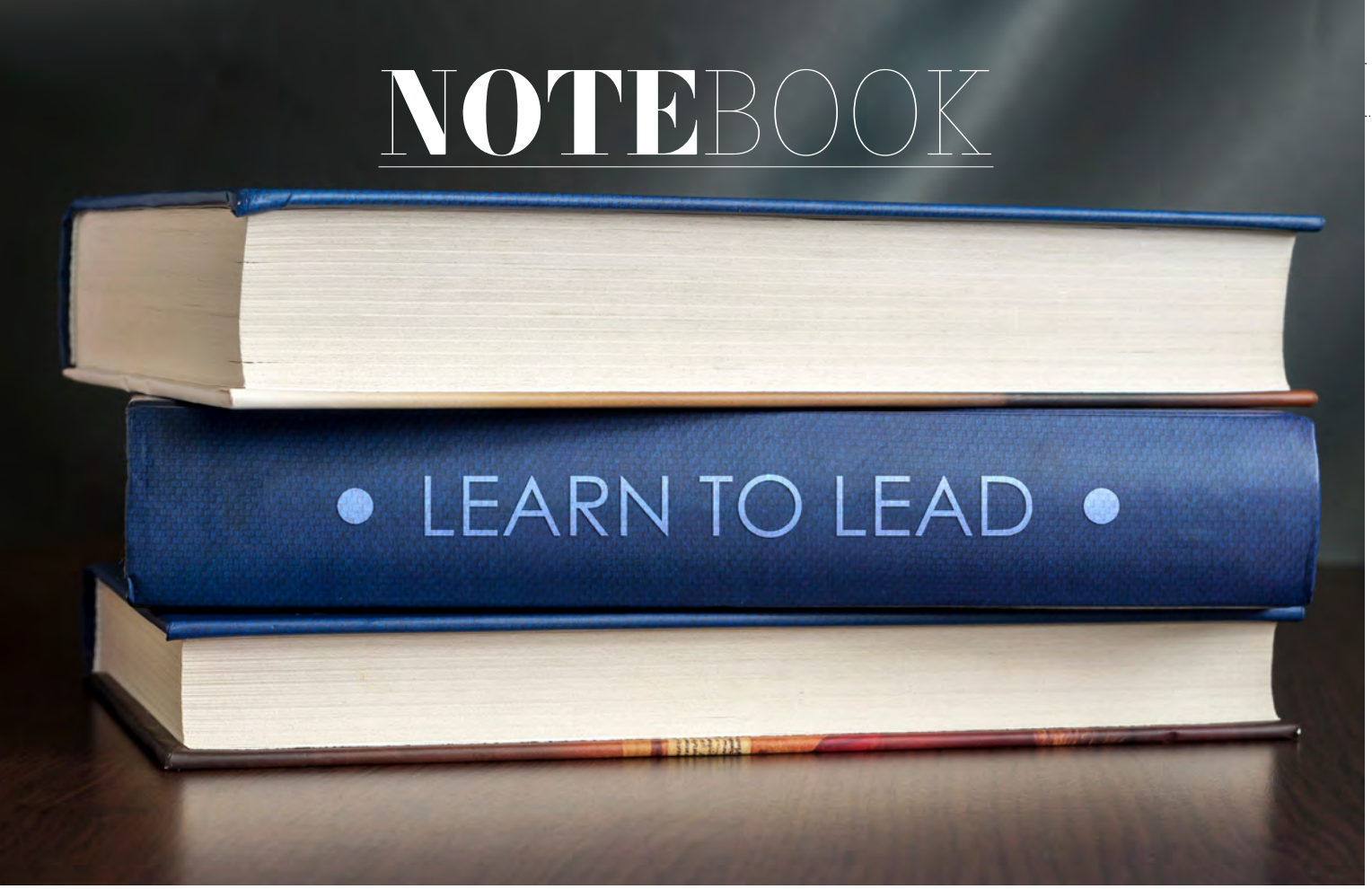

THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP

By Chris Warrick

If you have been in the golf course industry long enough, you have probably seen the recent shift in the workforce labor pool. Gone are the days of having excess applications and the ability to fill an empty spot on your team by the afternoon. COVID-19 has altered our labor market in such a way that we have a surplus of jobs and a shortage of people to fill those roles. This has changed the dynamic between the potential employer and the recruit.

The average person seeking to join the workforce now has options and the ability to be selective in their recruitment. These options don't just appeal to new recruits. You can be certain that your current workforce is aware of all the newly created jobs and the inflation of salaries being offered to hold those positions. There has never been a more advantageous time for entry-level labor employees to find jobs — and they know it.

It's not enough these days to just offer good benefits. Look at any available job position. Most openings offer the same thing. Good wage. Health care option. 401(k). Paid vacations. These are no longer incentives; they are now the new standard for employment.

What is keeping employees from leaving and enticing recruits to join the team? Leadership.

In its simplest definition, a leader is an individual who can motivate another to accomplish an action. The untold truth about leadership: the quality is based on behaviors learned through exposure to the leadership behaviors of others.

Leadership styles are as numerous as there are people on the planet. All categories of leadership are learnable. Nobody was born a leader. What we view as natural leaders are individuals who were raised with more exposure to good or bad leadership. Our individual styles of leadership are based on our own exposure to good — and bad — leaders in our lives.

Your current and future employees are going to stay with or choose you based on what they think you can do for them. Are you going to allow them to get their hours? Are you going to help them progress and make more money? Are you going to be understanding about their personal lives? You should have answers to these questions before hiring somebody. If the answer is no, be honest. Employees will respect you more for your honesty and enter the job

with realistic expectations.

As a leader, you are ultimately responsible for two things:

- The goal you as the leader were appointed to accomplish
- The management of your subordinates

If you crush your subordinates, you will not achieve your goal. And if you coddle your subordinates, they will not reach the goal. A balance must be found.

In the past, it was possible to push your subordinates to their breaking points and see if they have what it takes to make it. If they didn't, it was easy to replace them. I'm confident about 90 percent of the individuals reading this have worked for someone with that mentality. Now, employees aren't that easy to replace, and they know it. This means we must adapt our leadership styles to meet the demands of our industry.

The future of leadership is called servant leadership. This leadership style shows your subordinates that you are operating with their interests in mind. Servant leadership is so powerful that even military leadership schools have adopted it. Invest in your subordinates and, in turn, they will go the extra mile for you. That is the main theme of this style. It takes trust, honesty and good intention to achieve.

Where can we start to develop this relationship with our employees? Begin with your normal work review process. Ask the following questions:

- What are your goals working at this job?
- What are your goals outside of this job?
- How quickly do you want to achieve these goals?
- Is there anything I can help you do to achieve these goals?

The above questions will give you a great starting point in developing this relationship. Write them down and use them to invest in your employee. Other ways of showing your employees that you want them to succeed can include the following:

- Get them enrolled in your club's benefits package
- Provide a structure for career advancement
- Have financial professionals teach them money management skills

If you know they can't afford things like health care, find local programs employees can use and provide that information to them. It takes extra work on our part, but the benefits are worth it.

It's time to be the leader and mentor that your employees deserve.

Chris Warrick is the superintendent at Highland Country Club in LaGrange, Georgia. He is also currently a Staff Sergeant in the U.S. Army Reserve, where he has served for 12 years including one deployment to Afghanistan.

Tartan Talks 83

▲ Phelps

Communicating before engaged audiences didn't fluster **Rick Phelps** once he made golf course architecture his official career.

Despite being the son of **Dick Phelps**, arguably Colorado's most prolific designer, Rick had started pursuing a sports broadcasting career. His training as a student included working as the campus radio station's play-by-play announcer for University of Colorado football games.

Golf course architecture eventually supplanted sports broadcasting as Rick's profession. But lessons from broadcasting endure, especially when he must pitch and explain projects.

"It has helped in a lot of ways in making me feel comfortable speaking in front of an audience, whether it's members or a board," Rick says on the *Tartan Talks* podcast. "Also, hopefully, I'm trying to choose my words carefully to avoid excess words, but also to make points as clear as possible to the audience."

Rick has received an even better seat for Colorado's golf development than he did for football games. He started helping his father on projects as a 10-year-old and has witnessed changes in design styles as the state's population rapidly grows. He's also experienced shifts caused by water concerns in arid regions. "There are places here in the Front Range where the water system is as tapped out as it can get," he says.

To hear Rick's golf development and college football stories, download the podcast from the Superintendent Radio Network page on popular podcast distribution platforms.

GLASS-INSPIRED *IDEA*

A trio of Minnesota college students are using funding obtained via a business competition to launch a concept for rethinking the sand used on golf courses.

By Cassidy Gladieux

Three young entrepreneurs are aiming to make golf courses more sustainable one glass at a time.

Longtime friends **Matt Gendreau**, **Ben Goelz** and **Matt Thielen** want to turn recycled glass into sand for course bunkers and topdressing maintenance.

"We all love to golf, it's one of our favorite pastimes," Gendreau says. "We've had plenty of help along the way and really great mentors and they all love to golf, too, so that tends to be the type of people that are especially attracted to the idea."

The idea for the project they originally titled "Greenscapes" came after Gendreau took an entrepreneurship class and learned of ways that oats from distilleries were being upcycled. He recognized that the United States recycles around only 30 percent of its glass waste compared to other countries, like Sweden, that recycle around 90 percent of their glass.

Since last fall, the newly named Circular Sands has been in full swing. Gendreau, who attends the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, pitched the idea at the Fowler Business Concept Challenge, and Goelz and Thielen joined the team soon after. Goelz and Thielen attend the University of Minnesota Crookston.

The team was one of 25 finalists that competed at e-Fest in Minneapolis. The competition provided the trio an opportunity to network with student entrepreneurs from across the country, promote their business to other organizations and have the potential to win a portion of $215,000 in cash prizes.

"We've done a lot of practicing," Gendreau says, "presenting in front of different professors and even our friends and just constantly trying to refine it and make it the best that it can be."

Since placing third overall at e-Fest and receiving $20,000 in seed funding, Circular Sands will use the money to establish an LLC, invest in the equipment and machinery necessary to make their product, and, ultimately, get it onto some willing courses.

It's not just about the money, though.

"The greatest takeaways of the weekend were getting connected with people who had a passion for golf and sustainability — both people who are excited to invest and also people who just love our idea and want to work with us to support our mission," Gendreau says.

The glass being recycled comes from material recovery facilities, which will then go into a glass crushing machine, making it into a fine powder. The machine will allow the glass particles to be anywhere from zero to 300 millimeters and it can be adjusted to meet various course desires.

Concerns over glass shards or big chunks of glass making their way through the machine are easily dispelled by the group. "There's a lot of different stops and ways to ensure that the sand is 100 percent pure, and that none of that extra debris is left in there," Gendreau says.

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Sourcing the glass comes at little to no cost, allowing Circular Sands to offer their product at a cheaper price than some other alternatives.

Continuing their research, the group found studies demonstrating that recycled sand is higher performing, provides a firmer footing, causes less plugging and comes with a steeper angle of repose. "Combined with the fact that it's fully customizable is why we think we really have the edge over these natural sands," Gendreau says.

Gendreau explains that courses that prefer to use the aesthetic, fine-white sand spend a majority of the money on shipping costs, given you can only get that sand from parts of the country where it occurs naturally. "By offering this locally, we'd be not only slashing the shipping costs, but also the carbon emissions of doing all that shipping," he adds.

The team recognizes that the depletion of natural sands in tandem with the large volume of water, pesticide and fertilizer usage, courses will eventually have to adapt sooner rather than later.

"With golf courses being a luxury, I think that one of the most important things for them is establishing that sustainability factor so they can keep ahead and keep an edge over sports and leisure as a whole," Thielen says.

As for the future of Circular Sands, the team is motivated to succeed regardless of a competition outcome.

"Obviously, we know with any startup there's underlying variables that you never know are going to occur until they occur," Thielen says. "But as far as our projections go, a lot of what we're projecting has come from direct quotes from suppliers, or customers, or experts, or has come from industry research."

The team explained that they typically look at the conservative ends on projections to ensure some wiggle room when it comes to finances.

"The upside potential is that it could be even greater than we're planning for," Thielen says. "But as far as year one, it's looking profitable and then through those first five years, we've factored in growth rates and we think we really think it's extremely scalable as well."

The team first plans to stay local and eventually grow into the bigger market. Minnesota, their home state, has a large golf market with 422 facilities, according to the National Golf Foundation. The Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington market has more than 3,000 golf holes.

"We'd like to start close to home," Thielen says, "and then once we find success here, we look to branch out and eventually be in every golf course."

Cassidy Gladieux is an Ohio-based writer and a frequent Golf Course Industry contributor.

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Dottie Pepper

FORMER LPGA PLAYER, CBS GOLF ANALYST

Dottie Pepper has seen and done a lot as a player and commentator throughout her 35-year professional golf career.

In 17 years on the LPGA Tour, she recorded 17 wins, including two victories at the Kraft Nabisco Championship. She also played in six Solheim Cups and won the Vare Trophy in 1992 for having the tour's lowest scoring average.

For the past 18 years, she has been sharing her knowledge and observations as a walking reporter. She's been a part of the CBS golf team since fall 2015.

Pepper has an interest in and appreciation for golf course maintenance and agronomy, one she acquainted from the late **George Pulver**, her longtime coach, mentor and friend. Speaking with **Rick Woelfel** on the *Wonderful Women of Golf* podcast, Pepper recalled one of her first encounters with Pulver when she was 15.

"He was out taking soil samples at Brookhaven (New York) Golf Club," she says. "He was out there with (his wife) as they were walking and playing holes. He was taking soil samples, so I guess that sort of sparked my interest in agronomy and, ultimately, I think architecture as well."

The art, science and technology of agronomy has evolved considerably over the course of Pepper's life and career, but she wonders whether technology has gone too far, particularly with the use of water.

"Just because technology is available doesn't mean you have to use it," she says. "I think in some situations we've overused the technology that's there. I say that because everybody wants to put water everywhere. Look, I'm a green thumb and I like having water at my disposal in my yard, but not necessarily everywhere on every golf course is it a great environment.

"I remember distinctly being at the Safeco Classic my first or second year on tour in Seattle. And Seattle has its fair amount of rain. But they were putting so much water on the golf course. It was mudball, after mudball, after mudball, and I finally got hold of an LPGA official and said, 'What the heck are we doing?' I'm staying in private housing on the golf course and the sprinklers are going all night long and we've had nothing but rain. What are we doing?' And, he said that 'green was good.'

"But, at some point, you've got to stop and I think that's where we are. By hook or by crook, we've come to respect the bounciness of the terrain, and sand capping, and being able to monitor water. What I don't love are the green speeds because I think it limits us a little bit and that's where I say the agronomy … just because you have it, doesn't mean you have to use it.

"I think we're getting back to the space where we understand that air movement and drying conditions. If we have to lose a few bad trees, it's OK. If we can make the turf conditions good on their own where Mother Nature can be a friend rather than a foe, we've done a great job. I think that's where the biggest change in those 35 years for me has been been. Everybody just wanted to run the water, now we're realizing that it's not all that healthy all the time."

During the podcast, Pepper spoke to the superintendents who volunteer their time to assist their peers hosting major events.

"That regular staff at a golf course that's holding a tournament can't possibly maintain that golf course to tournament standards, especially if there's weather," she says. "So, there are interns and there are volunteers and there are superintendents from the area that come in to help. If there's an ounce of a delay, unless you have a huge staff and people from really everywhere helping, you don't get back on the golf course." **GCI**

What I don't love are the green speeds because I think it limits us a little bit and that's where I say the agronomy … just because you have it, doesn't mean you have to use it."

PREPARING FOR PRESSURE

Golf's major championships now dominate the game. The world's best players gear their schedules and preparation around the four weeks of the year when majors are contested. A win in one of the majors often changes the arc of players' careers and even their lives. It's no wonder that under the pressure that accompanies these events we sometimes see players come unglued.

But what about the courses chosen to host a major? How do they deal with the pressure that in many ways equals what the players feel? The answer is that they prepare. They plan, anticipate and devise contingencies to such an extent that they manage to make hosting a major tournament look almost routine.

What can superintendents and other club and facility managers learn from these battle-tested professionals? Two veterans of major championship events say there are three keys to success: advance preparation, communication, and the ability to anticipate and then deal with unexpected circumstances.

ADVANCE PREPARATION

Nick Sidorakis, general manager and CEO of Southern Hills, which has hosted numerous PGA and USGA championships, including the 2022 PGA Championship, likes to say that "planning prevents poor performance." To make sure no detail falls into a proverbial crack, Sidorakis created a 10-point preparation checklist that emphasizes coordination with tournament hosts, tournament directors, operations managers, vendors and city officials. And that's all before he gets to the items on his list specific to the remarkable Southern Hills course itself.

Russ Myers, Southern Hills' acclaimed golf course superintendent, keeps his own checklist, which includes:

- Achieve the objectives of the host organization and partners. At the major championship level, these are the objectives of the PGA Tour, the PGA of America and the USGA. In the case of a local or regional event, these partners would include PGA sections, corporate entities and charitable organizations, all of which have objectives and their own definitions of success.
- Do whatever it takes to eliminate ground under repair areas prior to the event, and to the extent possible avoid lift, clean and place.
- Let the golf and the golfers be the event's main story, not the decisions made by the superintendent or the crew.
- Build infrastructure, staffing and plans that can adapt quickly to a wide range of potential challenges.

COMMUNICATION

Keeping multiple affiliated parties well-informed is essential to success. Three components that drive effective communications are:

- **Content:** Make sure the plan includes all affiliated parties, from players to staff to those not even present at the golf course. Plan communications for each segment, detailing priorities for each audience segment in clear and concise language. Use visuals — photos and video to reinforce key messages.
- **Character:** Make your communications reflect your values and the club's culture. Allow your passion, enthusiasm, and commitment to ring through.
- **Cadence:** Predetermine the pace of your messaging. Enable key constituencies to anticipate your next communication by establishing a disciplined communications schedule.

AGILITY FOR THE UNEXPECTED

"Not sure anything is unexpected. Everything that can happen will either happen, or at the least, needs to be prepared for," says Myers, whose checklist reflects his experience preparing for golf's marquee events:

- Foster a culture of anticipation and quick reaction.
- Recruit industry professionals who understand your culture and can support your goals.
- Provide the facilities, tools and opportunities for your team and volunteers to help you be successful.

Few courses and superintendents will ever host a major. But simply keeping members and customers satisfied and engaged and their course in the best condition possible is a major challenge.

Myers and Sidorakis both emphasize the need to stay flexible and to realize that even the best plans will require adjustments. Myers puts it this way: "When (the event starts), the issues you were initially concerned with will likely not be the ones you end up focusing on."

Or as **Mike Tyson** famously observed: "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." 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.

DO THE RIGHT THING

Have you ever heard the term "busman's holiday?" It comes from Britain, and it means spending your vacation doing the same thing you do when you work. You drive a bus in New York, then go to London and spend the whole time riding the bus. Or you own a grocery store in Dallas and walk the food aisles in Rome. Get the idea?

Golf course superintendents should be very careful about taking a busman's holiday. What do I mean? That even if you love playing golf or seeing other golf courses in your time off, it's going to be very hard for you to play another course and not notice the conditioning, the rough and smooth spots, another superintendent's successes and failures. It's unavoidable.

Unless the other superintendent has specifically asked for your opinions on his/her course, you should —and I can't emphasize this strongly enough — say nothing.

Where's this coming from? I've heard about other superintendents "visiting" other courses for less than innocent reasons. The worst examples I know are when a "well-meaning" member takes it upon themselves to "invite" another superintendent to come over, play the course, and offer advice for making the course "better," or "more challenging." This column is directed at two different groups of superintendents: those who visit and those whose courses are visited.

THE VISITOR

Never, never, never visit someone else's golf course without letting that superintendent know you're coming. Even if it's a 100 percent casual round with a friend, reach out and let them know you'll be there. Maybe ask if you can come by and say hi, and if you have the time and interest, take a look at their operation. You might learn something; you might make a friend or do a little networking. All good.

If you're visiting another golf course with an ulterior motive, such as a member wants to hear your opinion on the conditioning, architecture and operation or you think you can do a better job, look yourself in the mirror first and ask how you'd feel if someone were doing this to you.

Our business is tough enough without stabbing one another in the back. Sadly, there are those who seem to enjoy doing exactly that.

If you are sincere about our industry being a brother/sisterhood, contact the other superintendent in advance and be honest. Chances are they already know that the member in question is out to get them or might know their job is in trouble. If not, maybe you're doing them a favor by letting them know. They might be flattered that you want to learn from them.

If the member swears it's just a social round, be careful. Still let the other superintendent know you're coming. I've found there's usually a hidden agenda and the member wants your assessment of their course. Do yourself a favor and don't offer any opinions (certainly not any negative ones) and do not put any "observations" in writing.

Instead, try to educate the member. Ask if they know their superintendent's budget, the labor sources and staffing levels, the resources and access to key vendors. Is there an HOA involved or consideration of property values before executing various cultural practices? Restrictions imposed on the club by local ordinance, permitting or environmental agencies? Are there geographic or climatic considerations? What's the irrigation situation and water sourcing?

You should defend a fellow superintendent, not help bring them down. It isn't fair, it isn't nice, it isn't productive. Again, how would you feel if it happened to you?

THE VISITED

How do you react if another superintendent calls to say they're coming to play your course?

Start by taking the high road. Welcome them, invite them over to your office to say hello, even ask for their opinion on the conditioning. Find out who the invited member is (knowing this should tell you a lot). Unless you have reason to worry, assume this truly is a social visit.

Then do your homework. Check out the other superintendent if you don't know them, make some calls, comb your network. Are they known for undercutting others, trying to climb the job ladder or wanting to give one of their assistants a leg up? And learn about where they work and how that facility compares with yours. **GCI**

Editor's note: What's next after learning another a superintendent is visiting your course? Visit www.golfcourseindustry.com for more practical guidance.

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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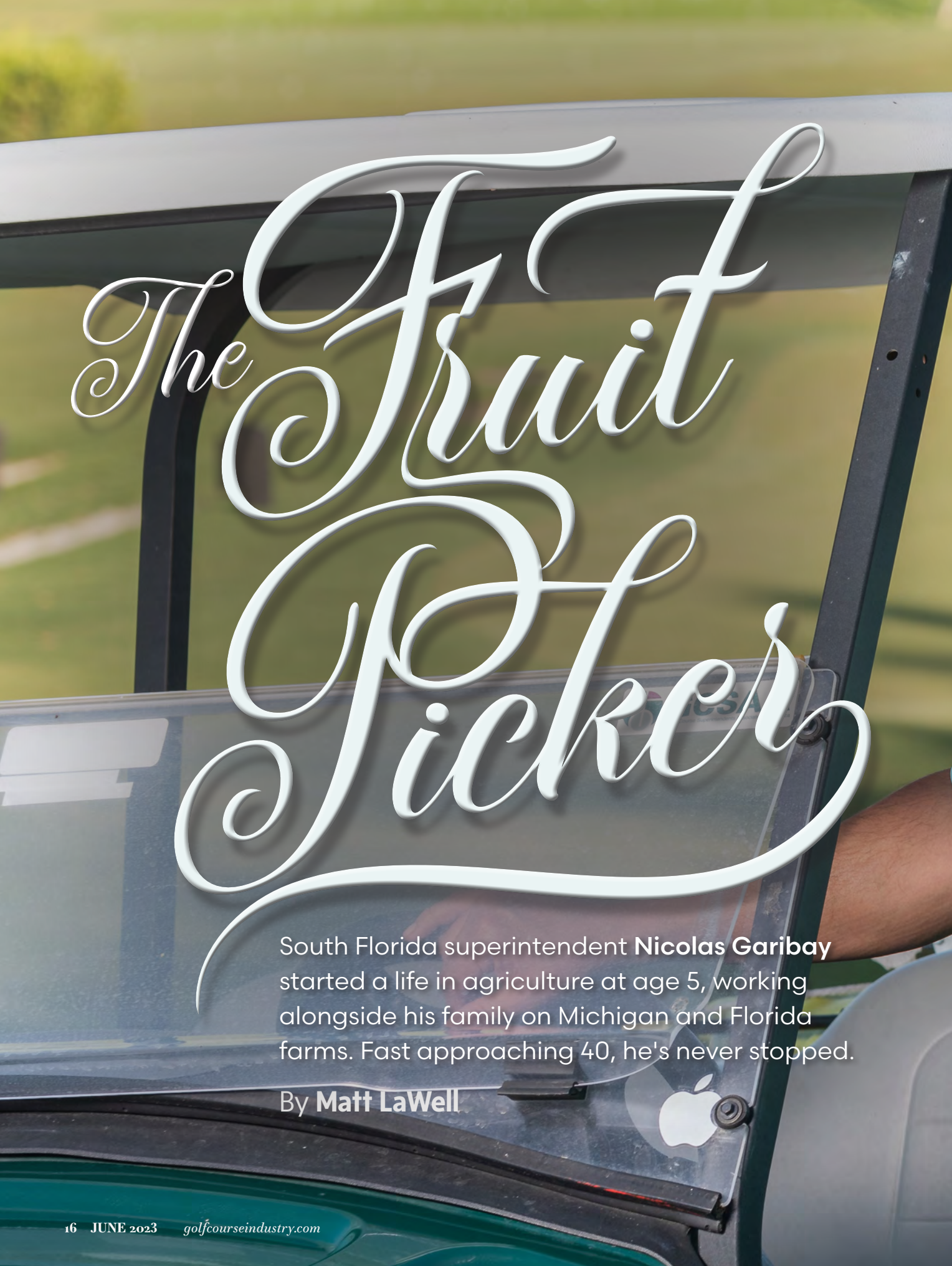

The Fruit Picker

South Florida superintendent **Nicolas Garibay** started a life in agriculture at age 5, working alongside his family on Michigan and Florida farms. Fast approaching 40, he's never stopped.

By **Matt LaWell**

PHOTO CREDIT PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUNMAN LLC.

Every spring, from the years before he was old enough to remember to the year before he married his wife, **Nicolas Garibay** traveled with his family from Florida to Michigan and back again to pick fruit.

Garibay climbed in the back seat of a Ford Econoline van with his brother and his sister, his parents up front splitting the drive time. The journey normally started around dawn, everything they owned packed in a trailer hitched behind them. Sometimes extended family joined in, as many as a dozen or 15 other cars filled with aunts and uncles and cousins. Somewhere along the ribbon of highway they would all stop at a McDonald's or a Taco Bell for the largest meal of the year. Garibay remembers his father, **Eduardo**, ordering 50 hard tacos and 50 soft tacos, the feast emerging from the back in a cardboard box. *Eat up*, his father would say, and Garibay would would tell him, *This is too much food*, but the tacos seldom survived. They might all pull off at a rest stop every couple hundred miles but more often they pushed through the day, then the night. Everybody not behind the wheel nodded off sooner or later. By the time they woke up again, the roll of the road had transformed into the stillness of a farm. New state, new home, the cycle of the land pulling them in.

After unpacking their lives into their next temporary home — only beds, tables, a couch, and major utilities were provided in the mobile homes they inhabited for about six months at a time — they settled in for maybe a day or two, acclimated to the weather, the neighborhood, school again, then got back to work.

▲ Before he started working alongside his parents around age 5, Nicolas Garibay would still walk Michigan fields with them as they picked fruit.

Of course, there were challenges. In Michigan, Garibay and his siblings, **Eddie** and **Adriana**, were the only Hispanics in their school, and even though they counted plenty of friends in both states, every trip felt like starting over. When they reached high school, their class credits almost never transferred from state to state.

And the work was physically hard. There were hot days, cold days, wet days, long days. Equipment busted. Sometimes work poured in by the bucket or the bushel, sometimes by the hour. No two days were ever quite the same. But, Garibay remembers, "everywhere we went, you would see family. That was the beauty of it.

"Nowadays, where can you have your entire family working together?"

Years before he first worked on a golf course and decades before he became the superintendent of the Legend course at The Club at Ibis in West Palm Beach, Florida, Garibay worked alongside his family, planting corn, squash, carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, green beans, zucchini, even watermelon in Michigan. The family picked strawberries from the ground, then cherries from the trees. Garibay remembers picking fallen fruit for juice at 5. He remembers sheathing himself in a rainsuit and climbing higher and higher in a picker to pluck leaves from cherry trees at 8. He remembers running a tractor at 12. Oranges filled their Florida winters. "Everything had its calendar," Garibay says.

The Garibays last trekked north in the early 2000s, their shift mirroring a larger national trend. Migrant farmworkers who traveled from state to state, following the harvests and the work, accounted for about 15 percent of hired hands throughout the 1990s. That number plummeted in the early 2000s and today sits around 3 percent, according to the U.S. Labor Department's most recent National Agricultural Workers Survey.

Two decades of travel and work took a toll on the family. Eduardo and his wife, **Esther**, were approaching their 40s and had started to slow down. Eddie had already stopped traveling with them, remaining in Florida to work his own jobs, and Adriana was starting high school. Garibay had recently fallen in love with a girl named **Miriam** whom he was certain he would marry. And their youngest child, another son named **Ezequiel**, was new to the world.

Garibay already knew a few years earlier that he didn't want to push his body to work his whole life.

"We had a supervisor, a guy from Texas, probably 75," he remembers. "Any time he would give me and my brother a ride to a different crop or a different field, he always gave us a pep talk and asked us what we were going to do with our future."

Work, the boys said. *Keep coming up here and working*.

No, the old man replied. *No, no, no, no. You cannot be like your father and your mother. You need to think different-*

ly. You don't want to be out here, 50 years old, digging a trench with a shovel. You know English. You don't have to work out here in the fields. You can do something different. You need to do better in life.

"He would talk to us like we were sons," Garibay says. "That's when we thought about doing things differently, about not killing ourselves for work."

Garibay remembers the name of the man who persuaded him to not work himself into pain, paralysis or something worse. **Ovidio Chapa**.

"We didn't think it was wrong," Garibay says. "We just didn't know any better. I'm thankful he told us those things."

▲ Nicolas Garibay, left, loves teaching and coaching in life and on the course. His recent students include assistant superintendents Anton Vergottini, center, who recently left The Club at Ibis, and Trent Thomas.

Garibay is almost 40 now, nearly the same age his father was the last time he headed north, and he still wakes up as early as he did during those years on the farm—earlier, probably—though he no longer grinds physically every day, just mentally.

The alarm beeps at 4:15, he locks the front door on his way out by 4:50, and is normally at The Club at Ibis, a 54-hole private community, where he started as the **Jack Nicklaus**-designed Legend course superintendent in November 2021, around 5:40. "I sit at my desk for 10 or 15 minutes, brainstorming, thinking of what needs to be done today or the next day," he says. He finalizes the day's plans with his assistants, then passes along first and second jobs when the rest of the 23-person crew arrives around 6:30.

He still works with the land, but with far less stress on his body these days than his parents endured. Most mornings are filled with rides around the course, his focus on details.

"What needs done, what isn't getting done, he's got a real good eye for all that," says **Matt Masemore**, the club's director of golf course maintenance for the last 16 years. "Not everybody does. Some people can drive past an irrigation head that hasn't worked for a week and not see anything.

"There's room to improve and he's always looking to raise the bar."

Garibay talks throughout the day with his assistants, **Trent Thomas**, a recent convert to golf course maintenance, and **Anton Vergottini**, a native South African who moved last month from Ibis to Lemon Bay Golf Club in Englewood, near the Gulf, to work on a major renovation. He never wants to micromanage them. He wants to give them the room to try, fail and succeed. But he still pushes them as he was pushed when he was younger.

"My job is not to develop them to be an assistant here," he says. "My purpose and my goal is to develop them to be promoted. That's what I want."

Thomas says Garibay holds high expectations for them, "but never unreal expectations. He does really work to develop people." Vergottini calls Garibay a great leader. "When you do something wrong, he'll tell you, but he'll also give you the necessary equipment to know *how* to do the job the right way, and *why* it's being done like that. He sees everything. There's not a thing he misses. There are times I'll do something and ask him if he saw it, and he'll tell me, 'I saw it a long time ago.' We need leaders like that."

How did a first-generation Mexican American — a Michican, he sometimes calls himself, blending his birth state with his national heritage—who never finished high school and only later earned a GED and a certificate from a University of Georgia turf program, climb from picking fruit to leading a team of almost two dozen at an elite private club? How did he trade up from working with his body to working with his brain?

Chapa and his message certainly helped. So did the love of that girl, Miriam — turns it really was love at first sight: They married two years after meeting at Frog Leg Festival in Fellsmere, which is affectionaly called Little Mexico and where they

both lived, when he was 18 and she was 16. And there were mentors who pushed and pushed and pushed for years.

The first and most frequent was **Carlos Arraya**.

Garibay dived into work the first spring, summer, and fall he remained in Florida — and he started out on a golf course maintenance crew.

Still just 15 years old, he followed a couple uncles and a couple cousins to Hawk's Nest Golf Course in Vero Beach, Florida. Arraya remembers hiring the four of them and then hearing about "this kid who worked hard and was in love with this girl." Even then, Garibay impressed Arraya. "This is a good-looking kid," Arraya remembers thinking. "A little wet behind the ears, but he looks like he can run a fly mower. Let's put him on the team."

Garibay worked most of that first season on fly mowers and weed eaters and edgers — still the kind of hard, physical work he was used to on the farms — all for about $7 an hour.

"I felt like I needed more," he says, so he left to work for the next five months at Orchid Island Golf and Beach Club, also in Vero Beach. No longer spurred by Arraya or his family, he left the industry for the only time to work alongside Eddie on concrete jobs for the next seven months for $14 an hour. "We were having a great time," he says, "and then jobs started going down, we got less hours and fewer jobs, our checks were cut in half." They switched gears again, this time working in air conditioning for about eight months. The money in that industry was even better, until it wasn't. He returned to Hawk's Nest months after Arraya returned from his own stint away from the club and, for the second time, asked Arraya for a job.

"I told him, 'If you want to come back and you want to make it a career, you have to make a commitment to people,'" says Arraya, now the general manager at Bellerive Country Club in St. Louis. "That's how it all started. We were sitting at 10 tee looking at 11 green, and I said, 'If you're going to do this, you're going to do this the right way. I'll do everything I can to give you everything I know."

They worked together most of the next 13 years at Hawk's Nest — most of them with Eddie, who followed his brother into golf and is now an assistant superintendent at John's Island Club in Vero Beach — and later at The Venice Golf and Country Club in nearby Venice.

Arraya listened to Garibay on the radio most days, talking with the assistant superintendent and the rest of the team. Even then, Arraya says, "I knew he had what it took to lead people. And he had that strategic vision to look beyond right now. He had a skillset you can't teach in the classroom. You just know when you see someone who has that 'it factor.' When you're around him, he makes you want to be a better person. And you cannot teach that."

Arraya pushed him to earn his spray tech certification. He pushed him to earn that turfgrass certificate from the University of Georgia — which he finished in half the suggested time. He pushed him to finish three, four, five jobs when others on the team finished one or two. He pushed him to set goals. "I certainly yelled at him enough," Arraya remembers.

One day, about seven years into their second run together, Arraya called Garibay into his office, dropped his work file on the desk, told him to read it, and walked out for a few minutes. Certain he was about to fired, Garibay left the file where it was. *If you're going to fire me*, he remembers thinking, *just fire me*. When Arraya returned, he asked Garibay if he had read it.

"No."

"Nick, you're so hard-headed. Just read it."

Garibay opened the folder and on the top sheet spotted the words "assistant superintendent."

"I can't remember if I shed a tear or not," Garibay says. "I was very grateful. I wanted to have a better work life than my parents. For me, it's very emotional, because I saw what they went through. They suffered. They worked in the rain, they worked in the snow, they worked when it was cold, wet feet all the time. It was brutal. I'm accomplishing what I wanted."

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That promotion sparked the next decade for Garibay. He moved to PGA Golf Club in Stuart, where he worked as assistant superintendent under Florida legend **Dick Gray**. Despite working together for just six months, Gray describes Garibay as "unforgettable."

"His curiosity is endless," says Gray, who retired in 2020 after 53 years in the industry. "He's very humble, he has a ton of pride, and he's very curious. It's not enough for him to know *what*, he wants to know *why* and *how* and *when* and *where*. He's a special person. He calls me or sends an email every now and then, and he always thanks me."

He reunited with Arraya at Venice for nearly four years, then landed his first superintendent position in November 2018 at Jacaranda West Country Club in Venice, working under corporate director of agronomy **Augustin Lucio**. Three years there earned him the position at Ibis.

"The accomplishments I have had in my career have been emotional, just because I never thought I would be where I'm at. I didn't think I had the potential to be a superintendent, especially at a club like Ibis," he says. "I didn't think I had the capability of becoming a superintendent. And then within a month or two afterward, I was like, 'I was ready a long time ago.' I called Carlos and told him that."

Yeah, man, Arraya said. *I know you were.*

During that same stretch, Garibay's life off the course reflected his life on it: disciplined, dedicated to family, ever growing and improving. He and Miriam, who also traveled every year throughout her childhood from Florida to Texas, where father sold cars around citrus picking, became parents when they were young — **Nicolas Edwin** is now 19 and **Yoseleen** is 15. After being baptized as Jehovah's Witnesses, they welcomed **Amarayah** in February 2022. He shows off videos of her dancing in the kitchen.

He mentions a few favorite Bible verses — Proverbs 27:17, *As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another* … Proverbs 3:5, *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding* … Isaiah 41:10, *Do not fear, for I am with you; … I will uphold you with my righteous right hand*.

He clutched to those last two verses throughout three harrowing days last year, less than a week after Amarayah's birth, when Miriam was admitted to the hospital with post-partum hemorrhaging that nearly killed her.

"She was already cold, she was shivering, and she was telling me to take care of the family, take care of the kids," Garibay says. "That's the last thing you want to hear. We could have lost her. That would have changed my life completely. I wouldn't be here. Golf? No, I'm done. That's why I say, and why I tell my staff, you can't take anything for granted."

"I think it brought us even closer together," Miriam says. "We appreciate everything even more."

What might be next for Garibay? He turns 40 this year, though as a Jehovah's Witness he won't celebrate the day. Fatherhood should be more fun than ever, especially with his son starting to study electrical engineering after excelling in his first job as a two-time McDonald's employee of the month, and his daughters starting high school and walking, respectively.

On the course, Masemore is set to retire this month, opening up a director of agronomy position. Garibay has already added his résumé to the pile.

"If I were a GM, I would hire him in a heartbeat," Gray says. "I would tell him, 'This is what this membership expects, here's what they want, and I know you can do it.'"

"He'll be a director somewhere," Arraya adds. "He'll be at one of the big clubs."

Will Garibay's nontraditional background and climb hinder him? Gray says it might. Arraya says Garibay should lean into what makes him different — especially his quarter of a century of boots-on-the-ground work.

Words of wisdom

"There are a lot of Hispanics probably in the same boat I was, working in agriculture with their parents. Becoming a golf course superintendent is something that's reachable and it's probably something they would enjoy. There are a lot of operations that are bilingual and it's a great opportunity. If this is something you want, go for it, because it's definitely worth it." — *Nicolas Garibay*

"Being Latino helps him tremendously because it helps him relate to all cultures, not just Hispanics, because he understands the challenge to overcome the optics," Arraya says. "That's a reality that people are uncomfortable talking about, just like gender, just like race. I think he will leave a mark in 10 or 15 years in Florida as one of the better directors and one of the better leaders in our industry. I would be shocked if that didn't happen.

"His climb, it's pretty special. There are a lot of guys in his shoes who maybe didn't have the personality or the leadership skills and never got an opportunity. Nick's pretty courageous. It takes a lot of courage to step outside that comfort zone and say, 'Yeah, I don't have a degree.' I remember for so many years trying to camouflage that in his credentials and finally saying, Own that. You don't have that but here's what you *do* have. It gives people hope, and that's what we all need."

Whenever and wherever that next step happens, Garibay will be ready. He has been working on the land since he was 5. He learned about responsibility through all those years on the farms and the courses. He learned about loyalty. He learned through experience.

"That's what I think I gained," he says. "And what did I lose? I don't think I lost anything. I never felt like I lost. I always felt like I gained.

"Everything I've done I feel has prepared me for where I am." GCI

IMMIGRA TO INCRE

WHEN MUHAMMAD ALI ARRIVED IN THE UNITED STATES FROM PAKISTAN IN 2007, HE SPOKE NO ENGLISH. TODAY, HE OVERSEES THREE SACRAMENTO GOLF COURSES — AND IS A U.S. CITIZEN.

By **Matt LaWell**

ANT DIBLE

Muhammad Ali has traveled six times between Sacramento, California, and Ghourghushti, Pakistan.

The two cities are on almost exactly opposite sides of the globe and, at first glance, they have little in common. Sacramento is home to more than 520,000 people within its city limits and is its state's capital. Ghourghushti, on the other hand, is home to between 40,000 and 50,000 people, and isn't the capital of its province (that would be Lahore), its district (Attock), or even its region (Hazro). Sacramento is relatively close to water, less than a couple hours from the Pacific Ocean if traffic is moving. Other than the nearly 2,000-mile-long Indus River, Ghourghushti is landlocked for days, almost 800 miles from where the Gulf of Oman meets the Arabian Sea. And the sports and culture! Big difference between the California combination of basketball, baseball and surfing, and the Pakistani preferences of cricket and bull riding. But still, both can be stiflingly hot, especially during the summer. Separated by a dozen time zones, their 12-hour clocks are identical most of the year.

And they are the only two cities the 35-year-old Ali has called.

Ali was still a teenager in search of a new life with his wife when he boarded multiple planes for his first transcontinental journey. He had never tended to the agronomic needs of a golf course — had never even walked up a fairway or across a green — but he knew plenty about farming the land, he knew how to work, and he knew enough to ask plenty

of questions. He still asks plenty of questions.

Ali launched his turf journey a little more than 15 years ago. He spoke no English back then. In just a decade and a half, he has climbed the proverbial ladder from a night waterer, to a crew member capable of mastering any job, to an assistant superintendent, to a superintendent tasked with one golf course, then two, then three. He is now in charge of 54 holes across three public courses, each of them owned by the city of Sacramento and managed by Morton Golf.

How much higher can he climb? His career mentors say his brain and work ethic could land him at just about any private country club, and Ali has never placed limits on himself. To answer that question, though — and to understand the drive, passion and discipline necessary for Ali to flourish quickly — we need to travel across those dozen time zones.

Ghourghushti isn't that different, after all, from Sacramento — or from so many other cities across the United States.

Ali learned about tending to the earth early, but not as a seasonal laborer on a golf course or on a landscape crew, or thanks to a high school or college courseload.

He just stepped outside and walked across his family's farm.

"I was on the farm every day," Ali says. "Even before I started school."

His father, **Sher Bahdur Khan**, and his uncle, **Sardar Bahdur Khan**, were part of at least the fifth generation of their family — their tribe, Ali says — to till the soil. They grew tomatoes, potatoes, wheat, grain, corn, squash, peppers and the cash crop that is tobacco, all on about 4½ acres. They milked cows, too, normally between five and 10, enough milk for the family and to sell to neighbors.

"I remember riding a horse in elementary school," Ali says. "I wasn't 'working' working, but I would watch them. And when I was in middle school and high school, I would do little things on the farm with them after school. Even in middle school, I knew how to milk cows, how to feed them, how to clean the barn, how to pick vegetables, how to harvest corn — the little stuff we do we every day."

Ali learned how to work by watching, then by doing. Cows needed to be milked and crops needed to be planted, monitored, picked and sold. His father and uncle did those things – and so did Ali.

He would probably still be in Pakistan doing those things if not for his father's health and the country's medical insurance infrastructure. His father endured dialysis treatments for years, driving more than an hour each way from the farm to the nearest hospital. Medical insurance in Pakistan has improved since Khan started his treatments, but "it's still in the very early stages," Ali says, "and you have to pay money to get any kind of medical treatment. And if you don't have any money, sorry, you cannot get treatment."

That sparked Ali and his wife — whose family originally emigrated to Sacramento in the 1970s before returning to Pakistan — to consider a move to the United States. If he could become a citizen, his family could later move in with them, and his father could receive better medical treatment.

Ali and his wife had married in January 2005, and started working on his visa application almost im-

© COURTESY OF MUHAMMAD ALI (3)

mediately with the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad. Already a U.S. citizen, she sponsored his application. The process lasted almost three years — during which time she moved to Sacramento and gave birth to their first child, a son named **Uzair**.

He received a call from the Embassy during the fall of 2007, that his visa application had been approved. He picked up his passport and was free to travel to the United States.

After a series of flights, he arrived on Dec. 11.

The first seven months in the country were a blur. Ali met his son for the first time, and landed his first job, then his second job, then his third job. And they were jobs, not a career.

"I was working at a car stereo shop," he says. "My father-in-law knew somebody." For $35 a day, Ali swept the store, loaded and unloaded whatever deliveries came in and went out, and helped whenever the store migrated to a local flea market. "I did that for a couple months and then I started working with another guy. He hired me at $50 per day. We were selling area rugs. My job was to clean his store, unload and load his truck. Area rugs — man, are they heavy."

I TALKED TO A COUPLE PEOPLE IN THE INDUSTRY AND THEY ALL SAID, 'DON'T DO THREE GOLF COURSES, YOU DON'T HAVE A FAMILY LIFE. BUT I DECIDED TO TRY IT. I CAN DO IT WITH THE HELP OF THREE VERY STRONG ASSISTANTS AND A COUPLE REALLY STRONG PEOPLE ON EACH CREW."

— MUHAMMAD ALI

Ali received another financial bump at his third job that first year in Sacramento — all the way to $60 per day selling cell phone accessories. "By that time, I knew a few English words," he says. "'How are you,' 'good morning,' I knew numbers."

But $60 a day wasn't enough to provide a life for his family, and it didn't provide any upward mobility. An uncle, **Muhammad Nawaz**, worked at Haggin Oaks Golf Complex, a popular 36-hole facility in Sacramento. He suggested Ali apply for an open crew position and helped him land an interview. Well, interview in the loosest sense of the word.

I WANTED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THIS COUNTRY. THIS COUNTRY HAS GIVEN ME SO MUCH, AND IF I'M GOING TO BE HERE, I'M AS MUCH AMERICAN AS I AM PAKISTANI."

— MUHAMMAD ALI

"There wasn't a whole lot of conversation," remembers **Sam Samuelson**, who worked as a superintendent for City of Sacramento golf courses from 1994 to 2011, and today is the superintendent at WildHawk Golf Club, also in Sacramento. "I had to explain to him, 'This is what I need you to do,' and he shook his head to say, 'I can do that.'

"We turned him into a night waterman and he was just phenomenal. We still had old quick coupler irrigation at that golf course and he was the best I've ever seen do it. He had never touched it before, I don't think ever. His uncle went out there with him one night and showed him how to do it and that was it. He didn't need to be showed more than once."

Ali realized that thanks to his farming background and tireless work ethic, golf course maintenance could provide stability and a steady income. He applied for a *second* crew position at Timber Creek Golf Club in Roseville, about 14 miles northeast of Haggin Oaks. He was hired there, too, and was suddenly working 16 hours most days. Mornings and afternoons at Timber Creek for superintendent **Jim Ferrin**, afternoons and nights at Haggin Oaks for Samuelson.

"Employees can be headaches sometimes," Ferrin says. "Finding people can be difficult and you don't really have the dedication. I don't remember him missing *a day*. Mr. Reliable." Ferrin still regrets that he couldn't work longer with Ali. "I've always said he's the one who got away," Ferrin says. "But it's a good thing that he got away because it made him strive for other and greater things."

With his visa secured, family growing and career starting to blossom, Ali seemed to be situated perfectly for years to come in late 2008. The financial world then crumbled, and the economy crashed.

Incredibly, he navigated that mess even better than his then-nascent golf course maintenance career.

"I was able to buy my first house in 2010," he says. "The prices were so low. There were four houses next to me and nobody was buying them." He had saved enough in just

I'VE BEEN A SUPERINTENDENT FOR 45 YEARS AND I'VE BEEN WORKING ON GOLF COURSES FOR 53 YEARS. I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYBODY WITH THE DEDICATION THIS GUY HAS. WORDS CAN'T SAY ENOUGH. HE MAY BE ONE OF THE NEXT SUPERSTARS IN THIS BUSINESS. I'M NOT KIDDING. THE GUY IS THAT GOOD."

— SAM SAMUELSON

three years in the country to purchase a three-bedroom, two-bathroom home with his brother-in-law, **Imran Khan**, for $68,000. "He had one kid, I had one kid, we paid cash," Ali says. They all lived there, together, for five years before reselling for a comfortable profit.

Around the same time that he purchased his first home, he managed perhaps his greatest accomplishment since arriving in the United States: becoming a U.S. citizen.

"That was the one thing I wanted to do," he says. Earning U.S. citizenship would allow him an opportunity to apply and be hired for better municipal positions. He would also be able to welcome his mother to live with him — his father, whose illness spurred Ali's move, died in 2015. "And I wanted to know more about this country. Getting to know the country, getting the full benefit, adopting the culture — this country has given me so much, and if I'm going to be here, I'm as much American as I am Pakistani. This country played a big role in my success. Embracing that was part of it."

The next six years included one highlight after another: landing back on the day shift at Haggin Oaks … working under superintendents **Jim Daly**, who encouraged him to pursue his Certified Applicator Certificate, and then **Stacy Baker** … not only learning English but gaining comfortable fluency … welcoming his second son, **Muazzam**, and his daughter, **Mahira** … and, in October 2017, being hired as superintendent of Bing Maloney Golf Course.

Ali increased his responsibilities, from groundskeeper to irrigation technician to de facto assistant superintendent, soaking up information "like a sponge, just wanting to learn the business" Baker says, and impressing all the right Morton Golf decisionmakers.

"Stacy didn't tell me anything, but I think he went to the ownership and he fought for me," Ali says. The superintendent job was not without lots of challenges — a 70-year-old irrigation system spread across 27 holes chief among them — and he jumped at it.

Less than three years later, he landed the same position at Bartley Cavanaugh Golf Course, and, after the retirement early last year of superintendent **Bob Cline**, at 9-hole William Land Park Golf Course, too.

"I talked to a couple people in the industry and they all said, 'Don't do three golf courses, you don't have a family life.'" Ali says. "But I decided to try it. Honestly, it's not everybody's thing, but I can do it with the help of three very strong assistants and a couple really strong people on each crew."

He counts just six crew members including assistant **Brandon Salinas** at Land Park, six including assistant **Matt Smith** at Bartley Cavanaugh, and 11 including assistant **Leo Moreno** at Bing Maloney — 23 total, with four or five seasonal workers across all three courses.

Maintaining golf courses today, he says, is far easier than managing the family farm even a couple decades ago.

"Especially back in the day in Pakistan, the technology was not there," he says. "Now I have an iPad to water my greens. It was a different story then. I didn't have a cell phone until I was in high school — it wasn't available, or it wasn't affordable. I was in the countryside. I remember my mom used to cook on fire. We never had gas growing up. It was a different life."

This is a dream fulfilled, a success story still in the middle chapters. Someday, Ali says, he would like to own a little farm here. Buy some land, do some of what he did growing up, "just for fun" and some peace of mind. Until then, there is plenty to do on every golf course.

"I'm really proud of him," says Ferrin, who still talks regularly with Ali and recently helped him during an elementary school field trip at Bing Maloney. "So proud. Not only is he growing his career, he's growing golf. The man has made all the right decisions."

"I've been a superintendent for 45 years and I've been working on golf courses for 53 years," Samuelson says. "I've known many superintendents, but I've never seen anybody with the dedication this guy has. I've gone out to play his golf course with a couple buddies of mine on a Sunday. I'll leave the course at 1 o'clock and he's still out there working. No superintendent does that.

"Words can't say enough. He may be one of the next superstars in this business. I'm not kidding. The guy is that good."

What is the secret? What does it take to travel halfway around the world with next to nothing, to succeed on every rung of the ladder, to thrive in a new country and a new career?

"There are lots of things we can do, people just don't try," Ali says. "I go for it. I try things normal people don't try.

"Once you decide what you want to do, it's just easy." GCI

Matt LaWell is Golf Course Industry's managing editor.

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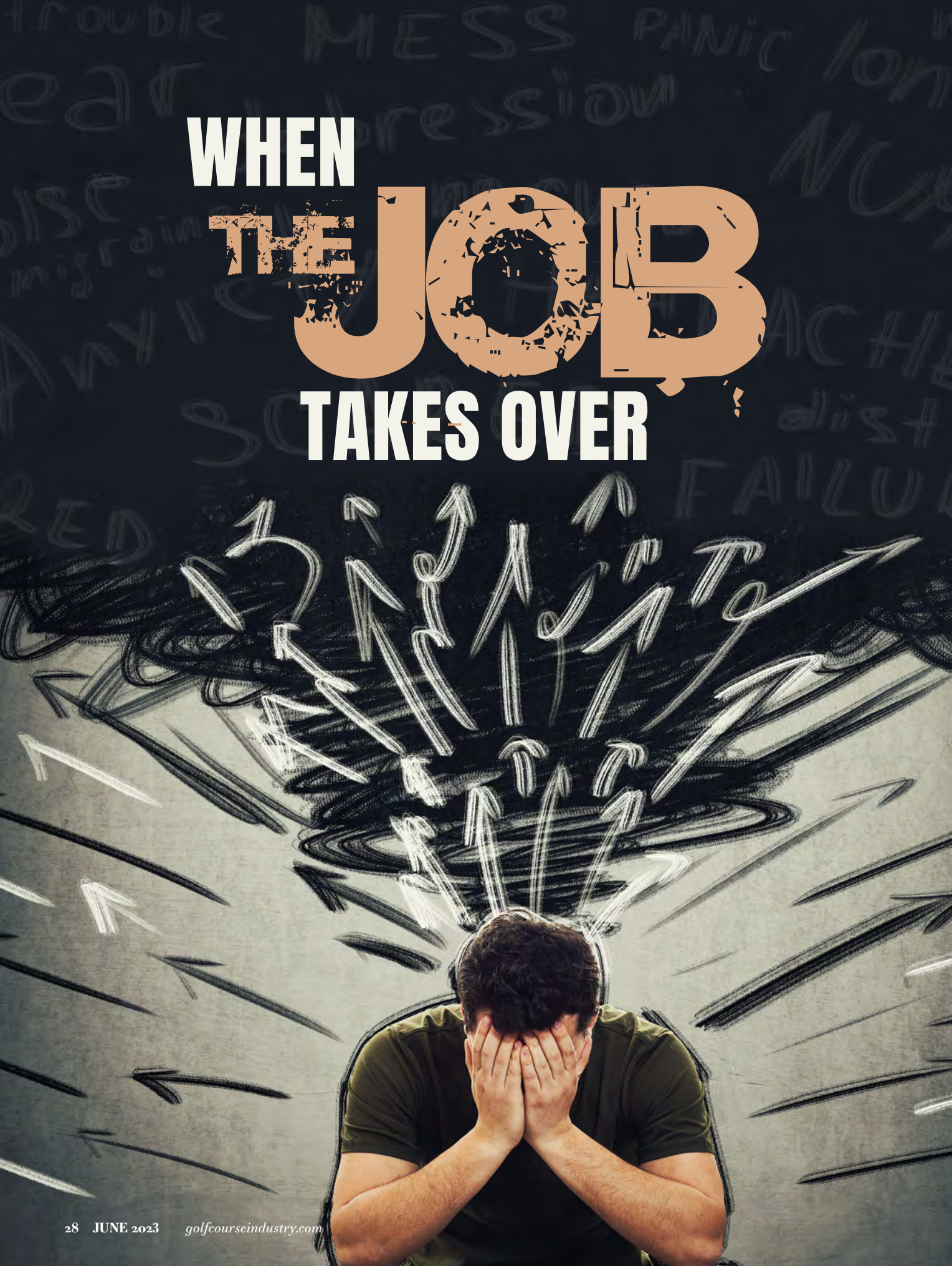
WHEN THE JOB TAKES OVER



Once called an 'idiot' by a respected peer, **Chris Allen** sought help to save the things that mattered to him the most. He's now flourishing off and on the course.

By **Trent Bouts**

For a long time, the life **Chris Allen** aspired to was right under his nose. But it wasn't until he was called out — called an "idiot" — by a virtual stranger that he began to see things as clearly as they were close.

It was July 2019 and Allen had barely sat down at a dinner hosted by John Deere at the company headquarters in Moline, Illinois, when the guest beside him asked how many hours he worked in an average week. Just a few years into the superintendent role, Allen admits he was feeling "all proud" of himself when he answered, "Oh, probably 70 to 80." Without hesitation, not even the blink of an eye, Allen's dining partner shot back: "You're an idiot."

The ensuing conversation changed Allen's life.

At that time, he was a divorced father of two working his golf course — Eagle Lakes Golf Club in Naples, Florida — not like it was the *only* thing that mattered, but certainly first in line. It had been that way since he landed the job in October 2015 and was a major reason why, just a few months post-promotion, his wife told him to leave.

Things unraveled quickly for a couple that had been married five years and together for a dozen. Allen and wife, **Emily**, a schoolteacher, had yet to start a family when he became superintendent, but they were building for one.

"When I got the role and went home and told her, we were all excited," he says. In that context, setting a goal of working 15 or more hours a day for his first 100 days in the job seemed like an investment in their future, more than the insanity he sees it as now.

"I said, 'Listen, the next three months, I'm going to work as hard as I possibly can to get this place back on its feet,'" he recalls. "I accomplished that goal, but it caused a lot of heartache. I was never home. I would be in at work at 4:30 a.m., work until 5 p.m. when the course would be too busy to do anything out there, eat dinner at the club, do office work until dark, then go back out and spray until 11."

Yes, there was a payoff. The golf course did get better, and Allen shaved more than $40,000 off the budget in those first three months by "pinching pennies in all the right spots, being organized and forecasting." Naturally, his general manager and his single owner "loved it." But there was a price, too.

"I definitely, 100 percent, put work before home, which is a very common occurrence in our industry," Allen says. "For most superintendents, our work ethic is through the roof, right? And we're all very proud of that. I'd come home thinking I'd done this great day of work and Emily was ready to shoot me because we weren't spending any time together. I thought she was insane."

Idiot.

"To me, I was doing what was right, doing what I should do to prove myself in a new position. And the job was going well, the golf course was doing great. But I was oblivious to the fact that everything outside that was crumbling around me. It led to arguing and fighting, then separating and divorce.

"I got so sucked into the daily operation of the club, and every square foot of grass and all these drainage projects and this and that. I became blind to the more important things. It was a very toxic situation. There was nothing she could say that would convince me I was putting work ahead of her.

"Even after she told me to get out of the house, that we were going to separate, I still thought she was being crazy and not understanding my side of things. But in the grand scheme, she was the one being rational."

Blinkered by "how the job can create a

self-sabotaging mentality without you realizing," Allen kept working at a fearsome pace. Then just two months after the divorce was finalized, his general manager, who he respected and learned a lot from over four years, died suddenly of a heart attack at age 46, leaving behind three young children.

"It was brutal. That was the first major wake up call for me to the realities of life and it triggered a period of reflection on life in general," Allen says. "I can remember spraying the fifth fairway shortly after and randomly crying at like 5:45 a.m. Part exhaustion, part regret for choices I'd made."

Then Allen got a phone call from his brother, **Scott**, up north. Scott and his wife had been talking and they felt strongly that what Allen and Emily shared was worth fighting for. "It hit me like a ton of bricks," Allen says. "Still gives me goosebumps to think about it. It was one of those moments when you hear these things, and they just make sense." He texted Emily later that same day.

Subsequent conversations steered them toward counseling, as individuals, then as a couple. A little over a year later, their first son, **George**, was born. Eighteen months later, **Emma** followed.

"The counseling was phenomenal," Allen says. "We ironed out a lot of things. Even though I was mostly at fault, the counselor explained that it's never just one person's fault. And I needed to hear that because, to be honest with you, I felt like the biggest piece of crap in the world."

The fault, or more accurately, the fault line running through the fracturing of their relationship was largely one of communication.

"Whether it's the way you're raised or whatever, nothing good comes from not verbalizing your feelings," Allen says. "Otherwise, things fester and build up and there will be a blow-up at some point. For couples who can't say what they need to say to each other, I really recommend getting help. I know a lot of us are from that era where guys don't want anything to do with that counseling 'nonsense.'

"Well, that's nonsense. If you care about your family and your kids, and yourself, go get some help if you need it. There's no shame in that. Once you go through it and you're on the other side, you realize you should have done it a long time ago."

For all that healing and all the new tools, in addition to their two children, the Allens were still divorced and Allen himself was still pulling crazy hours. Perhaps not surprisingly, "due to the previous experience," Emily "never really wanted to get married again."

Then, John Deere invited Allen to Moline for the John Deere Classic and a tour of its headquarters.

Although they had never met, Allen immediately recognized the superintendent he was about to sit next to at dinner. He'd seen him at local and state chapter events in Florida, not to mention in the pages of various industry publications. It was **Rafael Barajas**, at the time the president of the GCSAA.

"In my eyes, he was at the top of the game. I knew he was at a really nice facility, someone with loads of experience," Allen says. "I definitely looked up to him." All the more reason why Allen was "taken aback" by how things went soon after shaking hands.

"You're an idiot."

Of course, Barajas didn't leave it at that.

Allen explains, "He says, 'Listen, you're not actually an idiot. But you've got to understand that it's very easy to get sucked into that way of life in this industry. You need to understand that at the end of the day, no matter what, this is just a job. You can always get another job, but you can never get another family.' He didn't even know I was divorced or anything like that.

"When I flew back to Florida, I was kind of shaken to my core. All my fundamental beliefs just got destroyed in 10 seconds by Rafael. I was thinking I'm doing all this great work making so many improvements and it's making a difference. But when I sat back and

▼ Pawleys Plantation Golf & Country Clubsuperintendent Chris Allen,right, with his wife, Emily, and children (from left) Oliver, George and Emma.

© COURTESY OF CHRIS ALLEN (4)

> To me, I was doing what was right, doing what I should do to prove myself in a new position. And the job was going well, the golf course was doing great. But I was oblivious to the fact that everything outside that was crumbling around me."

looked at the operation, I came to the realization all those extra hours there weren't really paying off like I thought they were.

"While you're giving the club those extra hours you're taking twice as much from yourself. We've all seen a lot of guys burn out. Guys who choose a different career path even though they might be the best superintendents in the world. You can't blame them, because emotionally, it takes a toll.

"You can be just as effective, even more effective, working 50 hours instead of 80. There has got to be balance and at the end of the day, the product is going to be better if you have that balance. It's always going to be better if you're coming to work with a clear mind and a good attitude. Your staff feeds off that. I'm not sure I would have that mentality, even now, if I didn't have that dinner."

Returning to Eagle Lakes, Allen was, if not a new man, at least a new manager, of his crew and his life.

"My first year as a superintendent, I probably hired and fired 50 people because we were just a factory. Cutthroat," he says. "We didn't pay a lot, so we were kind of getting the bottom of the barrel from the labor pool. I reassessed the pay scale and took a different approach to become more flexible with schedules and focused on positive reinforcement. The response was tremendous. Tremendous.

"After that conversation with Rafael, I created a really nice environment and culture for the guys. It got to a point where we had solid employees coming by looking to work for us. For good employees, it's not just a job. They want to be taken care of, feel like they are appreciated. They want that culture. The labor shortage is tough all over the country. So, you're not doing yourself any favors if you're not taking care of your staff."

Aware that several staff members were working other jobs to take care of their families, Allen came up with an alternative. In order to not spread them so thin, he helped them establish an after-hours landscaping business in the neighboring community. To get them started, he let them use tools and equipment from the golf course.

Since relocating to Pawleys Plantation, on Pawleys Island near Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, in September 2021, Allen helped some crew members in similar circumstances secure a contract to manage a wild hog population pestering homeowners. That work evolved to include a fencing contract. Opportunities like that, so close to their main job and so conveniently scheduled around it, Allen says, can make a huge difference helping hourly employees stabilize life at home.

"And things like that also create a bond and a loyalty aspect," he says.

▲ Chris Allen has found the right mix on and off the course since moving to South Carolina in 2021.

"People understand that you care about them and that you don't see them as just a tool for your job. To me, that's been a huge thing. Rafael drove the point home that family should be the most important thing in your life and that I should be empowering my staff to feel the same way."

After his trip to Moline, Allen's crew members weren't the only ones who picked up on his new perspective. Across the board, he "pulled back and reassessed." It didn't just change his management style. "It changed my entire life and perspective on work-life balance," he says. He trimmed his own work week closer to 50 hours.

"It's just grass. I tell my guys that all the time now," he says. "We're not pulling people out of fires. We're not saving lives. We're just growing grass. That's all. And all I want from them is communication. It's family first. If you have something going on outside of work you need to take care of, you're not going to lose your job, it's not going to be held against you. Just communicate and I'll try and be as flexible as I can. No assistant who has worked with me since (the conversation with Barajas) has ever worked more than 40 hours, except in an emergency."

Emily also saw the change in Allen and in May 2020, about 10 months after Barajas dropped the idiot bomb, they remarried, on a small boat off the coast of Naples. It was at the height of the pandemic, so the captain — the sole crew member — served as officiant and George, 2½, and Emma, just under a year old, were the only witnesses. Later that year, a second son, **Oliver**, was born.

He wasn't done.

The South Florida golf market, Allen believed, was not conducive to the life he wanted for his family, not if they were truly to be his main priority. Often super-fueled by the deep pockets of escapees from northern winters, golf there can be intensely competitive. Golfers sometimes wear their club membership like a badge of honor, a status symbol. Perfection isn't the goal in course conditioning as often as it is the expectation.

"Those guys and girls in South Florida, the amount of pressure that is on their back on any given day to provide top-notch conditions is incredible. I have nothing but the utmost respect for them," Allen says. "And it's 24/7, non-stop. It's almost like members are more concerned about having perfect conditions than the enjoyment of the game. That's not the case at Pawleys. The membership is unbelievable. There is this real Lowcountry vibe. Sure, everyone wants great conditions, but their focus is on everyone enjoying the place, and they want the staff to be happy, too."

The Allens knew what to expect in South Carolina. Nearly 20 years earlier, they shifted from Massachusetts to the beach so Emily could attend school at Coastal Carolina University. Allen had an environmental science degree but jobs in the field were scarce, so he took an hourly position on the golf course maintenance team at TPC Myrtle Beach. They spent five years in town, marrying in Murrells Inlet in 2011, before a family health issue drew them back up north soon after.

Today, Allen says, they couldn't be happier. "It's fantastic. Pawleys kind of reminds me of being back in Cape Cod, a small, beachy town," he says. "It's a lot less busy than Myrtle Beach and the golf course is absolutely beautiful. We were living in a townhome in Naples but we both grew up with yards and we wanted that for our family, so the kids could run around, play sports and games and have fun. That just wasn't financially possible in Naples, unless we moved two hours inland.

"Since coming here, I've actually had guys from South Florida ask me how I got out. How did I escape? For me, I wasn't escaping anything. I was going towards what my wife and I wanted. It was a positive move for our family." **GCI**

Trent Bouts is a Greer, South Carolina-based writer and a frequent Golf Course Industry contributor. This article first appeared in Carolinas Green.

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RUN INTO A NEW LIFE

Aaron D. Fish left comfortable surroundings and found a turf home in a beautiful place before succumbing to the stresses of his first superintendent job. He describes how a drastic lifestyle change helped him transform his body and mind.

WING

The golf course maintenance industry is a competitive, demanding and all too often thankless industry. Maintenance crews work tirelessly, day after day, in heat, rain, snow … you name it … to provide members and patrons exceptional course conditions.

Whether it's early-morning starts, late-evenings finishes, equipment breakdowns or any other hurdle, the maintenance team is expected to deliver daily without excuses. Unfortunately, the pressure of the daily grind, economic woes and the numerous other challenges a superintendent faces can become overwhelming. The demands are mentally testing the good men and women everywhere throughout the industry.

Managing your personal life in an extremely demanding industry while staying positive, focused and above all happy is paramount to a successful and long career as a golf course superintendent. Finding that balance and taking control of my life and career came in a way I would have never expected.

My journey in turf management started in 2004, when my twin boys were just months from being born and my oldest son was about to turn 4. I'd lost my job as a manager at a retail store and was struggling to find work in a small Michigan town. One of the only available jobs was as a laborer at a local golf course making just over $8 per hour. I had no prior experience or clue what was involved, but I applied anyway. I was terrified on the first day!

Superintendent **Steve Young** (now a longtime friend and mentor) took me under his wing and assured me through hard work that I could get wherever I wanted to in this industry. It didn't take long before I fell in love with the job and decided this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Once I learned the industry, I became the assistant superintendent and worked 11 great years at the same course.

Through some great advice, I enrolled in the Penn State Turfgrass Management Program. Several years later, I earned a turfgrass science and management degree, studying long into the nights and missing gatherings while simulta-

neously raising three boys (with my lovely wife and biggest supporter) and coaching youth sports.

After years of growing frustration over not getting to take the reins from a superintendent nearing retirement, I decided to transition into selling turf equipment with a John Deere dealer. At the time, I thought it was the toughest career decision of my life. I had grown close with the crew and fell in love with the course. I left behind a career that was becoming very easy for me.

Sales represented an unfamiliar pursuit. The territory was neither John Deere-friendly nor economically stable. I developed the itch to return to turf management toward the end of my John Deere tenure. This time, I wanted to maintain warm-season turf.

I always dreamed of working and living in the Southeast but had no experience as a warm-season turf manager. Plus, Penn State wasn't exactly focused on such teachings. I eventually found myself in a phone interview with **Jeff Kent** at Colleton River Club in Bluffton, South Carolina, working out the details of an internship. My dream opportunity, which involved returning to daily turfgrass maintenance and work in the Southeast, was staring me in the face. The position offered an opportunity to leave my frozen northern Michigan hometown, start over in turf management with warm-season grass and move to one of the most beautiful places in the country.

Did relocating to the South Carolina Lowcountry seem intimidating? You bet! My oldest son had just graduated high school, my twins were about to enter high school and we were important people in our little part of the world. I sat on several youth sports boards of directors and coached teams. Everyone knew us and our families, and friends were close by. Everything we ever knew resided in northern Michigan.

As terrifying as it seemed, I knew this was my chance to change my life and give my family the life they deserved. But there was one caveat: I needed to leave my family in Michigan, head to South Carolina for the internship and make sure I was cut out for turf management in the Southeast. It was eight long months away from my family, friends and everything I'd ever known. I was living with young South African H2B workers in an unfamiliar place.

The decision paid dividends. I was offered — and accepted — a position as an assistant superintendent on the Nicklaus Course at Colleton River Club. Now came time for the real change, moving my family to somewhere unfamiliar, enrolling our boys

in a new, bigger and more diverse school, and rebuilding our lives away from our comfort zones.

We rallied as a family. We had each other's backs, stayed positive and started to settle into our new lives. Everything eventually fell into place. The kids were doing great in school, our oldest son began working on the Dye Course at Colleton River Club, and my wife was enjoying a great job.

Yet the stresses and challenges of life and golf course maintenance started impacting me in a negative way. I found myself drinking every day, often excessively, overindulging in the delicious southern fare and smoking to help cope with stress.

Work was great, but I wanted more. I knew I was ready to run a course and was itching for my opportunity. I found myself one day staring in the mirror frustrated, overweight and out of breath from smoking. I was ashamed by what I saw. I knew this wasn't the man I wanted to be. I decided enough was enough; it was time to change.

Changing was a difficult, slow process that I could have never done without my wife and family supporting me along the way. That same week I joined the local gym, stopped smoking and drinking alcohol, started a major diet, and refocused my life and mental approach on positivity. I literally removed any negativity I could from my life. I quickly realized that to be the best person and achieve my life goals I needed to become someone most people are too afraid to be.

Randomly, one day, I saw a Spartan Race finisher shirt and, out of curiosity, Googled what this Spartan Race thing was all about. I learned they were obstacle races all over the world, through mud, water and crazy terrain. The website described them as the most challenging thing most people have ever done. I was drawn to it instantly. Testing your mind, body and spirit aligned perfectly with my new path. If I can do this, I thought, I can do anything. So, I signed up for a Spartan Sprint.

To prepare for the 5K "sprint," I needed to start running, something I had avoided like the plague. In the beginning, I would set out on a one-mile run. I could barely run a hundred yards without walking, gasping for air and pouring sweat. It seemed like a 5K would never be possible. Every day after work, I ran and worked out for hours regardless of how tired I was or how much I didn't want to do it. I pushed through the pain and self-doubt.

I slowly began to improve, running farther and faster each week. By that first 5K Spartan race, I had drastically improved but was terrified. When I crossed the finish line that cold morning in North Carolina, covered in mud, sweat and blood, this overwhelming feeling of accomplishment and pride consumed me. It consumed me again as I completed a Spartan Super 10K race the following month. It didn't take me long to run Spartan Beast 21K in the swamps of central Florida.

Every race was harder than the previous one, testing me to my very core. The sense of pride and accomplishment increased as well. Every time I crossed a finish line, my confidence grew, both in racing and life. Training every day for hours had changed me physically. I lost nearly 100 pounds. I was lean and muscular, exactly what I always dreamed I could be.

Focusing on a positive lifestyle, staying dedicated every day, taking on every obstacle Spartan put in front of me, and pushing through the pain and discomfort that comes with every race, has mentally prepared me for anything in life. I attribute all these experiences to my professional accomplishments and personal growth. During this lifestyle change, I was blessed with the opportunity to become the superintendent of the Nicklaus Course at Colleton River Club.

I have become a better leader, husband, father and person. I can confidently say the lifestyle changes and the focus on positivity and running have opened many doors for me. It has prepared me to face any challenge off or on the course without fear. It has given me the strength to push through the adversity I've encountered — and will continue to encounter — as a superintendent. The combination of love and support from my wife and family and the invaluable teachings from a mentor like Jeff has allowed me to completely change my life. I feel prepared to not only survive, but to thrive in this demanding industry.

The way I see it, the only limit you have is the one you put on yourself. For a guy who never cared for running (or was too afraid of the challenge), I've conquered that fear and turned it into positive motivation.

Since running that first 5K only two years ago, I have completed more than 50 Spartan Races, averaging top 15 or better in the elite age group division. I won an open-heat 5K race; took third place in the Savannah (Georgia) Bridge Run; placed in the top 40 at a Rock and Roll Running Series Marathon. With an entire season of Spartan Races on my 2023 schedule, who knows what else might happen?

I couldn't have accomplished what I have to this point without an amazing support system behind me. I can't give enough thanks to the people who have my back every day for all they have and continue to do for me personally and professionally. But I'll be honest. I was the only person who could make the decision to change and take control of my life by facing every day and every challenge with an open mind focused on positivity and success.

I've had to bleed, cry, sweat, crawl and run through a lot to get where I am today and where I'm headed in the future. I know the changes I've made and continue to make. I also know the lessons I learn from failing and trying again and again will help guide me wherever I desire. This golf course maintenance industry can be brutal. It can get the best of you — but only if you allow it to. **GCI**

Aaron D. Fish is the Nicklaus Course superintendent at Colleton River Club in Bluffton, South Carolina. This is his first Golf Course Industry contribution.

THE TWO CULTURES

For years in my presentations and writing about the golf industry, I have bemoaned the loss of caddying as a recruitment path into the game.

When assessing the golf participation decline starting around 2000, it seemed evident that something was missing when it came to encouraging newcomers. We pointed to the loss of the teenaged caddie and his or her replacement by the motorized golf cart. It was obvious in a way that could not be disputed, although to be honest, it wasn't something that could be proved, either. But the explanation made sense.

A few years later, still before the COVID-19 pandemic, it became obvious the maintenance side of the industry was having trouble recruiting labor. Turfgrass school enrollments were also starting to drop. And it seemed to me that, again, part of the explanation was that youth were not being exposed to the game in their early formative years when career ambitions and dreams of professional endeavor were starting to gel. If more teens had started working summers and weekends on golf course crews, I figured, more of them would have been bitten by the lure of the outdoors and turfgrass.

A recent conversation with a modest superintendent and humble former caddie (and now club president) refined my views. I will always be grateful for the eye-opening, 15-minute exchange while gazing out onto their beautiful golf course. I left understanding how the cultures of the caddie yard and the maintenance building produce totally different orientations in life with rather decisive consequences for how things play out professionally.

The old adage holds up well: "once a caddie, always a caddie." I know from my own experience looping for businesspeople at private clubs on the western side of Long Island's south shore. Many were ladies and gentlemen; a few were pompous jerks who thought it was OK to verbally abuse their bag-toter or simply to act out their behavioral ticks in the absence of their therapist. Golf was the great equalizer. You learned within three holes all you really needed to learn about a golfer to find out what he or she was like a person.

You learned never to be afraid of anyone, rich or famous. They could be just as smart, befuddled or scared as anyone. When it came to the shot they faced, you had the information they needed about the yardage, slope, bounce and unseen dangers. You also had the inside dope on whether they were nervous, confident, clueless or cautious and whether they were up to the moment. Of all the skills needed to be an effective caddie, the most valuable one was as a mobile therapist.

In contrast to the intense interaction between player and caddie, the maintenance crew worked by habit to avoid golfers altogether. The crew began its work hours before most golfers got to the course. If bunker work, mowing or hand watering occurred during play, the crew learned to step aside momentarily and let players through. The occasional hand wave or "thank you" from afar was about as close as crew members got to golfers. The less contact, the better. Whatever cultural biases of class distinction that workers might have had toward those privileged with membership were reinforced, not counteracted, during the workday.

Small wonder that, years later, most superintendents and those who grew up as laborers still seem to feel awkward interacting with client-golfers. At meetings, they are deferential. In casual conversation, they are not likely to engage in the kind of half-joking, half-serious, give-and-take of comfortable repartee and banter that (former) caddies are comfortable with. It comes from a certain lack of self-confidence that ultimately puts the superintendent and staff in a subordinate status. The status is reinforced by the smug superiority of too many golfers (not all!) who think their research consisting of two articles found on Google makes them an expert agronomist.

There's probably more similarity than difference in the respective cultures of the two work yards. The caddie yard, including Monday play opportunities, were great occasions for a no-nonsense approach to people. If you knew your stuff, your peers knew it. If you said or did something out of line, someone wouldn't hesitate to tell you. If they thought it was needed, they would slap you down verbally or even physically. It was not exactly a place for "political correctness" when it came to perceived slights. It was a tough working environment, one that taught you fast how to grow up and earn respect.

Either way, those were — and to some extents still are — great working cultures for a kid becoming an adult. Valuable life skills are to be found there. It's part of the business that makes golf such a great game. 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).

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Gorgeous and growing

By keeping turf alive and thriving in a colorful desert, superintendents are playing a key part in making southwestern Utah a trendy place to visit and live.

By **Guy Cipriano**

The fifth hole on The Pointe nine at Sunbrook Golf Club, a 27-hole municipal facility in St. George, Utah, is a short par 4 with straight beginnings before shifting abruptly left at the 100-yard mark. The left side of the fairway follows a cliff.

Everywhere **Ken Steed** looks from the tee, fairway and green, he notices clusters of homes that didn't exist when he moved to southern Utah's largest city in 1996. He also notices what attracted him to a fast-growing community with a robust golf scene consisting of courses almost entirely constructed since 1990.

Snow Canyon and its reddish-orange peaks dominate the northern background. Hundreds of homes dot the immediate and distant periphery. Overseeded ryegrass fairways and dormant Bermudagrass rough cover the ground beneath Steed's gray, yellow and blue Hoka running shoes.

Visit for the mountains and winter warmth. Stay for a unique place to live and work.

Steed is a turf patriarch in southern Utah, a region cleverly marketed as Greater Zion in homage to nearby Zion National Park, which attracted 4.69 million visitors in 2022. Fewer than 45,000 people lived in St. George when Steed relocated to the area nearly three decades ago. The city's population swelled past 100,000 in 2022. The area encompassing and surrounding St. George now supports 14 golf courses in a 20-mile radius, with 58-year-old Dixie Red Hills, a city-owned, 9-holer, being the oldest.

"Golf is extremely important to this area," Steed says. "On a scale of 1 to 10, it's a 9 or 10. It brings a lot of people here to play and it brings a lot of other tourists in to do a lot of different things. They come to play golf and then venture out to the state parks and national parks. It's huge for us."

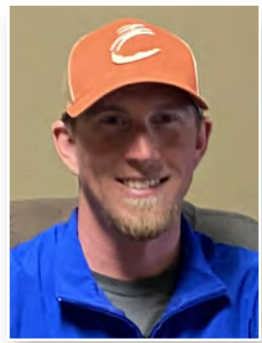
Like nearly every turf or club manager in the area, Steed hails from elsewhere. He developed a passion for golf as a child playing at Mick Riley Golf Course, a 9-hole, par-3 layout in suburban Salt Lake City, the state's largest city. Salt Lake City is 300 miles north of St. George. Neither the climate nor the growing conditions in St. George mirror what Steed experienced as a child.

Cool-season turf thrives in Salt Lake City. Warm- and cool-season turf thrive—and struggle—in St. George depending on the season. There's no right or wrong turfgrass answer in a region that receives less than eight inches of annual rainfall and experiences average temperatures ranging from 54 degrees in January to 102 degrees in July. "If I had to describe it," says **Josh Kent**, the superintendent at Coral Canyon, "we're right on the border of that Transition Zone."

A Minnesotan who worked in Nebraska before relocating to southern

Sunbrook Golf Club is one of four municipal facilities owned and operated by the City of St. George, Utah.

Utah, Kent leads the maintenance of a 23-year-old course routed around and through colorful canyons. His team manages cool-season turf year-round on all playing surfaces *in a desert*. Greens are bentgrass; fairways are predominantly ryegrass. Spending 2½ years under superintendent **David Buckner** at Conestoga Golf Club in nearby Mesquite, Nevada, introduced Kent to the nuances of desert turf maintenance. Mesquite is 43 miles from Coral Canyon, a distance qualifying as nearby in the expansive West.



▲ Kent

"My first impression was: How do they grow grass in the desert?" Kent says. "How do you have desert terrain, desert plants, dry and hot, then a nice green golf course in the middle of it? I didn't understand how that worked."

Kent proved a quick learner. He became a head superintendent before ending his third full year in the desert. Keeping cool-season turf alive during a southwestern Utah summer requires persistence, planning and patience. Kent's crew arrives at 4:30 a.m. and begins preparing the course for around 30 to 60 hardy golfers depending on a typical summer day. Making the irrigation decisions required to protect ryegrass and bentgrass while enduring the July and August monsoon season determines summer success.

Scouting is also part of the summer routine. Yes, disease and pests can damage cool-season turf in southern Utah. And yes, *Pythium* is a significant disease concern. But no potential pest or disease issue perplexes Kent more than the flea beetle, which hasn't been studied as extensively as other turfgrass pests. "It's such a nuisance," he says.

March, April, May, October and November are considered peak golf season in southern Utah, with courses often accommodating more than 200 players per day. Kent says the cool-season turf he maintains continues actively growing through November. The lowest winter temperature he has encountered since relocating to southern Utah is 21 degrees.

Todd Rummins can handle cold winter stretches and has adapted to punishing summers. A northern Ohioan who worked in Las Vegas for six years before arriving in southern Utah in 2018, Rummins is the superintendent at Entrada at Snow Canyon, a private course that reopened last April following a giant **David McLay Kidd**-guided makeover. The project resulted in a turf pal-

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Superintendent Ken Yates and general manager Brenton Rice are overseeing the beginnings of Black Desert Resort.

ette with 65 acres of bentgrass greens, fairways and tees *in a desert*.

Only 120 miles along Interstate 15 separate Las Vegas and St. George, and the drive includes a surreal dash through the Virgin River Gorge. The Mojave Desert cities possess subtly contrasting growing environments.

"Here," Rummins says, "it's all about the nighttime temperatures. The difference from here to Vegas is about eight to 10 degrees cooler in nighttime temperatures. When you are trying to get your bentgrass to survive through three months of brutal summer heat, the recovery period during the nighttime is everything. Most of the courses in Vegas have bentgrass greens, but it's only four acres of your course. Nobody has 65 acres of bentgrass there. It's too much to take care of."

So far, Rummins has learned bentgrass prospers from late February until about mid-June in southwestern Utah. "You're trying to just not go backwards at that point," he says. "It gets 115 degrees in the summer and you're trying to hold on, and there's every pest in the world out here." Fall temperatures, according to Rummins, emerge in October, which coincides with the arrival of the region's snowbirds. Peak bentgrass performance aligns with the peak golf season.

"If you were here every day, your favorite days of playing would be from mid-February to mid-May," says former Entrada at Snow Canyon interim general manager **Michael Rushing**, who recently launched a St. George-based consulting firm. "Your next favorite window would be the third week of September through about the third week of November."

Entrada at Snow Canyon's im-

Population spike and golf

Greater Zion's population has more than doubled since 2000 and Zion National Park attracted 2.1 million more visitors in 2022 compared to 2002. In response to the growth, developers introduced a pair of new courses over the last three years: Copper Rock Golf Course in Hurricane and Black Desert Resort in Ivins. Six of the region's 14 courses were built this century.

Can the region support more new courses?

Utah is currently less restrictive in curtailing development than surrounding desert states. But the southwestern Utah golf community is bracing for discussions involving water resembling the ones in parts of Arizona, California, and Nevada.

"I think the struggle — and I know our leaders are aware of it — is water," Sunbrook Golf Club superintendent **Ken Steed** says. "That's what it's going to come down to. I hope we don't overgrow our water, but the people in charge in this area seem to be very on top of it and we are watching every drop. I'm glad to see that."

Sunbrook is one of four courses owned and operated by the City of St. George. Steed's goal involves decreasing the 27-hole facility's reliance on overseeded ryegrass fairways. He envisions future scenarios where Bermudagrass covers fairways for longer stretches.

"Our overseeds are getting lighter and lighter every year due to the cost of seed and water," says Steed, who became the superintendent at Sunbrook in 2022 after eight years leading the turf team at city-owned Southgate Golf Club. "We are cutting back, and we're in a learning process of how we are going to do that and make it work for everybody."

St. George-based consultant **Michael Rushing** encountered water cost and availability concerns while holding club management positions in Arizona and Texas. He's observed a different dynamic since relocating to southwestern Utah in 2021.


Black Desert Resort

"Water is still less expensive here," Rushing says. "In Tucson, for effluent water at the golf course I was at, we spent three quarters of a million dollars. I'm kind of waiting for St. George or Washington County to say, 'We need to charge more.'"

Despite nearly 8 inches of precipitation through the first five months of 2023 refilling snowpacks and reservoirs, water conversations are likely to intensify as southwestern Utah continues to expand. "Golf is important, and tourism is the No. 1 draw," Rushing says. "Water resources will determine how many people can live here and how commerce grows."

▲ Rummins

mediate and new golf neighbor features 70 acres of bentgrass greens, fairways, tees and practice areas. Black Desert Resort is the final project in the late **Tom Weiskopf**'s career. Both courses are along the base of Snow Canyon State Park and managed by Troon.

Black Desert Resort superintendent **Ken Yates** worked in Alabama, Texas, Nevada and Mexico before landing in southwestern Utah last February. He led a pair of phased grow-ins — Black Desert Resort unveiled its first nine holes in 2022 — in conditions ranging from snow to heat exceeding 110 degrees. "It's a very special project," says Yates, a St. Louis native. "It's such a different course than any of my friends have worked on."

Weiskopf and partner **Phil Smith** routed Black Desert Resort atop black lava rock. Less than six miles to the south, Steed maintains holes at Sunbrook routed on cliffs, atop black lava rock and blue clay, around a river, over ponds, and past hundreds of modern homes *in a desert*.

▲ Steed

Steed knows the St. George scene well enough to avoid playing during the peak season. "This time of the year, we are just booked solid," he says following a course tour on a comfortable and crowded mid-March morning, "I can't even get a tee time — nor do I want to take the playing chance from somebody who's down here to play."

Asked what he thinks when he sees the crowds and homes, Steed responds, "They found a good place."

"Somebody let the secret out and here we are," he adds. "I'm somebody who moved from out of town, so I can't complain about it. It's sad in some ways, but that's how economies grow." **GCI**

NEW TOOLS FOR A CLASSIC SPOT

FAST APPROACHING FIVE DECADES IN THE INDUSTRY, CHICAGOLAND AGRONOMY DIRECTOR **DAN DINELLI** IS STILL LEARNING NEW TRICKS.

By **Matt LaWell**

No matter where he is on the golf course at North Shore Country Club in Glenview, Illinois, director of agronomy Dan Dinelli is surrounded by stability and endurance.

His superintendent and close teammate Jacob Miskiewicz has been with the club for only about a year, but his crew foreman, Juan Villarreal, has worked there for 49 years, which is two years longer than Dinelli himself. Villarreal was hired by Dinelli's father, Joe, who was the superintendent at the club for 35 years, just slightly longer now than the three Ocampo brothers — Santiago, Felix, and Tony — have worked on the crew. The greens are relatively new, replaced six years ago — more on them in a minute — and so is Dinelli's course dog, Metta.

"Metta!" Dinelli shouts during a recent morning tour around the course. "She wants to go pick up a member's golf ball," he says. "That won't be good." Metta relents, her jaws free of any ionomeric resin shells and butadiene rubber cores. A 2-year-old English springer spaniel, she is a hunting dog still full of puppy tendencies.

Dinelli had never raised his own course dog during his long run at North Shore — after arriving in 1976, he worked under his father until a 1993 promotion to co-superintendent, then took over in 1995 after his father retired — with Villarreal often training a goose dog for the course. "Don't ask me his technique," Dinelli says. "I just try to learn from him."

Those decades of institutional knowledge allow Dinelli and his 20-person crew to accomplish far more than other crews of similar sizes at similar sparkling clubs. "It takes time to build that kind of team," says Dinelli, who will oversee the Western Amateur at the club starting July 31. "I see how challenging that can be, and I'm blessed that I inherited a lot of that from my dad's era here. It takes time to build and construct a workforce, but once you get it there, oh my gosh, it's just so rewarding.

"It's like growth regulators," Dinelli continues. "You're trying to develop consistencies out here, and then once you develop those consistencies, develop a baseline, then you can start raising the bar."

Yes, Dinelli uses plant growth regulators — most frequently Cutless MEC from SePRO on those aforementioned greens, which are a unique bentgrass blend of 007, Flagstick, and Mackenzie. Dinelli opted for that blend after watching Dr. Thomas Voigt, a professor emeritus of crop sciences at the University of Illinois, run a series of tests on the North Shore turf. "It's not an easy decision because you can probably pick half a dozen blends and be equally satisfied," Dinelli says. "You have to compare and contrast your options, keep all the tools available and see what works for you. That's been my experience with all those chemistries."

Dinelli allowed the greens two seasons to grow in and get comfortable through challenging Chicagoland summers. A conversation with fellow turf pro Scott Pavalko — then the director of agronomy at nearby Bob O'Link in nearby Highland Park, now the director of golf course and grounds at Castle Pines Golf Club in Colorado — persuaded him to develop what has become a fairly aggressive PGR schedule: spray the greens every week.

"We started with light rates, knowing that if there's something I was seeing and was concerned about, it would be an easy, quick turnaround," Dinelli says. "You start out with a lower rate, say eight ounces an acre, and start creeping up. You find your comfort level that way. With the rates we've been using, I haven't gotten uncomfortable yet. All bentgrasses are prone to wear, so you really have to be careful, but even at these lower rates, if there's a bit of overspray, it's just not problematic."

Dinelli occasionally increases the rate to 10 ounces per acre, and sometimes 12, "if we really want to tighten the screws." By now, Dinelli says, fewer larger applications could be more challenging, "because then you have to give it a bigger slug. By the time the plant metabolizes, we're already reapplying it again. There's quite a bit of overlap. We've never seen a decline.

"You get the density you want coming out of spring, you got everything where you think it needs to be as far as density and coverage, you can start the weekly program and just work that in with your schedule. It's a lot of spraying, but you can fine-tune your nutrient program to be light and frequent with it and the growing degree days doesn't mean as much."

After four full seasons of the practice, it feels almost as stable as everything and everyone else at the club. ■

Time *strategically* spent

A destination course leaned on its crew to regrass playing surfaces when golf tourism slowed. The work produced even more oohs and aahs once visitors returned to New Zealand.

By **Hal Phillips**

Few golf course superintendents spent their COVID times as productively as **Brad Sim**. The native Australian, who looks after the magnificent 18 holes at Cape Kidnappers Golf Course, spent New Zealand's not-insignificant lockdown periods rebuilding and regrassing his greens. When that was finished, Sim and his in-house crew stripped nearly 50 acres of fairway turf, reseeded them and grew them back in.

"In-house" doesn't mean they did it alone. Sim and his team leaned on the green-shaping expertise of original architect **Tom Doak** and his ace shaper **Angela Moser**, with mechanized help from a couple drill seeders and a turf cutter from Wellington's Sky Stadium.

"I still owe them a round of golf," Sim says. "The total price tag was quite reasonable, for what we achieved, because we're already paying the crew we have on staff here. We hired a contractor to help with the fairway stripping. And we invested in the second drill seeder. But the crews here were magnificent and this course has never looked or played better."

North American superintendents will remember the pandemic for the participation boom it sparked, as golf was among the outdoor activities that could be undertaken despite lockdown requirements. The same held true in New Zealand, but the circumstances there proved quite different. For starters, two major lockdowns remained in place longer. New Zealand is a big country, but it's home to just 4 million residents and approximately 250,000 golfers. Kiwis also played a lot of golf during the pandemic, yet they didn't travel too far to do so.

"We were open during most of the lockdown, but business was slow," says director of golf **Ray Geffre**, an American who notes that Cape Kidnappers is a resort track where, traditionally, 80 percent of the round revenue is generated by international visitors. "With no one coming in or out of the country, there weren't a lot of golfers here. That summer of 2021-22 was actually the perfect opportunity to regrass the golf course."

Sim's background only made the argument for in-house regrassing stronger. Having grown up in New South Wales and armed with a turf management qualification, Sim spent nearly two years building The Grove, an 18-hole facility in London, England. After a maintenance gig at Cape's sister course, Kauri Cliffs Golf Course, Sim served as construction and grow-in manager at The Els Club Dubai, eventually transitioning to assistant course superintendent duties there. His next move—to the **Jack Nicklaus**-designed The Australian Golf Club, outside Sydney — coincided with the club's

© COURTESY OF CAPE KIDNAPPERS GOLF CLUB (3)

comprehensive renovation.

"The fairway regrassing at Cape was a big job to tackle in-house, but apart from that and some complications owing to COVID matters, I felt quite comfortable," says Sim, who estimates the greens project took five weeks and fairways 10. The crew broke ground Dec. 14, 2021, and reopened the golf course July 1, 2022. "The good thing about the fairway project was, we didn't have to change anything — meaning no changes to the existing irrigation infrastructure," he adds. "Our biggest problems were cyclone-type events that washed us out twice. Otherwise, we would have been done six weeks earlier."

THE 18 HOLES AT Cape Kidnappers were designed by Doak and opened in 2004. The architect has since created other New Zealand designs, but you never forget your first. While Cape has maintained its glittering reputation, Doak believes the course remains oddly misunderstood: "This is a course fairly ranked among the top 50 in the world, but I've found people have difficulty classifying Cape Kidnappers in their own minds — because it's so different and distinct from anything else," he says.

The course does occupy an utterly unique place between links and heathland genres. While much of the back nine strategically flirts with sheer, white cliffs that drop nearly 500 feet into Hawkes Bay, many holes flank deep, thickly vegetated ravines that, anywhere else, would represent a course's most memorable physical features. Geffre says first-time visitors to Cape Kidnappers are often surprised by the breadth of amazing golf and terrain away from the cliff edges, not just canyons but flamboyant shaping, exotic vegetation and striking elevation changes in the form of natural swales and hillocks.

Sim and Geffre knew that Cape Kidnappers had a cumulative thatch problem exacerbated by the site's heavy clay soil. Yet there were additional turf issues: poor performance during hot, dry summers; poor drainage in winter; ever-softer approach areas where balls were checking and not bouncing forward; and dry patch and its patchy appearance.

On the front end, ownership was determined to restore the firm and fast turf conditions that Doak created, because bounce and roll are vital to the strategic function of links designs, heathland deigns and hybrids like Cape Kidnappers. Working with Doak and Moser, Sim and his crews first rebuilt the putting surfaces from 4 inches down, thereby removing the thatch layer. Then Moser put the contours back exactly as they'd been before.

On the back end, Sim could see that bounce, roll and original contours weren't the only things this renovation had restored.

"It was instructive to learn just how much the thatch was hindering us," he says. "It showed us how little water was traveling through the thatch layer. We couldn't get enough water to the soil. When we had the thatch, we'd have ¼ to ½ inch of rain and you could see it only penetrated about 60 percent of the thatch layer. The penetration today is 10 times better. That was sobering: to see that normal watering would be ¼ inch and not getting anywhere near the soil. That's just not conducive to great conditions."

As to the qualities of Pure Distinction, the "super bent" that replaced the older varieties at Cape Kidnappers, let's just say Sim is a fan. "It was very hungry to start with because there was no organic matter there to feed itself. The greens looked ordinary for a time, but they putted fine. Now they look great and putt unbelievable."

Cape and Kauri Cliffs are both on New Zealand's North Island, but they are separated by more than 310 miles north to south. Kauri, where superintendent **Andy Wood** presides, enjoys a subtropical climate, where Cape is drier. Wood also resurfaced his greens during the pandemic, with Pure Distinction, to spectacular effect.

"The climates are a little bit different, but this grass loves them both," Sim says. "It's a bit drier here at Cape actually. Each course gets about the same amount of warmth, but it stays warmer a little bit longer up north. We'll hit (86 degrees Fahrenheit), just like Kauri. But they'll get an extra month or two of that. The blend we replaced at both courses consisted of older varieties. Today, they have their own super bent available, I believe. But we felt the Pure Distinction was the pick of the bunch. It's just so fine and dominant. And I

Shaper Angela Moser, Cape Kidnappers superintendent Brad Sim and architect Tom Doak.

have to say, it's just getting better by the week — tighter and tighter, and choking out all the weeds."

THE SCALE AND duration of the fairway regrassing project at Cape only accentuated the effects of COVID, mainly around staffing. This dynamic also underlines how lockdowns in New Zealand differed from those that predominated in the United States and elsewhere. "The rules were tough," Sim explains. "If any house had it, any individual in that household had to isolate for seven days. So, a lot of people who weren't infected had to isolate anyway. Then they'd end up getting it a week later. Business-wise, it was the perfect decision to undertake all this work during the pandemic. But there were times when, restriction-wise, it was very tough."

Most of those staffing issues surfaced later that southern summer of 2021-22. Seeding went off without a hitch, for example. Sim went with a four-way Browntop blend (Eggmont, Arrowtown, Manor and Sefton) from PGG Wrightson: "Some of these varieties had proven results on our property, but two had lighter tones to match the softer Pure Distinction. Everything seeded beautifully and germinated in short order. Six days in the ground and it was popping its head up."

Despite the fact that Sim's irrigation system was not affected and remained perfectly operational, he and his crews were obliged to essentially hand-water all 50 acres of newly germinated fairways and green surrounds for two months.

"Watering proved a little tough because it was the middle of summer," Sim says. "The soil profile here has a high clay-to-loam ratio. It gets a bit boggy in the winter, but we get very hard in the summer and water runs straight off the top. We couldn't irrigate the new fairways in anything more than one-minute cycles — or most of the water would just run off and away. The good news is, apart from our cyclone events, it didn't go anywhere in the rain. The profile handled normal rains very well, but we had to be careful if we watered too much."

About those cyclone events: From March 23 to 29, 2022, Cape Kidnappers received nearly 8 inches of rainfall. In all, it absorbed 10 inches in March. Several drains washed out and the seed was too young to handle the traffic of fixing them. Addressing those spots delayed the reopening. But these issues frankly paled beside the daily watering grind.

"It was one-minute cycles for eight weeks," Sim says. "We didn't automate. It was all by hand and by eye because of our soil issue — and because the ridges were drier and the swales more moist. Once we were all seeded, we had guys methodically moving through each nine, turning on individual sprinklers: one minute and move, one minute and move. … When they'd each finished the loop, we'd send them out on the other nine — in the hot, baking sun. We did that for eight weeks.

"Nothing ever goes perfectly. Sometimes we are too close to see the improvements. It's impossible to not stress — just don't panic. The watering is a good example. That's an extraordinary amount of attention over such a long period. But we couldn't be happier with the results."

Sim's boss couldn't agree more. "The fairways were a huge undertaking — just an enormous volume of turf for an in-house crew to peel back, dispose of and replant," Geffre says. "These guys averaged a hectare a day during the fairway projects. That's more than two acres a day. That the entire project was undertaken and completed under COVID conditions? Well, my hat's off to Brad and his crews. They did an amazing job." GCI

Hal Phillips is a Maine-based freelance writer, managing director of Mandarin Media, Inc. and a frequent Golf Course Industry contributor.

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FINDING INSPIRATION

This month's issue has been about inspiring others or inspiring performances. I think many readers recall a piece I wrote four years ago about Augusta National and how rather than view the Masters as a syndrome, we can look to their attention to detail as inspiration. Now, what inspires me may or may not inspire you, but I wanted to share a few things I recently found inspiring.

Obviously, my recent job change has been inspiring. I have written about that enough, so I won't continue to bore you here. If you would like to hear more about how the change came about and my experiences since relocating to Kentucky, feel free to reach out and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Although it is now June and the world has turned its attention to the U.S. Open at The Los Angeles Country Club, I found the PGA Championship won by **Brooks Koepka** at Oak Hill Country Club to be inspiring. The East Course at Oak Hill Country Club was a visually stunning masterpiece of golf course architecture and presentation. The 2019 renovation of the **Donald Ross**-designed course was led by my fellow Virginia Tech alum **Andrew Green**. And the presentation of the golf course was led by my fellow 2015 Syngenta Business Institute alum **Jeff Corcoran**.

It's no secret I enjoy major championship golf, but this year's PGA Championship was extra special as I was truly happy for both friends. They deserve all the accolades and credit they deflected. And that too is inspiring. In an industry where many think highly of themselves, their humility is refreshing and hopefully a lesson for those coming up the ranks.

In the lead-up to the event, as photos were being shared across social media, I was blown away with the effort required to maintain those intimidating bunkers. Those bunkers were as deep and steep as I have seen this side of The Pond, requiring some improvisation on the part of Jeff and his team.

Yet they found a way and the golf course provided a great test for the best players in the world. The leaderboard was full of former major champions and great players trying to become major champions. Then there was PGA Professional **Michael Block**'s top-15 finish. If his performance wasn't inspiring, then I'm afraid there is no hope for humanity.

A good friend recently stated on a podcast that you walk through the World Golf Hall of Fame and you will see countless photos of the world's greatest players and their accomplishments. Victories achieved on some of the greatest golf courses in the world maintained and prepared by great superintendents you have never heard of.

You may even hear the term, "the stage is set" on the evening before a professional tournament or major championship. Until recently, the "stage manager" and his or her team have been hiding backstage. I know when I started in this business 35 years ago, I thought it would be cool just to have **Johnny Miller** read my name aloud on air the final day of the U.S. Open. I never dreamed I would see the golf course architect and the director of agronomy interviewed on live television in the lead-up to contesting a championship.

It's also inspiring to see the enthusiasm of the volunteers and everyone else involved in the industry. The posts on social media showcasing the craftsmanship on display, as well as the "whatever it takes" and "can-do" attitudes of the agronomy teams, are inspiring.

Hopefully you found your inspiration and it translates to better course conditions, a better member-guest or club championship. Maybe you seek better employee morale and better team chemistry. Whatever your inspiration I sincerely hope you found it and utilized it to make things better around you, at work and at home.

And if you haven't found it yet, keep searching because there is inspiration happening around you every day. Just keep your eyes and mind open to the possibilities. You never know when something you see, read or hear will spark an idea or innovation.

And like **Mark LaFleur** of Syngenta suggests in his Twitter handle — create positive change. Because despite how much has improved in our industry, there is still room for more. Hopefully you're inspired to go out and make that happen. GCI

MATTHEW WHARTON, CGCS, MG, is the superintendent at Idle Hour Country Club in Lexington, Kentucky, and past president of the Carolinas GCSA. Follow him on Twitter @IHCCGreenkeeper.

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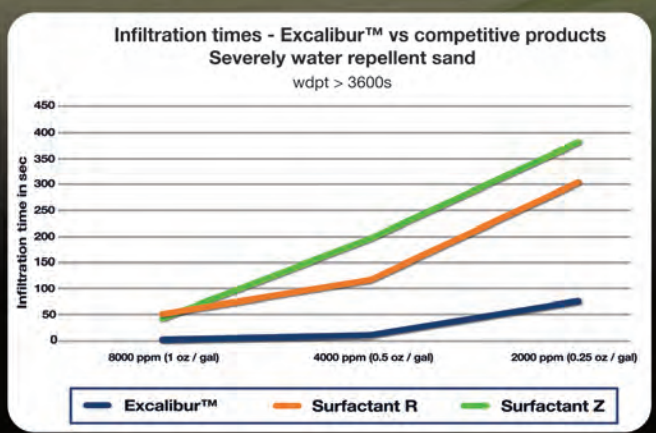

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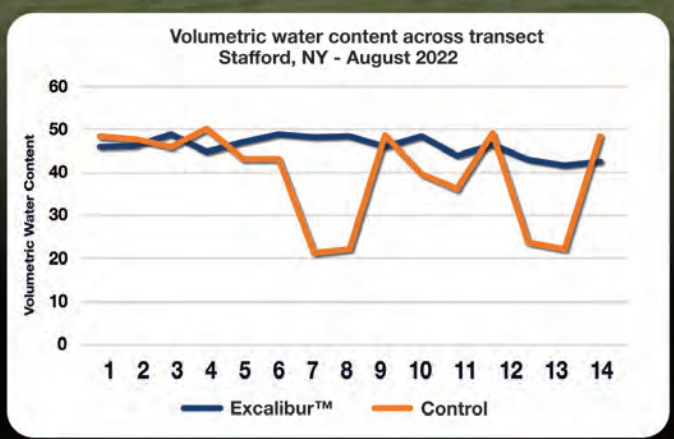

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