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VOL. 38 NO. 4

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THE PAR-3 COURSE PARADOX

A short and spectacular mentality transformed Big Cedar Lodge, a nature-inspired resort in the Ozarks, into a destination golf innovator.

Lee Carr explores the business methodology and maintenance behind Big Cedar's trifecta of par-3 courses — Top of the Rock, Mountain Top and Cliffhangers — in this month's punchy cover package (*America's Par-3 Capital*, page 14). Cliffhangers, an 18-hole layout with holes ranging from 60 to 170 yards designed and constructed primarily via in-house ingenuity, joins Arizona delight Mountain Shadows as the second par-3 course on a *Golf Course Industry* cover.

Reporting on Big Cedar reunited Lee with her golf storytelling roots. Lee's "tryout" assignment in September 2019 examined Big Cedar's efforts to develop a golf maintenance workforce in an isolated region with a limited summer labor pool. Lee and Big Cedar have simultaneously blossomed over the past seven years.

Lee possesses off-the-charts empathy, curiosity and golf industry zest. Tremendous thought accompanies every word she types or speaks. Her network includes the industry's most influential figures because she's mastered the art and science of listening. With no external prodding, Lee earned a turfgrass certificate from Virginia Tech. She's balanced a writing career with raising three terrific sons, including one who has worked at Sleepy Hollow Golf Course, a **Stanley Thompson**-designed Cleveland Metroparks facility.

Golf conversations with Lee feature no ending. Life conversations with Lee make others feel better about the world. She enthusiastically chats about any golf topic at all hours. Golf is a better game because of her presence.

Big Cedar also makes golf better by listening to others. The fact resort officials unveiled Cliffhangers in July 2025 suggests they've tapped into growing demand for quick-play layouts with imaginative design and splendid conditions. Big Cedar's par-3 courses hosted around 50,000 rounds in 2025. The total should significantly increase in 2026, the first full season for Cliffhangers.

In addition to expanding playing opportunities for golfers who don't want five hours of drudgery, the presence of three elite par-3 courses helps director of agronomy **Bubba Wright** and the Big Cedar team grow careers. Crews treat Top of the Rock, Mountain Top and Cliffhangers with the same level of meticulous care as the resort's regulation layouts. Mountain Top and Cliffhangers superintendent **Steve Johnson**, one of the central figures in Lee's 2019 and 2026 stories, has accumulated plentiful construction and grow-in experience without leaving southwest Missouri.

Resorts are emulating Big Cedar's golf development philosophies. The National Golf Foundation reported in its 2026 Graffis Report that 50 par-3 courses opened over the past five years. Many of those projects occurred within the hyped resort sector, giving the impression that America is a nation filled with epic par-3 courses.

Wading deeper into the Graffis Reports reveals another par-3 course trend — and it's a worrisome reality. The industry lost more than 800 par-3 or executive courses from 2004 to 2024. Little thought was given to the rapid reduction of compact courses until the last five years, when the industry started setting rounds-played records. Finding introductory facilities for beginners became a bigger scramble than a **Jordan Spieth** tournament round. America now supports around 1,700 par-3 and executive courses.

Golf is an intimidating game to learn on an empty course. The intimidation amplifies when newbies trying to keep their heads down look up and notice dozens of experienced players waiting to hit shots. And nearly none of America's 29.1 million golfers learned the game at a destination resort.

As resorts continue adding imaginative par-3 layouts, the sudden shortage of nearby short courses offering functional design and solid conditioning could prevent others from pursuing the greatest of all games. The contraction of safe spaces to learn the game represents an unintended conundrum stemming from golf's post-pandemic surge and prosperity.

Whenever and wherever conundrums emerge, savvy leaders seek input from brilliant people. The riddle caused by two decades of a shrinking short-course supply will be solved by people like Lee.

Guy Cipriano

Guy Cipriano
Publisher + Editor-in-Chief
gcipriano@gie.net

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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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GIE Media, Inc.
5811 Canal Road
Valley View, Ohio 44125
Phone: 800-456-0707
Fax: 216-525-0515

GROUP PUBLISHER
Dave Szy
dszy@gie.net

PUBLISHER + EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Guy Cipriano
gcipriano@gie.net

EDITORIAL
Matt LaWell
Senior Editor • mlawell@gie.net
Kelsie Horner
Digital Editor • khorner@gie.net
Terry Buchen
Senior Contributing Technical Editor

GRAPHICS / PRODUCTION
Jim Blayney
Creative Director
Kaitlin Sellers
Advertising Production Coordinator

SALES
Jimmy Clark
Account Representative
jclark@gie.net • 216-393-0220

CORPORATE
Richard Foster
Chairman
Chris Foster
President and CEO
Dan Moreland
Publisher Emeritus
James R. Keefe
Executive Vice President
Kelly Antal
Chief Financial Officer
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Time for discovery

Director of agronomy Rusty Mercer is ramping up for the the second full season of Kinsale Golf Club. How is the transition from Year 1 to Year 2 going — both on the course and off?

By *Kelsie Horner*

Kinsale Golf Club is in its second full season of play following a November 2024 opening. Superintendent **Rusty Mercer** is guiding the Naples, Florida, club through the transition.

This isn't his first time getting a course off the ground.

The 65-year-old Mercer's first superintendent job was at Hot Springs Country Club in Arkansas, where he worked with **Bill Coore** and **Ben Crenshaw** on a course renovation. Following that project, Mercer followed Coore and Crenshaw to Cuscowilla on Lake Oconee, where he worked for 17 years before heading to Florida.

After working at a few other properties, including Streamsong, Mercer joined the Kinsale staff in 2023 prior to the start of construction. Before officially opening the 18-hole course on Nov. 1, 2024, Mercer and his team faced some weather challenges.

"We had said all along the previous year that we would open November 1," Mercer says. "What we didn't know was that we were going to have two tropical depressions and a hurricane hit us through that summer. We had record rainfall during the grow-in."

Thankfully, due to proper planning and design plans from architects **Gil Hanse** and **Jim Wagner**, the course was prepared for that.

When planning construction, the club opted for a sand-based course, rather than a soil-based layout. Most courses in the surrounding area were constructed around houses or condominiums and built on soil. Kinsale was built to be strictly a golf club.

"I needed to move water, and I needed it to be firm and fast," Mercer says. "There's a lot of golf in Naples. It, in some cases, is very similar. We needed this to be different. It needed to stand out in its difference. And by doing it like this, I think we achieved that. We're never wet in play areas. It's always firm. And I think that sort of sets us apart from a lot of golf in southwest Florida."

The sand allows the course to drain much quicker, which has less impact on play. "We saw right off the bat that we moved a lot of water really quickly, and that kind of proved to be the thing that allowed us to get open on time."

Year 1 was successful. Mercer says members were excited and happy with course conditions. "It was great. I think the membership was very impressed with where it was at that point in time."

The first few years at a golf course is all about "discovery," as Mercer says. He carried that attitude into Year 2.

"The first few years, you're just watching and you're making decisions and you're tweaking programming, whether that be with water or fertility or disease control or pretty much everything," he says.

Mercer has his team to thank for the early success. But this wasn't the first successful track he shared with his crew. Many of his current staff members followed him to Kinsale from Streamsong. Mechanic **Jaime Basurto** has been with him for almost 10 years. Superintendent **Alex Aloisio** for nearly a dozen years. Assistant superintendent **Enrique Hernandez** has been by Mercer's side for over 20 years. Mercer's other assistant, Enrique's son, **Alexis**, has now worked with him for a dozen years.

His team's dedication and willingness to move with Mercer speaks to his leadership.

© COURTESY OF KINSALE GOLF CLUB

"I don't overwork them," he says. "I do believe that it's important that they've all got lives, they've got families, they've got wives, and it's important to spend time with them, and I've believed that through my entire career. It can't all be about work. I raised two boys and it was important to be at baseball games and soccer games, and if I'm going to do it, then I'm going to let them do it too."

The experienced director of agronomy has learned valuable lessons and advice through years of experience. Here, he shares some wisdom about transitions:

What advice do you have for other superintendents who are getting a course going?
I think one of the most valuable things is to do a good job of ***surrounding yourself with good, knowledgeable people*** who will always tell you the truth. Don't get too full of yourself. ***Don't be too proud to ask for input***. But it's just critical that the input that you get comes from quality sources. I think that the best you can do is surround yourself with a quality crew who are going to make you look good, who are going to challenge you and not just say yes to everything, but who will ask you questions about the things that you're trying to do. I think that makes us better, irrespective of what kind of business we're in. You don't want people around you who just agree with everything that you say. That's not healthy. I think you have to work hard at that, and you have to look hard for that. I know when I hire assistants, I always give them the same speech of, 'Listen, I don't want to hear just 'Yes' to everything I say. If you have a different thought, I need you to express it, and if you don't do that, then I can't use you.' The guys that I've had here over the years, they've been really good at that. They took me at my word, and sometimes that leads to arguments. And I think arguments are great. I think that's a great learning tool.

What qualities does a superintendent need to have in order to properly transition a course from opening to full play?
I think one of the biggest things is you've got to ***be curious***. I think you've got to be willing to try some things that aren't necessarily approved by the establishment — the establishment being some of the organizations that are involved in golf. I think you have to be willing to look at every situation as a standalone situation, because every site is different, and you've got to be able to determine what those differences are and how best to deal with them.

I think ***it's OK to question everything***. Be curious enough to question everything and then not be scared to try something that might be a little outside the norm. So just question things, be curious. Surround yourself with good people and good things can happen.

Kelsie Horner is Golf Course Industry's digital editor.

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Tartan Talks 117

Mark Mungeam came of golf course architecture age working for **Geoffrey Cornish**, one of public golf's greatest prophets.

Now as ASGCA president, Mungeam is using his platform and wisdom to educate others on the enormous benefits and complexities facing public golf. The way Mungeam sees the industry in 2026, affordability has become a significant dilemma in densely populated regions such as New England, where he lives and executes most of his work.

"It's really, really hard to get a tee time," Mungeam says, "and many times they aren't available at all. We don't have enough public golf — and we definitely don't have enough affordable public golf."

Mungeam outlined his vision for affordable public golf and the architect's role in making the game more accessible during a *Tartan Talks* podcast recording at the 2026 New England Regional Turfgrass Conference & Show in Providence, Rhode Island. The episode can be found on the Superintendent Radio Network page of popular podcast distribution platforms.

"I'm always considerate of how the golf course will be maintained because that's become an issue," Mungeam says. "Every municipal course and every public golf course is being maintained with far fewer people than in the past, and they are all searching for ways to be maintained more efficiently. As a designer, if we can improve and help that situation, that's an important part of golf course design."

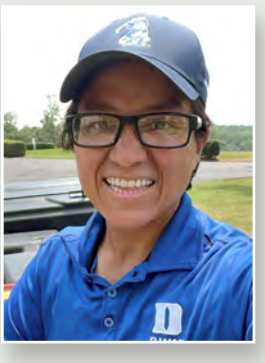
COURSE NEWS

Inverness Club in Toledo, Ohio, will host three future USGA championships, including the 2045 U.S. Open. … Philadelphia mayor **Cherelle Parke,** city officials and members of the Cobbs Creek Foundation are launching a $9.1 million investment in restoring three miles of Cobbs Creek and the public Cobbs Creek Golf Course. … Long Cove, a lakefront community in Malkoff, Texas, is planning The Canary, an 18-hole championship golf course designed by architect **Beau Welling** that will be the centerpiece of The Old Mine Club on Cedar Creek Lake and is scheduled to open for member play in 2027. … Casa de Campo Resort & Villas reopened its **Pete Dye**-designed Teeth of the Dog course following a yearlong restoration and enhancement project led by Jerry Pate Design.

Joselyn Kent

DUKE UNIVERSITY GOLF CLUB

> There's never an easy season in North Carolina. We've always got to be ready for something."



When *Wonderful Women of Golf* first crossed paths with **Joselyn Kent**, she'd been working at the Duke University Golf Club less than a year and was still settling in. Two and a half years later, she's the senior assistant superintendent, more experienced, and confident she can handle any challenge thrown at her.

And this past winter was certainly challenging.

"We battle all kinds of seasons all year long," Kent tells host **Rick Woelfel**. "We don't have a break in the wintertime."

Kent spent a considerable amount of time and energy this past winter working to keep the course clear of snow and especially ice. She notes the winter season that just passed was quite different from the winter of 2024-25.

"This year was difficult," she says, "but if you stayed vigilant, stayed ahead, and looked at the information you had around you, you know within a week or so what is coming at you. For the most part, we knew we were going to have snow a little bit. We knew it was going to be a wet, cold, snowy kind of season — but the extreme longevity of it, the coldness and the ice, we weren't expecting it, but we knew we could handle it, and we did what we needed to do."

Kent drew a lot of attention on social media over the winter after sharing videos of her efforts to deal with the snow and ice.

The first challenge was to get access to the necessary equipment. "You've got to get to the mechanic's shop to get anything done," she points out. "So, we had to clear a stretch from the start of Hole No. 10."

The next major step in the process was getting ice off the cart paths. "You have to make sure the cart paths are clear," Kent says, "so at least at the end of the day you can have walkers. Those cart paths were a challenge."

Kent utilized sand to cut through the ice. She would apply the sand at 6 a.m. each day. "By the end of the day, those cart paths would be slushy and wet," she says.

As for the Bermudagrass greens, they are customarily covered when the temperature drops below approximately 25 degrees. In this instance, they were under cover for perhaps two weeks before the season's heaviest snowfall.

From there, the crew left things in the hands of Mother Nature. "We waited until all the ice and all the snow had totally melted [to remove the covers]," Kent says. "We're more protective than most of the courses I've been around. We just went with Mother Nature 100 percent, so we had no issues [with ice on the greens]."

Kent acknowledges that it will be sometime this spring before the true impact of this past winter's weather can be assessed. "There's never an easy season in North Carolina," she says. "We've always got to be ready for something."

Kent works under superintendent **Brendan McNulty** and appreciates the fact that her boss respects and trusts her judgment.

"I've enjoyed learning what he has gone through," she says. "And I'm glad that he's given me a chance to maybe give him some relief. He has more hours and more stress than I do, so I'm glad to be able to give him a little break."

When time allows, Kent continues to serve as a volunteer at various events. Her long-term goal is to work a tournament in all 50 states. So far, she's checked off eight states. Kent views these events as educational experiences.

"Personally, I love learning about all the different grasses and seeing how some superintendents handle things a lot differently than I would, or what I've seen my bosses do."

SUPERINTENDENT RADIO NETWORK

‘It’s my job’

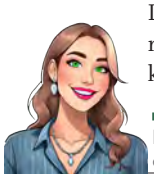
Superintendent **Mark Lyon** is protecting both the turf and the wildlife at Teton Pines Country Club.

When superintendent **Mark Lyon** first visited Wyoming’s Teton Pines Country Club, the property wasn’t what he expected.

“I was picturing Jackson Hole mountain golf: lots of elevation change,” Lyon says. “But really, it’s a very flat property. I think when **Arnold Palmer** designed it, he said it might have been the flattest piece of property he’d ever worked with.”

Built on an old hay field in Wilson, Wyoming, at the base of the Teton Mountains, the 18-hole private club is a wildlife safe haven. The maintenance crew frequently encounters moose, and occasionally a grizzly bear makes an appearance. Black bears, coyotes, racoons, river otters, elk and numerous migratory birds all visit.

“99 percent of my cool animal stories are from work. I’ve had some pretty cool experiences just being real close when they’re out here, and it’s a lot of fun,” Lyon says.



Lyon ensures that decisions made on the property are kept with the environment in mind. He must balance short-term club goals with long-term viability for the property and wildlife.

“The reason I live out here is to be able to be in an environment like this, and I see it as my job,” Lyon says. “As long as I’m here, it’s my job to protect that on the golf course.”

The club is an Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf, and works with local non-profit Protect Our Water Jackson Hole. POWJH works to keep Teton County water safe through projects and advocacy. The organization and Teton Pines worked together to ensure golf course inputs weren’t contributing to nutrient loads in nearby waters.

There are more than 30 acres of ponds on the course, all of which are cared for with water quality in mind. There are native grasses in all areas between ponds and manicured turf, providing buffer zones.

Lyon is very selective about tree removal, protecting natural habitats from being disturbed.

“There are a couple areas on the course where animals move from east to west,” Lyon says, “and we want to make sure we keep those protected.”

The course also follows a “robust” integrated pest management system. Teton Pines and surrounding areas deal frequently with voles, small rodents that eat at the turf, especially under snow. They can damage large open areas. Teton Pines doubles as a cross-country ski resort in the winter. Lyon has found that voles do not like to burrow through the ski areas, so the club modified the ski course to move the voles to more native areas.

“We don’t have to put down nearly as much repellent or stuff that kills the voles, because the packed snow actually stops them from moving on the golf course,” Lyon says.

Teton Pines’ wildlife, natural views and mountain adventures keep Lyon where he is. “If you come out for one year, you get sucked in and you can’t leave, and that’s kind of how I ended up being here for so long and sticking around,” he says. “The reason people want to be here is because we have these amazing views and amazing animals that come and call our course home. So, it’s very important to me to keep that going and keep that in the front of my mind when I’m making decisions on what’s best for the golf course.”

KELSIE HORNER is *Golf Course Industry’s* digital editor. To submit ideas about conservation-focused programs or actions at your course, email her at khorner@gie.net.

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And that, ironically, is exactly why watching them has become so … dull.

The problem with perfect

Let's be honest: very few people watching professional golf see themselves in it. Maybe a fraction of a percent of all golfers on Earth can do what those players do. The rest of us — members, guests and superintendents included — are not inspired by 195-yard 9 irons and balls in a bunker sitting up like they're on a range mat.

Perfect lies. Immaculate bunkers. Greens smoother than a billiard table and cut to a speed most clubs could never afford to maintain for more than a weekend. It looks great on television, but it's not relatable. And if it's not relatable, it's not aspirational.

Hard vs. interesting

There's an important distinction here, one that superintendents understand better than anyone else: hard is easy. Interesting is not.

You can grow four inches of rough and call it "championship conditions." You can dry everything down and hope survival becomes the storyline. But that's not competition — that's punishment. And golfers, from Tour pros to Tuesday-morning regulars, don't really want punishment. They want a challenge that feels fair, thoughtful and intentional.

That's the nuance. That's the craft. That's where you come in.

Great golf course setups — past and present — weren't just difficult. They were curated. They asked questions. They rewarded decision-making. They exposed weakness without humiliating ability. And they did it through design and conditioning, not brute force.

You control what matters

The irony in all this is delicious: while we complain about boring professional golf, we're sitting on the most powerful lever in the game. Course conditioning is the one thing you can control completely, and it matters far more to your golfers than whatever happened last Sunday on TV.

Your members don't need (and can't handle) Tour-level green speeds. They don't need laser-flat perfection. They need contrast. They need conditions that invite competition, not conditions that apologize for themselves or chase an impossible standard.

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You don't need a ball tracker graphic to make golf compelling. You need golfers standing on a tee, debating how to play their shot.

The enemy is boredom

Technology has given us incredible tools: moisture meters, penetrometers, Stimpmeters, infrared data. These devices aren't the problem. Used wisely, they're instruments of control and confidence.

The danger comes when consistency becomes the goal instead of the foundation. When every day looks the same. Plays or feels the same. Golf was never meant to be static. Weather changes, as you well know. Grass grows and the wind blows. The best courses — and the best superintendents — embrace that reality and shape it into something compelling.

At the end of the day, your golfers don't remember who won last week's tournament. They remember their round. The hole location that tempted them or the approach that required extra thought. They remember feeling challenged — but not defeated. And that's not boring: That's golf how it should be.

So the next time the TV shows another perfect drive followed by polite applause, turn it off. Then look at your fairways, your surrounds, your greens. Because while professional golf might be struggling to inspire the rest of us, you're shaping an experience that still can — one setup, one decision, one thoughtful condition at a time.

And that, superintendent, is anything but boring.

TIM MORAGHAN is principal at ASPIRE Golf (tmoraghan@aspire-golf.com). Follow Tim online at Golf Course Confidential at www.aspire-golf.com or on X @TimMoraghan.

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America's PAR 3 CAPITAL

A southwest Missouri resort is leading the way in making short courses a focal point of the golf and agronomic experience.

By **Lee Carr**

More than 30 years ago, **Johnny Morris** acquired land in Ridgedale, Missouri, that would become Top of the Rock. It was the first course to open at Big Cedar Lodge. This 9-hole, par-3 layout, overlooking Table Rock Lake, has since been joined by five other courses, including Mountain Top, a beautiful 13-hole walking course, and Cliffhangers, a tantalizing 18-hole, par-3 course. There is also a Himalayas-inspired putting course by Mountain Top, and another one under construction near Top of the Rock. Big Cedar is showcasing the best short course scene in America.

The championship courses are Payne's Valley, Ozarks National and Buffalo Ridge. Exceptional playing conditions across the property are a credit to experienced leadership, strong teams and a unified purpose. **Bubba Wright** is the director of agronomy, joining the operation in 2023 after nearly a decade at Pebble Beach Resorts.

Steve Johnson, now the superintendent at Cliffhangers and Mountain Top, was involved with the construction of both of those courses. He was also the superintendent at Payne's Valley during its construction. For more than nine years at Big Cedar, Johnson has been building courses and teams, including working with **Steven Gilbert**.

Gilbert started with Big Cedar in 2013, working on the crew at Top of the Rock, moving to Mountain Top

during construction, then working as an assistant for Johnson at Payne's Valley. He also worked at Ozarks National before heading back to Mountain Top for a while, being promoted and helping fill positions as necessary. He's served as superintendent at Top of the Rock since 2023.

"There is some streamlining that comes from the continuity of the team," says Wright, noting that they work diligently to retain talent and promote from within. There are approximately 120 people serving in golf course maintenance during peak season. "Retention is very important when you have an operation of this size and scope. It's difficult to bring people in and train them to our standards."

They also make an effort to be consistent. "Eighty percent of the things that we do, we replicate from course to course," Wright says. "The other 20 percent is unique to the needs of that property. It's really my goal for the staff and assistants, when they are ready to be a superintendent, that they can take the same program and the same practices and put them into place."

At Top of the Rock, there are 15 full-time, year-round employees. "Most people think a par-3 is going to be a small staff," Gilbert says, "but we should have 23 total all summer long—that's our [H-2B visa workers], our interns, our mechanics, everyone." Top of the Rock possesses a dedicated maintenance facility and some special features that are labor intensive.

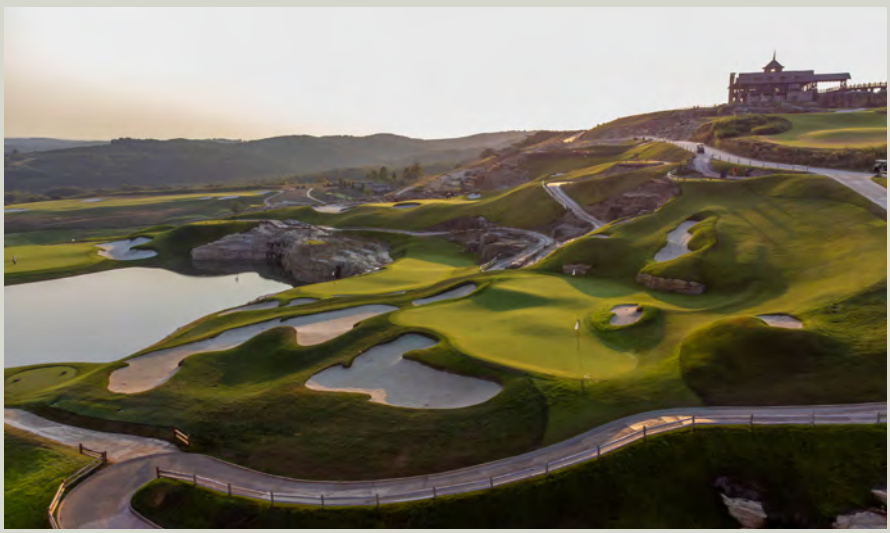
"Just leaves," Gilbert says. "If everything was to fall in one day, to clean up the landscape beds would take about two months; that's with half a crew on it." The flowerbeds are gorgeous at Top of the Rock and treated as ground under repair. "In March, we start mulching the beds and it takes four people roughly two and a half months to finish those."

They are diligent about divots, making their own green sand to fill them. On the five sets of tees, where they place two sets of markers, they work through 150 pounds of sand a day in the summer. They churn through 500 pounds of sand on fairway divots every two weeks. The crew is also in charge of the grounds around Osage Restaurant and Arnie's Barn, as well as the under-construction putting green.

"We are at roughly 50,000 square feet, with the potential for more amenities in the future," Gilbert says. It was designed by Morris, who is involved with the construction, though Wright and **Jeff Steen**, the vice president of golf, also contribute.

Top of the Rock has T1 bentgrass greens and fairways, Tahoma 31 Bermudagrass on the tees and a fescue rough. From May to September, they host 130 to 155 players per day. Collectively, the short courses supported approximately 50,000 rounds in 2025, with Cliffhangers opening in July.

Cliffhangers was originally destined to be the site of a driving range for Payne's Valley, though Morris and his son, **John Paul**, felt the site had more potential. "Their



© COURTESY OF BIG CEDAR LODGE (4)

Certified, award-winning and non-profit

Every course at Big Cedar has been designated Signature Sanctuary status by Audubon International, demonstrating its ongoing commitment to sustainable design, construction and long-term management.

To achieve and maintain certification as a Signature Sanctuary, standards must be met for integrated pest management, water quality monitoring, wildlife and habitat enhancement, while adhering to best management practices.

The courses at Big Cedar are also part of a not-for-profit conservation foundation, with profits from all green fees being put toward conservation support efforts. Bison, white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, pheasants, black bears and bald eagles can all be seen from the course, in addition to the breathtaking Table Rock Lake and Ozark Mountain views.

Johnny Morris and his son, **John Paul**, earned the Audubon Medal, a prestigious distinction honoring lifetime efforts in conservation, in 2019. Johnny Morris was also the 40th recipient of the GCSAA Old Tom Morris Award in 2023, given to someone who has thoughtfully impacted and contributed to the game of golf.

plans and creativity were delivered to the golf team," Wright says, "and we executed in the field. We shaped bunkers and greens with their input. It was a great project, with a very tight timeline, and I was impressed with how quickly we got it done." Cliffhangers opened with national, widespread acclaim.

"With 40 acres it was a perfect site for a par-3 course," Wright adds. "It was a great decision. There are a lot of unique features. Our first hole is a putting-only hole, and there are severe elevation changes. It overlooks Payne's Valley, with multiple water features throughout the property, classic Big Cedar style. It's like taking a ride at Disneyland and in between you get to play golf."

At Cliffhangers there are seven full-time staff and there will be an additional 15 seasonal workers. Mountain Top operates with four full-time staff, and six additional seasonal workers. Those teams, and the one for Payne's Valley, work out of the same facility, which can be tight in the morning. It's functional, but they're working on improvements.

Superintendents gather for a weekly meeting to help with communication. "Those meetings are about an hour, and we get to share some details with each other," Johnson says. They address schedules, and long-term and capital goals. "There's good camaraderie there, good-natured ribbing about different things," Johnson says with a laugh.

The teams operate independently with the exception of spring or fall aerification, or big events. In 2025, that included the Internet Invitational hosted by Barstool Sports and Bob Does Sports. Influencers, professional athletes and golf personalities played for a $1 million prize.

"The staff really took pride in being a part of that, having their handiwork displayed for a national audience," Johnson says. "It was all hands on deck. The Mountain Top guys helped at Cliffhangers, and as the tournament rotated, we helped at Payne's Valley and Buffalo Ridge, and they helped us. We made sure we were in front of the tournament and getting things done." Whether working or playing, Big Cedar understands the value of experience.

DELIVERING QUALITY

Cliffhangers has 18 holes plus two extra tees, so players have 20 chances to make a hole-in-one. Tees are artificial, including the one on No. 3, called "Lion's Den," which is actually inside a cave where a mountain lion prowled around during construction.

The Cliffhangers tee sheet is usually full, and it's driving an increase in rounds on the other courses. The excuses reluctant golfers use — golf takes too long, it's too expensive, it's too hard — don't work for par-3 courses. "Our par-3 courses alleviate the intimidation," Wright says. "They can be cheaper to play, and faster. We see a lot of youth, grandparents and grandkids, and female golfers. Par-3 courses have been a huge home run for the industry."

Short courses are important in other ways, too. "Short courses get people ready for bigger courses," Gilbert says, "and the industry will continue to build them for space and water reasons." With less acreage, fewer resources are required. That doesn't mean that maintenance is easier. In a lot of ways, it can be more difficult.

There are more rounds on par 3s than there are on championship courses because you can schedule tee times later in the day. "The properties are tight, so the challenge remains for maintenance in the afternoon," Wright says. "You can be working a few holes away on a par-3 course, but you're still only 100 yards from a golfer. We use battery-powered weed eaters, blowers and stick-edgers, trying to limit our noise."

Ball marks, divots and traffic are always a challenge, and at Cliffhangers, the maintenance is highly detail oriented. "That's just the design and the layout, the shape of the bunkers, the contours of the greens," Johnson says. "There is a lot of fly mowing and weed eater work. We use a machine in the bunkers, but only on a third of them because the faces are so steep and the angles are so sharp."

Every course at Big Cedar uses a modern liner in its bunkers. Last year the bunkers experienced as much wind erosion as water erosion.

Mountain Top has fewer maintenance challenges — and a more relaxed pace. "To play 13 holes it takes an hour and a half and the views are great," Johnson says. Because everyone walks, there's no waiting on the tees. Mountain Top is often played in larger groups, in the same way that people will gather at the 19th hole of Payne's Valley to play it with their buddies.

To help curate those experiences, every course receives a maintenance morning with a delayed start for golfers every two weeks. The courses rotate so they are not all closed on the same morning. At Top of the Rock, there are also three maintenance blocks of 45 minutes each throughout the day to work between groups. If the tee sheet is solid, only periphery work can be done.

> It's like taking a ride at Disneyland and in between you get to play golf."
>
> — *Bubba Wright*

"We are self-start in the morning, with taskTrackers, so staff can arrive up to 45 minutes before their shift officially starts," Gilbert says. "We have a 10:50 a.m. huddle every day to go over keynotes and anything that was missed. It's working extremely well for us." The staff that arrive early facilitate maximum efficiency — handling dew sweeping so the greens can immediately be sprayed, for example.

Gilbert is extremely detailed with the notes for his early staff. "Knowing your crew is a big part of working on a golf course," Gilbert says. "Trust them to go out there and do what you have trained them to do." Gilbert learned about self-starting on social media. It takes pre-planning, but it's creating a great work experience.

Johnson meets with the Cliffhangers and Mountain Top assistants together, and then those assistants run their separate crew meetings. The teams are smaller so it's helpful for each assistant to be aware of what is happening at the other course. It helps keep the weekly spray and fertility tasks aligned for these properties, too.

"We are going through some growing pains at Cliffhangers with all of our water features, and making sure our pump stations are up to par," Johnson says. They move a lot of water every day so hiring an irrigation technician has been a great help. On the other courses, the assistants

The evolution of Big Cedar golf

The golf scene at Big Cedar Lodge has been evolving for more than 30 years. It started when **Johnny Morris** acquired 243 acres of land from College of the Ozarks in 1995.

- ***Top of the Rock***, a 9-hole par-3 course designed by **Jack Nicklaus,** opened in 1997. A putting course, designed by Morris, is currently under construction near Arnie's Barn, the barn transported from Latrobe, Pennsylvania, to honor **Arnold Palmer**.
- ***Buffalo Ridge*** began as Branson Creek Golf Club, a championship course designed by **Tom Fazio** in 2000. Morris acquired the property in 2013 and worked with Fazio to renovate it to reopen as *Buffalo Ridge* in 2014.
- ***Mountain Top***, a 13-hole par-3 walking course designed by **Gary Player**, opened in 2017. **Tom Watson**, a Missouri native, designed the Himalayas-inspired putting course that is adjacent to Mountain Top.
- ***Ozarks National***, an 18-hole layout, was designed by **Bill Coore** and **Ben Crenshaw**. It opened in 2019, the same year the clubhouse, an 1800s log cabin from Minnesota, was relocated and assembled on site.
- ***Payne's Valley***, designed by **Tiger Woods** and his firm TGR Design, is a championship course honoring the legendary **Payne Stewart**, a Missouri native. After preview play during the fall of 2019, the course fully opened in 2020.
- ***Cliffhangers***, a par-3 course designed by Morris and his son **John Paul** in 2021, opened as a vision fully realized in July of 2025.

usually handle irrigation repairs.

Golfers might experience some growing pains at Cliffhangers, too. It can be difficult, particularly if it's windy. People think it should be easy because the holes are shorter, but they can lose a lot of balls in the ankle-high fescue rough. "I see people in some weird places," Johnson says. "I think, 'Goodness gracious, how did they get there?' It is cart path only for good reason. You can be sideways down a hill before you know it." All of it adds up to a lot of fun and excitement.

An additional challenge for the crew is working in the Transition Zone. "The winter can be in the negatives, and you are trying to protect warm-season grasses from desiccation and winterkill, and in the summer it can be 100," Wright says. "We are managing three different monostands of bentgrass greens, zoysia tees and fairways, and tall fescue roughs. None of those want to thrive at the same time. I remind the team that if you can be successful here, you can be successful anywhere."

Gilbert believes that "at Big Cedar, we are never done building, we are never done changing, we can always be better at something and we are always going to push toward that. The joy is seeing the improvements." Guest reviews are sent to superintendents at the end of the week and there have been many good ones over the years.

"The superintendents have a lot of autonomy," Wright says. "I am fortunate to be on several golf courses every day, and with so much talent, we continually improve them. No course is more important than another, and we all have the same standards. I am very proud of the people who work here, and I'm excited to see what the future holds."

Lee Carr is a northeast Ohio-based writer and senior Golf Course Industry contributor.

Irrigation on a cliff

Across Big Cedar, each golf course has its own irrigation lake or reservoir and a deep well pulling groundwater through to fill it. The pump station is on the other end of the pond and connected to the irrigation piping. Cliffhangers and Mountain Top share the same irrigation source and there is a large pump station for the Cliffhangers water features that will pump 12,000 gallons a minute.

Irrigation has been a tricky challenge for Cliffhangers, set into the side of a cliff, as might be expected considering the elevation, positioning and structure of the course. Superintendent **Steve Johnson** and the team are working through it. Precision irrigation is always important, but when water is not going to get close to where it needs to be, or when it will quickly roll away from its target, it's especially critical to keep an eye on distribution.

"In the uniqueness of Cliffhangers, with all the steep slopes and the design, we don't have a lot of large valve-and-head turf rotors," Johnson says. "You would be throwing into the side of a hill, or throwing over a mound but not getting the back side of the mound. We have a lot of block-system, small electric valves, 180 to be exact. There are a lot of intricate parts to our irrigation system."

An irrigation technician has been hired to help at Cliffhangers, with a focus on valve care. "We need to make sure that they operate and come on when needed," Johnson says. "If they don't, we're watering through the night, or developing dry spots." Either is a problem.

"With the elevation change at Cliffhangers, we have several pressure reduction valves (PRVs), because you are gaining head pressure in your pipe as water flows downhill due to gravity," Johnson adds. "You have to check that pressure so you are not overpressurized at the bottom end of the golf course, breaking pipe or damaging a head. We set irrigation programming and scheduling every afternoon before we go home, and first thing in the morning we check our completed programming cycles for any anomalies. This is all made possible with the Rain Bird Cirrus Pro system."

CLUB POLITICS AND YOUR JOB

"Politics."

Few words are more divisively charged these days. No one likes politics — or politicians much, for that matter — regardless of the side of the aisle you favor. We like those who *play* politics even less.

Politics are how we're governed. They're also how we're often frustrated, obstructed and stymied in our jobs. That's because politics stand in the way of informed decision making, efficient operations and just plain logic at times.

As we're all aware, politics are practiced well outside the Capital Beltway, state capitals or city hall. They're intrinsically mired in our daily lives, and that includes golf boardrooms, management offices and maintenance facilities.

And as much as we curse them, politics must also be embraced. What's more, they must be navigated effectually and adroitly, or they can threaten our success and, let's face it, our sanity.

For our purposes here, let's simplify matters and equate politics with those things that help us get our work done and, conversely, with things that stand in our way of getting our work done. In that way, we can equate politics with organizational agility and, on the other end of the spectrum, organizational dysfunction.

The most effective superintendents understand how their organizations work and recognize how their managers, board members and owners function. They understand the origin and reasoning behind key policies, practices and procedures within their own facilities, even if they don't always agree with them. Based on that understanding, they become adept at getting things done through formal and informal channels and networks.

Most crucially, they get ahead of the politics at their facilities by planning and anticipating the needs and requests of those they report to. They know they cannot control the politics that might be rife in their organization, but they're also experienced in not becoming its victim.

Here are four steps to help you deal with the politics of today's work environment … and get the work done:

1. Plan ahead of need. When you fully understand how an organization works — from the highest and mightiest of clubs to the most modest of public courses — you can prepare a course of action that anticipates political intervention. Waiting to address issues when they rise to an urgent level makes "no" a common response to your requests.

Help allies within your organization know what you need to be successful well in advance of those needs becoming urgent. This requires regular and constructive planning and communication with supervisors, accounting and the general manager.

2. Keep your accounting department and general manager well-informed. Schedule regular meetings once or twice a month. Keep those check-ins brief and focused on your key points and needs. Several tactics that will help them help you include:

- Informing your accounting manager/controller of needed capital equipment and expenditures months in advance.
- Telling them why these needs are essential to you accomplishing your goals within budget.
- Informing them of the downside risks of *not* investing in a preemptive manner, including any anticipated price increases.

3. Be a teacher throughout the organizational chain of command. Board members and owners are usually intelligent people who value knowledge of every aspect of their business. Help them understand your role and the resources you need to be successful.

- Keep a standing list of capital needs and priorities. Provide the list to each decision-maker so they understand your priorities.
- Conduct in-the-field tours with key decision-makers. Show them how your equipment and labor needs will deliver better results.
- Make them allies instead of opponents. The more they know, the greater their support.

4. Be stubborn. In a constructive way, don't be frustrated if someone is indifferent to your needs or unavailable to you. Stick with it. Your determination to do your job well will shine through their distractions or indifference.

Politics doesn't have to be a dirty word or something that frustrates our best efforts. With the right amount of planning, communication and persistence, we can navigate the thorniest political environments and get the work done.

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

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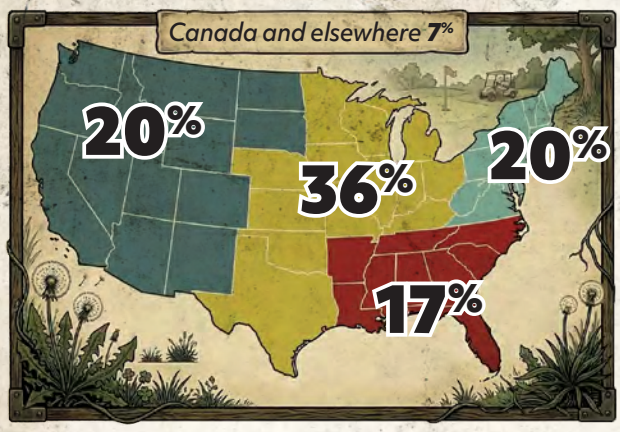
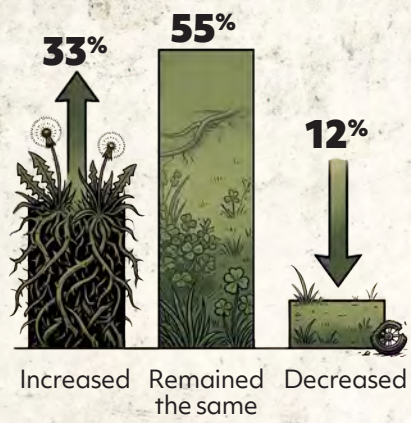
Where is your course located?



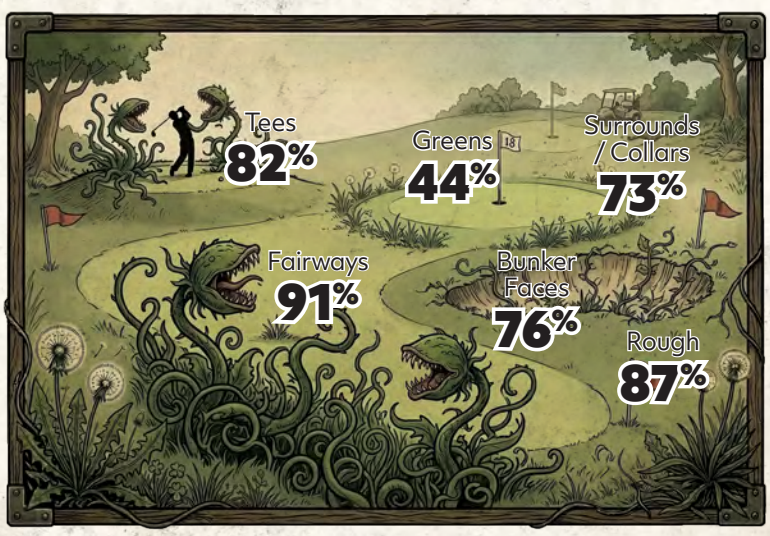
Weed pressure encountered at your course in 2025 compared with 2024



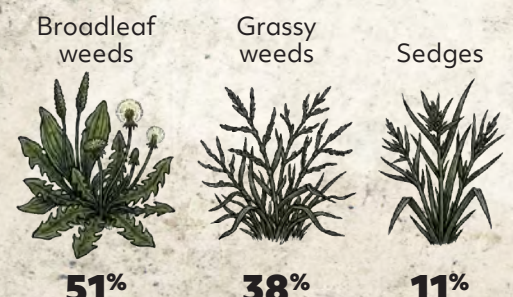
Mean annual herbicide budget by region

Northeast	$16,730
Southeast	$40,213
Central	$19,200
West	$16,499

Parts of your course where herbicides are applied to control weeds



Which category of weeds do you spend the most effort controlling?



About this report

For the second straight year, *Golf Course Industry* and PBI-Gordon have partnered on a Turf Reports section exploring how the industry views and controls weeds. Results are based on 205 responses at a confidence level of 95 percent and sampling tolerance of +/- 6.8 percent to a 20-question survey sent to a list of directors of agronomy, superintendents and assistant superintendents. *Golf Course Industry* collaborated with New Jersey-based Signet Research to execute this report.

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SIGNALGRASS IN THE SUN

Boca West Country Club director of agronomy **Jeremiah Lockhart** has been maintaining turf in the South Florida sun since 2012. Thanks to the constant higher temperatures, his programs remain consistent year-round.

Tropical signalgrass and goosegrass are the two weeds Lockhart and his team face most frequently. We talked with Lockhart to see just how he tackles the persistent plants.

In your years of experience, how has your approach to weed control developed?

Now more and more, I'm really focused on building a strong base, starting off with let's get the soil condition right so we're growing the strongest, tightest plant possible. That's our No. 1 defense. Being able to create a good, dense, tight turf canopy will keep a lot of weeds at bay. It's also staying on top of monitoring conditions and just constantly scouting a lot more to see where the germination starts. It's a lot of scouting; it's a lot of monitoring and just being able to adapt and move based on the weather that we're experiencing now and not what's historically happening.

How has the increase in play affected weed emergence and control?

We've seen a big increase in play. One thing we try to do is monitor and control entry and exit points on fairways to really try to direct the golfers where we want them to go. And then with that extended amount of play and the amount of people out there, it makes it a little tougher to spray. So, we really try to communicate with our golf shop about what we're doing, when we're doing it and how we're doing it, so that we can work around play the best. We do take a lot of time and try to minimize and treat only the areas necessary via spot sprays, post-emerge wise.

Where do you go to find the newest products and innovations in weed control?

I try to spend as much time as I can talking to guys in my area to see what they've used, what's working for them. And then I've got a good relationship with some of our vendors, guys that I've worked with a long time.

What advice do you have for other superintendents who are struggling with weed control?

Keep pushing. Keep pushing. It's going to be a battle up front, but once you can start to figure out what works for your property and talk to other guys about what's working there, don't be afraid to try something. If you have to do it in a small test area, test it out, find something that works, and then stick to your program. Stick to the basics at times. Don't try to overthink or overcomplicate things. Control your growth. Try to keep it good, tight. Monitor your historical areas, keep eyes on those, and always stay in communication with other guys as well, just to see what's working.

—Kelsie Horner

WEEDS ENCOUNTERED ON YOUR COURSE OVER THE LAST THREE YEARS

Crabgrass	84%	Virginia buttonweed	16%
Clover	79%	Bermudagrass	15%
Dandelions	74%	Johnsongrass	15%
Poa annua	63%	Dollarweed	14%
Nutsedge	62%	Doveweed	14%
Goosegrass	61%	Tropical signalgrass	8%
Thistle	51%	Dog fennel	8%
Spurge	42%	Quackweed	7%
Kyllinga	35%	Tumbleweed	7%
Knotweed	28%	Japanese siltgrass	4%
Dallisgrass	28%	Horsenettle	2%
Foxtail	23%	Swinecress	2%

See a clump? Dig it out.

Damon Hitti deals with plenty of challenges.

Now early in his 12th season as the superintendent at Weissinger Hills Golf Course in Shelbyville, Kentucky, Hitti is one of just two full-timers—the other, thank goodness, is a trusty mechanic—and his seasonal staff normally adds only three to five more people. "I never know who I'm going to have the next year," he says.

A 2022 renovation provided more than a few challenges, too: Replace old bentgrass tees with bluegrass, level and grade those tees, replace every irrigation element from the swing joints up, straighten out a dogleg fairway. "We definitely learned from it," Hitti says.

Oh, and another challenge: Weeds. Especially dallisgrass.

What weeds do you primarily deal with? What are your big challenges?

The big one is dallisgrass, and then goosegrass is right behind it. It does try to creep into the collars at times, but mostly fairways and rough.

How has that changed since you started at Weissinger Hills in 2015?

The amount of dallisgrass has definitely increased. It's a prolific cedar, which is one of the issues, and there's really not a good herbicide out there for its treatment. When I was helping over at the University of Louisville Golf Club, they had it and they were digging it out. That was the easiest thing to do—just find a clump and dig it out, backfill it, seed it and be done with it. That's what I'll do here, as well. That's been the best thing to get rid of it.

When does it normally start to pop up? And how many applications are you laying down?

It's a constant spot spray all year. Even now, I'm driving around, I see some clumps of it. When we're warmer, up into the 70s, I start to see a little bit of green popping up already. That's not something I want to see. … We're so wet right now, I can't even get out there with the spray rig or anything to even hit it.

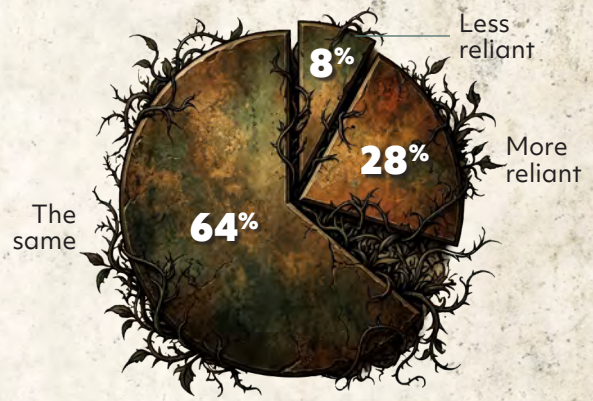
Part of our issue down here is our timing, because we start to get these [warmer] temperatures [earlier and earlier], and it wouldn't shock me to drive around and see a forsythia starting to bloom. We get caught in this thing where, we just came out of snow, we're still in winter, but here are our markers that are telling us, You need to be putting this stuff out. So, we put it out and then we get these torrential downpours, and I think we're losing that first important spray. It's just getting washed away. That's why I've gone to trying to do two, three, even four apps throughout the season to try to combat what I lost early.

Any other new weeds starting to poke their heads up?

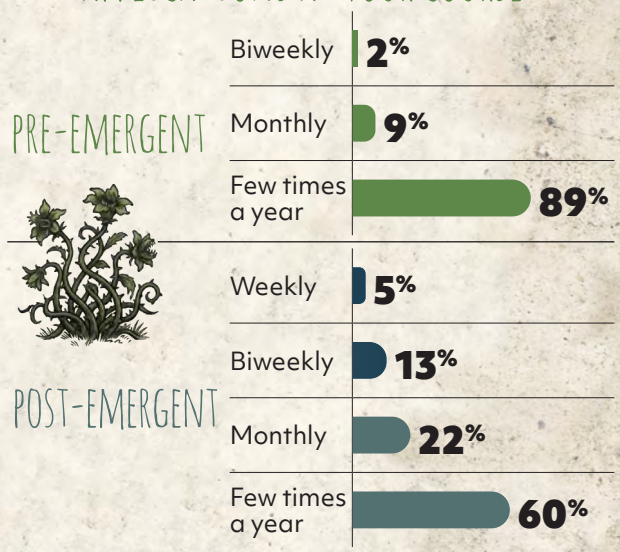
I'm starting to see more kyllinga, especially on my collars. I couldn't tell you where it came from, but I'm definitely seeing more and it's something that I'm spraying for now. And guys would probably say yellow nutsedge, too—probably because we've been so much wetter the last couple of years. Enough of us have seen it that we've talked at chapter meetings about whether someone is sprinkling nutsedge in the air.

—Matt LaWell

Reliance on herbicides to control weeds today compared with five years ago



Frequency of herbicide applications at your course



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A-OK IN BOOMTOWN

Daniel Mills remembers a childhood filled with the sort of terrain stereotypical of the Oklahoma panhandle. Born in Guymon and raised in Texhoma and Sayre, he recalls growing up around few trees, seldom feeling rain. "When people talk about Oklahoma being flat and desolate and a boring drive," he says, "that's the part of Oklahoma they're talking about."

There's nothing flat or desolate or boring about Twin Hills Golf & Country Club, the dream course that pulled Mills back into daily maintenance after a sales run. He recently celebrated his second anniversary at the Oklahoma City **Perry Maxwell** design he describes as "the place" for oil and gas business in the state capital, and so far just about everything is so good in Boomtown — even the weeds.

What weeds do you deal with in Oklahoma City? What are your big struggles?

We're like most other places, we have *Poa annua*. One thing that makes us different here is *Poa annua* does not do well on greens, because it gets so hot, it just checks out. It's hard to keep it alive in the summertime. We don't have it in our greens, but we find it in our collars and just around. Crabgrass is a big one, comes around the middle of April, and then goosegrass is one weed everyone in Oklahoma really fights. It's just so hard with the post-emergents.

And henbit [deadnettle]! I'm looking out the window right now, across the road, and the neighbor's yard is just purple-flowered in henbit everywhere. It's thriving right now. … We would have it everywhere if we didn't spray.

Have you noticed any weeds — especially your big ones, *Poa* and goosegrass — acting differently in recent years?

The *Poa annua* is becoming more resistant to [a prominent herbicide]. We're having to throw different products at it. … Goosegrass is going to be tougher, being able to spray [a popular selective, pre-emergent herbicide] on 30 percent of the property with the new EPA regulations.

What does your normal application schedule look like? When are you spraying?

We try to finish every year by the end of February. We're usually starting to get a lot of green Bermuda and we don't want to set anything back.

Did anything about the weeds surprise you when you returned to daily maintenance?

No. It's the same weeds everybody's been fighting since 2005. I'm on the board of the Oklahoma GCSA and a lot of times we have a hard time getting a sponsor for January and February [meetings], so we just do a roundtable, and every time we do a roundtable it's *Poa annua*, then goosegrass — the same talk every year. Most courses have crabgrass, but most have it under control. Very predictable. No new weeds.

You make it sound … not bad.

Everybody has their problems, but when you know your problems, they're not a big problem. I couldn't imagine my greens being covered for 60 days and having to put out a snow mold app, or having to reseed grass if you lose it. If we lose it here, it's Bermuda, it just grows back. But if it's a known for you, I feel like it's easy.

— Matt LaWell

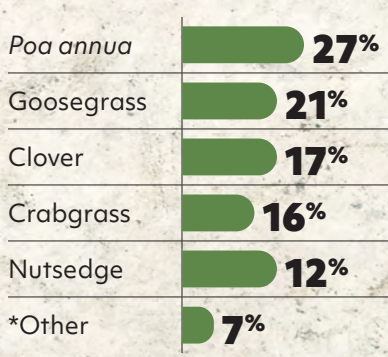
How is *Poa annua* viewed on playing surfaces at your course?

22% As a desirable playing surface

35% As a weed

2% Don't encounter *Poa annua*

Most challenging weed to control



**Other responses included: Dandelion, johnsongrass, dallisgrass, English daisy, thistle, swinecress, Queen Anne's lace, tropical signalgrass*

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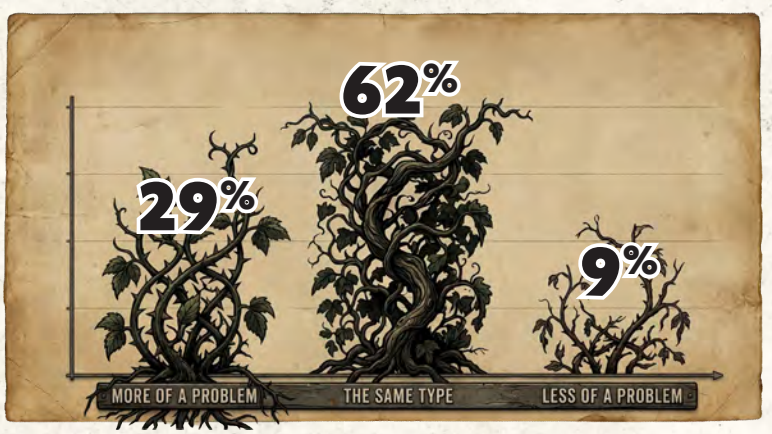
WEEDING OUT TROUBLE IN NEW ENGLAND

Alden Maddocks grew up on a golf course. A second-generation superintendent, he worked for his father at the Country Club of Fairfield before moving to Vermont and working at Ekwanok Country Club through high school and college. He began his professional career working as a teacher.

One day during class, when Maddocks was struggling to hold the students' attention, the class went outside. It was then that he realized he belonged on the golf course. He re-enrolled and graduated from UMass Amherst's Stockbridge School of Agriculture in 2011. He worked under his father again at Ekwanok, where he later took over as superintendent.

He has worked since March 2025 as an assistant superintendent at the semi-private Taconic Golf Club in western Massachusetts, where he and the maintenance team deal with broadleaf weeds like dandelions and clover, as well as milkweed.

How big of a problem do you think weeds will be in your region in 2036 compared with 2026?



Have you dealt with any southern weeds that have moved north?

Dallisgrass looks a little bit too much like crabgrass. So, a lot of times at a quick glance, we just assume it's crabgrass and it doesn't die. And then you're like, 'Oh, wait, that was dallisgrass.' Even when I was up in southern Vermont, we had a couple areas of Bermudagrass that we had infested that somehow came back every year. So, I've been seeing some southern weeds float up north for some time now.

With extreme weather stress in 2025, did you have to change any of your weed control programs?

To a certain extent, we couldn't really control weeds because it was just too hot and too dry. We would have been killing some off-target pests instead of actually killing the weeds just because of the weather conditions. I don't know if we necessarily had a higher population of weeds, they were just harder to control when we did see them.

How has weed control changed since you started?

It seems like golfers are less tolerant of weeds, especially in long grass areas. Several years ago, before I worked for my father, I noticed he had some weedy areas in his long grass. He just joked that those were pollinator areas, and that some of our members liked seeing the wildflowers in the long grass. But most of the membership, they would rather see a clean fescue and clean long grass.

Have you noticed a change of weed control or appearance since COVID?

With more play, you'll have areas that used to never thin out that will thin out, and you'll see weed encroachment in those areas. In a lot of high-traffic areas, it's hard to grow good grass. You just get the weedy grass that comes up where it's sort of a platter of whatever's around.

— Kelsie Horner

Have you implemented any of the following as part of your weed control program?

GPS spraying	22%
AI identification	5%
Spray programs created using an AI platform	3%
Drone spraying	2%
None of the above	73%

Respondenents could select more than one

OUT OF MY RANGE

I have been thinking a lot about practice ranges of late. Turns out one of my consulting clients, a fine old club in the Mid-South, is undertaking a design exercise to see if they can improve their driving range while also enhancing their golf course.

Not that easy an exercise on a tightly bound parcel, even within 150 acres. The slightly angular configuration of the property has nonetheless (and luckily) left them with a very adequate range, about 12 acres in size, at the center of their property. That alone is an unusual blessing for a golf club that is a century old. Turns out the grand old masters of golf course architecture were more concerned with sculpting fine golf holes than with setting aside area for a vast practice ground.

I have stared at dozens of routing plans by **Donald Ross** in search of a range that is more than a little shoehorned afterthought. Most Golden Age golf clubs and their predecessors were accorded a modest triangle of land, maybe 150 yards at most, set aside for warm-up or iron play. The idea of providing such modern conveniences as a 300-plus-yard, dual-sided practice ground with short game area, practice bunkers and multiple targets approached from different angles is strictly a contemporary indulgence. But that's precisely the point. Today's golfer is more dedicated than ever.

The wake-up call came during a spirited and thoughtful design charette at a club when the distinguished golf pro, who combines traditional thoughtfulness with modern business acumen, followed up a reference to the annual round count of 23,000 by asking an intriguing question: "What's the round count *at the range*?"

A light bulb went off. After all, this was one of those old-school residential clubs that is the focal point of an elegant residential community, with most members living within five miles of the clubhouse. They use the club a lot and they practice a lot.

This is an industry-wide phenomenon. In part, it is due to time limitations and the fact that a golfer can often get more out of an hour on the range than four hours on the course. It's also a function of a high-tech cultural shift, what with personalized launch monitors, app-borne swing instruction aids, and AI-generated data synthesizers that can now monitor your swing and make suggestions about ideal club path and practice routines.

Most clubs track the round count very carefully. It is a vital piece of data for monitoring course performance, pace of play, turf wear, revenue per round and managing dynamic pricing. But when it comes to play frequency at the range, I don't know of a single facility that tracks it.

The old adage of "you can't control what you can't measure" holds true here as well. It would not take much to outfit representative members or daily-fee golfers with GPS monitors that tracked their movements and time spent at various golf stations like the range. This would provide a very good indication of what we might call RUI — Range Utilization Intensity.

No doubt, any perceptive superintendent has an anecdotal understanding of this key data point. They know if they have enough hitting areas or turf coverage, and they also have a pretty good idea of wayward golf balls, whether onto adjoining holes or into neighboring back yards. But as I thought about the topic, it seems to me that facilities and designers would benefit greatly from a more granular understanding of range behavior. It would help to know, for instance, how much of what takes place on the range is pre-round warm-up versus serious, sustained practice sessions, and how long an average golfer hits an average number of golf balls.

Which isn't to say you would redesign simply to meet existing need. Much like the Peter Principle states that people rise professionally to their level of incompetency, expenditures tend to rise to meet income. Range expansion has a curious way of promoting more use by golfers.

My own patchwork of experience in the industry has convinced me that every club that has expanded its practice range and provided more equipment like launch monitors and swing analyzers has benefitted from increased use. Activity picks up, and when the upgrade is associated with covered hitting bays, screen time, golf simulators and some version of food and beverage like a sports lounge, the occupancy rate picks up dramatically.

To be sure, not every club has the space to do so. But those that are blessed with ancillary land and use it to enhance their practice ground are pointing the way to the healthy future of golf.

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 X at @BradleySKlein.

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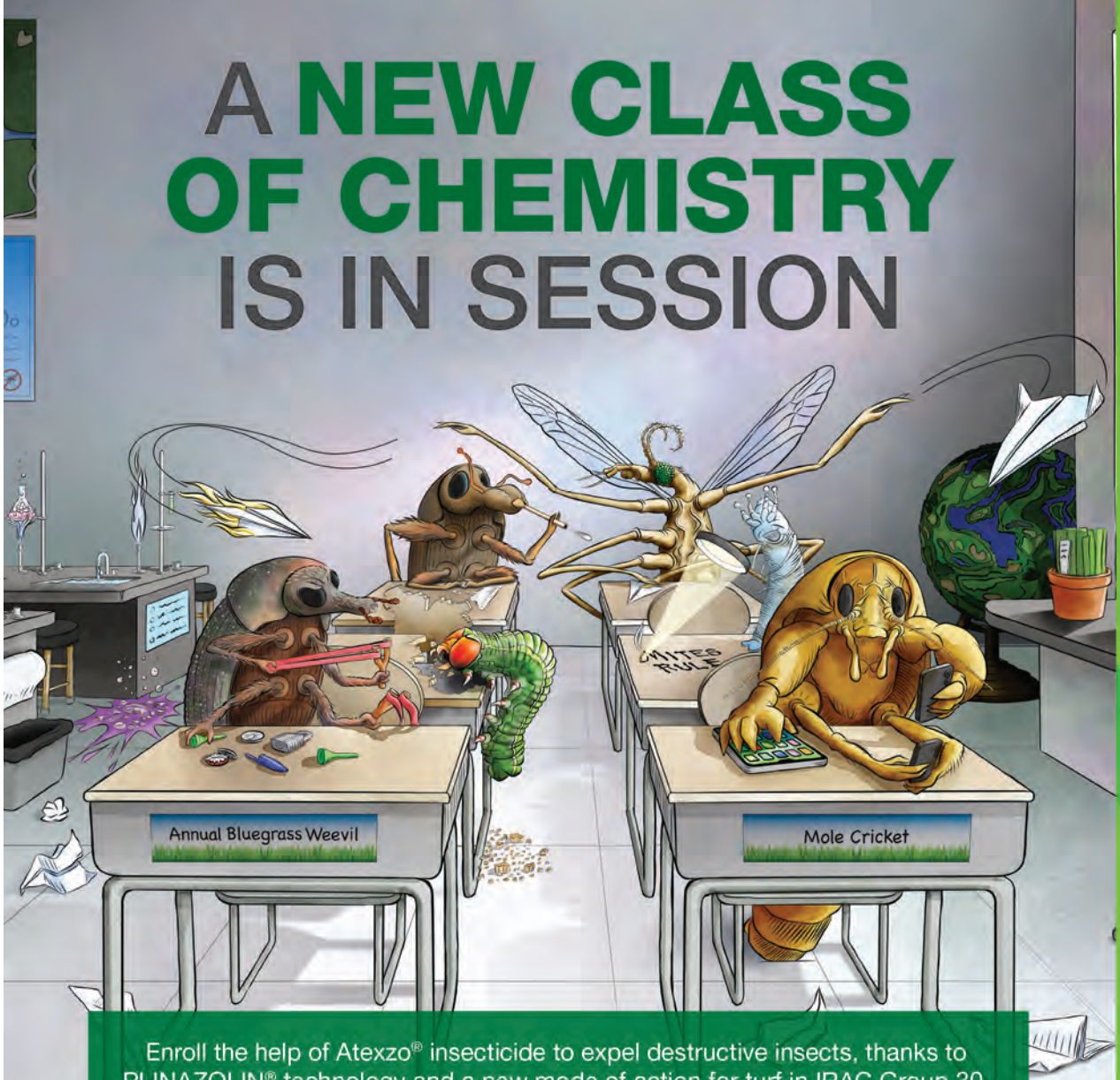

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EVOLVING CAREERS

Working as a corporate agronomist involves more than overseeing multiple properties. It means building on a familiar knowledge base, acquiring new skills and covering a lot of ground.

By **Lee Carr**

Anthony Williams jokes he's "adopted the title turf gypsy."

As a regional vice president of agronomy for Invited Clubs, he spends about 200 nights a year on the road and works with 23 superintendents in four states—Oklahoma, Kansas, Tennessee and Georgia. The properties he oversees are all in the Transition Zone, with many offering bentgrass greens.

Jim McPhilomy and **Bryan Stromme,** senior vice presidents of agronomy for Arcis Golf and Century Golf Partners, respectively, also travel frequently for their jobs. Being present is the best way to get your eyes on the property and spend time face to face with superintendents. All three will also tell you how much they enjoy their jobs, the things they miss about being a superintendent and how grateful they are to be able to do what they do.

Management companies have different approaches, cultures and operating structures. Invited has more than 160 properties in its portfolio, and operates with a few management contracts, but it owns most of its properties. Those properties are divided into four levels, based on budget and expectation: Premier, Signature, Select and Classic.

"In some markets, everyone wants to belong to the best club possible," Williams says. "In other markets, maybe where there are retirees on a budget, they just want to be able to play public golf. On Monday, I might be at a golf course that's very basic and then on Tuesday be at a golf course that hosts a professional tour event."

Arcis owns and operates close to 90 properties nationwide, also covering a variety of courses from exclusive, private properties through public daily-fee layouts. Sometimes there are equity partners involved, but all properties are managed to be sustainable. There are regional superintendents who report to McPhilomy and who liaise with more senior corporate managers.

"The most important people in the structure are all the superintendents because they have to manage the golf courses on a day-to-day basis," McPhilomy says. "Superintendents have to make decisions on what they're seeing regarding irrigation, fertility, mowing and more. We're relying

© BRYAN STROMME

on the superintendent daily. We provide support from the corporate level through regional superintendents and I collaborate with them on a macro level." McPhilomy consistently visits and works directly with staff on the Arcis properties.

The leadership team at Century Golf Partners has developed, owned, leased and managed more than 500 courses, clubs and resorts worldwide. Stromme has an undergraduate degree from the University of Minnesota in environmental horticulture (turfgrass) and an MBA from Keller Graduate School of Management.

"At Century Golf we focus on talent," Stromme says. "Mostly, we find the right people and place them in the right roles. We focus on the business of agronomy with an emphasis on technology. We prioritize education as a core initiative to help our team members perform well and grow in their careers. Additionally, we develop long-term strategic plans for golf course improvements, equipment acquisition, and capital expenditure budgets."

A DAY IN THE WORK LIFE

That is the big picture, but what are Williams, McPhilomy and Stromme doing routinely? They are building on the foundational skillsets they earned as superintendents. Williams was a superintendent for nearly 40 years before jumping into this new challenge.

"I am still more or less growing grass, and growing people who grow grass, it's very similar," Williams says. "But stepping into the corporate role, suddenly, it's bigger numbers and a bigger skill set is required. It's more accountability, as far as who does what and when. At first, I was a little overwhelmed because I had to be a better businessperson. Fortunately, I had the skills and I have great bosses. My life is significantly better because I took a chance."

McPhilomy is a second-generation superintendent from Colorado who grew up in the golf business. "I have always been of the mindset that I'm here to help, I am the facilitator," he says. "I have been fortunate to have worked with a lot of really smart people and when I go to a property, I am hoping to learn from them."

Due to the extensive capital outlay, McPhilomy has been spending a lot of time on projects. He's finalizing arrangements with contractors and architects, and wrapping up some renovations. At the NFL-affiliated Cowboys Golf Club, in Grapevine, Texas, an 18-hole putting course opened, the driving range now incorporates TopTracer technology and the greens were completely renovated with Tif3D. This year will bring more focus on The Player Course of The Woodlands Country Club, north of Houston, and changes to nine holes of The Palmer Course, also part of The Woodlands.

McPhilomy is always asking, "Why are we doing this? Is this a benefit? Could we do it a better way? Could we do it more cost effectively?" He builds on his instincts as a superintendent to go beyond. "These questions help us think through the whole process," McPhilomy adds. The ability to ask those questions differentiates candidates who are being considered for new positions.

CAREER PATHWAYS

"One of the best things about management companies or ownership groups is the opportunity to move up to bigger opportunities," Stromme says. Family, someone who frequents the course, or someone who professionally takes an interest in your career can all be supportive in different ways. The industry is full of intelligent, experienced and generous individuals, and that message needs to be shared with the next generation.

"From my experience, the most successful superintendents are the ones who maintain strong relationships with their mentors and members," Stromme says. "The people that know what they do and can provide coaching and leadership. I have been in corporate golf most of my life and it has been truly rewarding. We believe our efforts are giving back and helping others achieve their career aspirations and personal goals. As Century Golf grows, it creates opportunities for our people."

Jim McPhilomy

Bryan Stromme

Stromme has been visiting colleges to share information about management companies, answer questions and reinforce the message that most management companies seek internal candidates before looking externally when opportunities become available. Williams and McPhilomy share the same philosophy.

"There are a lot of really good young people that we want to nurture and promote, and hopefully keep within Arcis Golf for the future," McPhilomy says. "They understand how we do the administrative things, there's a lot of advantages to that, and they understand the HR side of the job." They are also familiar with operations and communications.

"At the end of the day, though, you have to hire the most qualified person. You need to be sure that people are ready and qualified for the position, and you have to be aware of complacency. Whether it is working for a management company or working as a superintendent anywhere, avoid complacency to advance your career." Apathy is a slippery slope, and everyone has been a witness.

"Since I was a little kid, I have spent almost every day of my life on a golf course somewhere," McPhilomy says. "I do miss that, a lot, and I miss the people. I miss interacting with the staff on a daily basis because I don't do that anymore." It is one reason he is happy at Arcis Golf, spending more time on courses, and continuing to

meet new challenges.

"You miss the crew and the greens committee chairs and the members," Williams says. "I still see a lot of those people, but it's that tight-knit piece of it. I miss locking the gate at the end of every day. I miss being involved in the local superintendent chapters. I serve on more national committees now and it's a little bit different."

Williams is happy to spend most of his time with superintendents and — surprise, surprise, in case anyone was thinking a corporate agronomy position would help you escape — weather is still an issue.

"At each level I was just trying to be the best that I could be," Williams says. "Eventually it would open up the next level and I am thrilled to be in corporate agronomy. I just love being a property manager. I wanted to see if I could function at this level and I'm so glad I did because I see way more golf courses and my impact is on a bigger scale."

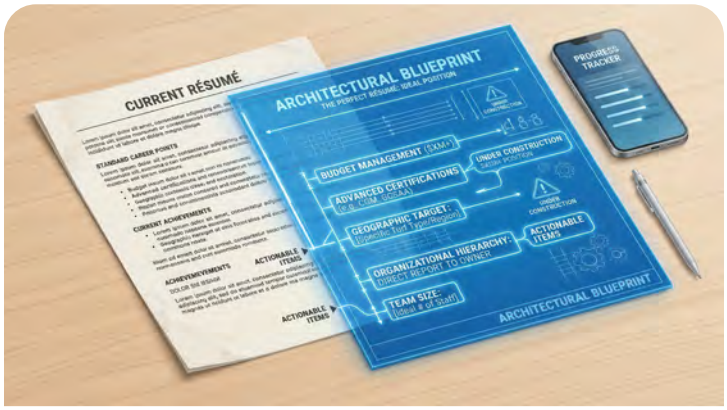
Williams works with GMs and pros as well as superintendents. He is excited about capital improvements at a number of courses. The business model is to find ways to add value to each club to grow the organization.

"I know there are some drawbacks to management companies because it's more complicated because it's bigger," Williams says, "but it's also more opportunistic because it's bigger. It's been great working with the club and regional managers because they are all so driven. They inspire me. That's a new mentality for me. I always thought about doing things to a certain level, but not to this level."

With a greater range of responsibilities, the data and the numbers still have to make sense. Management companies often take advantage of arrangements with preferred vendors for everything, earning discounts through economies of scale. Some even have preferred contractors for construction and architectural design. They also communicate in many ways, preferably face to face and also through newsletters, emails and phone calls, often sending messages through multiple mediums to ensure that no one misses the memo.

"Some people misunderstand management companies," Stromme says, "but from a career standpoint, it's one of the best paths in golf. We are seeing a resurgence of interest in the schools we visit and it's great. Everywhere I go there are students that are excited about the golf industry." Keep learning and consider your career options. From members to management, the industry is full of supportive people.

Lee Carr is a northeast Ohio-based writer and senior Golf Course Industry contributor.



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Career exercise

What does the job you dream about look like? **Anthony Williams** teaches a career exercise called "The Perfect Résumé." It starts with questions to consider about your ideal position:

- Where is it geographically (and what kinds of turf are you managing there)?
- What are your responsibilities (number of holes, amenities, budgets, communications)?
- How big is the maintenance team and what is the labor pool like?
- What is the organizational hierarchy (who do you answer to)?
- What level of education or certifications do you need?
- Are there special skills required — arboreal, horticultural, language or generational?
- What about finances (your compensation, that of your staff, budget for resources)?

When you know the answers to those questions, imagine what the résumé of the person who gets that ideal job looks like. Then think about your current résumé and be honest, not overly modest — you know your own talents better than anyone. "This exercise requires courage. It's tough to see your deficiencies openly," Williams says. If you placed those résumés side by side, what are the black-and-white differences between them? The differences you recognize are the skills you should be working on and acquiring those skills should become actionable items. This will help you avoid complacency and help you make progress toward your dream job. d finding ways to help others and your organization. Williams sums it up like this: "You have to see a future that's different and then reverse engineer a path for how you are going to get there."

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Don't call it a comeback!

More warm-season supers have embraced **Tower® herbicide** again as resistance issues and regulatory restrictions have limited the effectiveness of other products. Here's why use of this proven herbicide is surging again.

By Pat Jones

Evansville Country Club, Evansville, Indiana

Managing warm-season turf presents plenty of challenges. The last things most superintendents need are weed resistance problems or regulatory issues. Yet that's exactly what's happened over the past few years as pre-emergence weed control options have dwindled down south.

Where have turf pros turned to get control of invasive Poa annua, goosegrass and doveweed? For many, the solution has been Tower® herbicide from BASF.

Here's a refresher on Tower and why it's made a big comeback…despite the fact that it never really went away.

TOWER BASICS

Why has Tower recently grown in importance as an option for warm-season pre-emergent control? We asked BASF senior tech services representative Kyle Miller: **"With Poa annua becoming an even bigger problem during the winter months on southern turf, Tower fills an important void left by problems like Poa resistance and restrictions placed on oxadiazon."**

Miller also points out that Tower remains a popular way to deliver top-notch pre-emergent goosegrass control. He also notes that, **"Even though control of sedge species is usually a post-emergent activity, Tower offers pre-emergent control of many sedges."**

What makes it so effective? **"Tower is a different mode of action, and it is also a shoot inhibitor vs. a root inhibitor, like many pre-emergents. That's why it works on Goosegrass so well."**

Continue Reading

So, the science has always supported Tower's effectiveness. But how are superintendents using it in today's environment? We spoke with turf pros using it for different situations in different areas.

Camp Creek Golf Course, Inlet Beach, Florida

IN THE ZONE

Indiana may not jump out as a warm-season weed management hotspot until you consider that Evansville CC is actually well south of Louisville. Longtime superintendent Jeff Sexton wanted better Poa control for his fairways.

"Gary Myers (his BASF territory manager) came and visited and brought Tower to my attention. We had the budget for it, so I thought we'd give it a try," says Sexton. He'd used other products and felt like results were mixed in terms of injury and length of control. So, he tried Tower on his zoysiagrass.

"I kind of reversed things and did Tower in November and then came back in late January and put another product down to get us through to the Poa germination phase into the spring."

And the results so far? **"Excellent, really excellent,"** says Sexton. **"I think the change in active ingredient made a difference. We didn't have the Poa breakthrough on the latter end like other applications we'd made, and we didn't have to worry about root-pruning."** The goal was for Tower to last long enough to bridge into one last app. Did it work?

"There's no question it's working. Our critical time is the end of March when the Poa emergence starts a second wave. If I can keep it out through then, then Tower will really be a win."

Jeff Sexton
Superintendent at Evansville Country Club

Dr. Jim Brosnan, University of Tennessee

TARGETING EARLY POST-EMERGE

The Florida panhandle gets a little bit of everything thrown its way and, like most supers in the area, Zach Tolleson is used to finding new ways to control Poa breakthroughs. For him, Tower was more of a post-emerge extension to prevent breakthroughs in the fall.

"We started using Tower again here at Camp Creek because our Poa window is so long. I use it primarily in September at the full rate as an early post-emerge on Poa," says Tolleson. **"I just spray Tower in early September at full rate. I do one shot."**

Why is it right for him? **"It's not a root pruner and it has early post on Poa."** He uses Tower on all of

his Platinum paspalum surfaces, which is basically everywhere but his TifEagle greens.

For him, the high rate is the way to go. **"Don't expect to have the same post action if you go with the lower rate,"** he says.

A NATURAL FIT

"There's been so much change within our industry and people are scrambling to make good decisions about their pre-emerge programs," says Chris Key, senior sales specialist for BASF T&O in central Florida.

"As other products wane, it's an even better opportunity for Tower. It's just a natural fit in some of those shoulder areas."

Poa in bermuda is definitely the biggest issue in his region. How do people get ahead of Poa outbreaks? **"It's a 12-month program. You cannot let your guard down. Most supers start in August or September."**

Key says goosegrass is also a year-round battle. **"We've had such mild winters recently that goosegrass doesn't go completely dormant. Many of my customers are starting control as early as late February. There just isn't a clear finish line anymore."**

Chris Key
BASF Senior Sales Specialist

The Amelia River Club, Amelia Island, Florida

KEEP IT IN THE GROUND

In over a quarter-century as a superintendent, Jason Wilson of The Amelia River Club learned that there are seasons for managing Poa and goosegrass. **"You kind of get one shot and if you miss it, you have to wait a year. It's a critical window."** He struggled with that when he first came to the club and finally brought in Dr. Jim Brosnan from University of Tennessee to take a look. Dr. Brosnan found the Poa had developed resistance to several active ingredients. That's when Wilson discovered Tower. **"It can fit into that transitional role for goosegrass and help bridge a gap, and it works very well on Poa annua."**

They tested Tower and FreeHand® 1.75G herbicide (a granular combination of dimethenamid-P and pendimethalin) over the course of two years on a couple of Amelia's fairways. **"When the study was done, they found everywhere they used Tower and Freehand it was clean as a whistle."** Ultimately, Wilson concluded that Tower was a great "bridging" product to continue protection between apps of other actives.

"Because of resistance concerns, Poa annua really can't be allowed to emerge anymore. The goal is to keep it in the ground with a complete program. If you start the job and don't finish it, you're inviting bigger problems later," he says. **"That's why I like Tower in my program."**

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Family touch

A favorite Brainerd Lakes course is expanding again thanks to the new 9-hole Farm Golf Links, with multiple generations of Stones running the show.

By **Judd Spicer**

Golf course owner **Mike Stone** enjoys sitting on the clubhouse porch and having a beer with his customers.

Based on Stone's latest brainstorm, upcoming toasts look to be ample.

This summer, Stone and his family cast at Crosswoods Golf Course in Minnesota's bustling Brainerd Lakes golf region will unveil the 9-hole The Farm Golf Links. Designed by superintendent-turned-architect **Scott Hoffmann** and crafted by a three-man team in a mere season, the unique links-style grounds will serve as fresh complement to Crosswoods' existing 27 holes.

In concert with an aesthetic independent from the Northwoods' tree-lined routings, the project's downhome roots and hands-on collaboration serve in contrast to an oft-white-collar influence that has guided Brainerd Lakes' ample golf and home build growth across the past quarter century.

SUPER DESIGN EYE

Following more than four decades

© COURTESY OF MIKE STONE/CROSSWOODS GOLF COURSE

as superintendent at the region's venerable Madden's on Gull Lake resort, Hoffmann pivoted to the design easel with ease. His Classic creation in 1997 at the eponymous resort is celebrated as one of the top courses in the Upper Midwest.

In the years ensuing, Hoffmann has seen his Northwoods influence grow with the likes of myriad consulting and reno projects and, as regular *Golf Course Industry* readers are versed, his creation of 23.5 incomparable par-3 holes at The Gravel Pit.

When asked by Stone to survey the former farmland property on Crosswood's spread in neighboring Crosslake, Hoffmann searched for both an ethos of diversion and a hint of divinity.

"In talking with Mike, he wanted to really do something different than what's been in the Brainerd area," Hoffmann says. "And I did, too. Having had the chance to go to Sand Valley and Bandon Dunes, it's so fun to have those big, open golf courses with a lot of strategic play."

Big. And open. And fun.

"When I first looked at the property, it was open but had pockets of jack pine and it was covered with little bluestem and trees on what would potentially be a couple of the holes," Hoffmann says. "And I could see right away that chances were good that we had some nice, sandy soil to work with. And that got me excited right off the bat."

In short time, such excitement led to a design philosophy featuring a links-style layout with blowout bunkering, and massive template greens outfitted with two pins apiece — an homage to Sweetens Cove in Tennessee's Sequatchie Valley.

Hoffmann further knew that, in concert with The Farm's design contrasts, the man with and for whom he was working was his own contemporary contradiction. Across an area with an influx of modern dollars coming from points beyond the area's glimmering lakes and abundant flora, Stone isn't the sit-back-and-watch type.

"Mike is very, very hands-on. I've never seen anybody quite like him," Hoffmann says with a smile. "As an example, we rented a seven-yard scraper and Mike had never run one before in his life. He wanted to get all the scraping done in a month. So we'd go out and I'd say, 'I need so much sand on this green site,' and so forth. I figured I'd come back in three or four days and see what he'd got done, but I'd get a call that same night and Mike was like, 'Got it all ready for you to look at.' He worked seven days a week, beyond sunrise to sunset, and did get all that sand moved in a month."

Hard work and long hours coalesced with the ingenuity of creation.

"Being that the site was covered with all this little bluestem — and this was an idea Mike had — he took the snow blade from the skid steer, and he went out and scraped off that little bluestem six inches deep," Hoffmann says. "And once the bunkering was shaped out pretty much the way we wanted it, Mike just placed that little bluestem where we thought best to give that kinda wild and natural look. We didn't have to seed any of those areas, just — boom — it was done."

The head superintendent of his courses, Stone's work wasn't limited to above the ground.

"Mike did all the irrigation pretty much himself. And it's a big property, with triple and even quadruple rows in some of the landing areas, which can be up to 100 yards wide," Hoffmann says. "He went out and installed them himself with PVC, because that's something he knew how to work with. The HDPE is a great, improving product, but it takes some expertise and time to install that, and just wasn't part of our plan."

With shaper **Dan Bieganek** rounding out the team, creating The Farm with a three-man crew didn't deter from either detail or purpose.

"Many, many, many hours out there. But I enjoy it. I enjoy making something from basically nothing," Stone says. "And I had to be very purposeful with how I installed the irrigation, making sure that we weren't overwatering the native areas, and then areas where we did plant our new fescue. It's a huge area that we're using, but with minimal imprint on what we need to water, fertilize and apply chemicals to."

Working with an assistant who manages the grounds calendar and mowers, Stone oversees everything else across Crosswoods' agronomy purview. Having Hoffmann in his Farm corner proved a maintenance mind meld.

"Of course, working with Scott as an architect is awesome because of his background of being a superintendent," Stone says. "Everything that we built out there was purpose-built to be easily maintainable, without making any concessions in the architecture. From having that consistent mower height for tees and fairways, and then having most of the tees string right into the fairways — it's elegant, but also saves time."

The elegance combines with wide open space across The Farm's 80 acres.

"Full sun across nice, windswept areas," says Hoffmann, almost in verse, "much easier to grow grass on."

Maintenance assuagement intentionally extends to the bunkering style.

"We wanted to do something more native, more natural, no edging," Hoffmann says. "Just let it be wild, and something that will be raked maybe a couple times a month."

A sustainability doctrine of "more fertility but less chemistry" is intended to ease time, cost and labor demands.

"It's always a lot easier when you're full sun, any superintendent will tell you that," Hoffmann says. "And we wanted big fairways, with very little mowed rough. Essentially, the entire course is low-mow Kentucky blue, which I was skeptical about because I hadn't used it before, but I went out and played Landmand" — in Homer, Nebraska — "and that was all low-mow bluegrass and I was quite surprised at how bouncy and firm it was. That convinced me it could work."

Continuity of turfgrass heights will keep blades at bay.

"At The Farm, everything will be mowed at a half-inch, from tees to fairways to all the green surrounds," Hoffmann says. "So, there will be very, very little rough to mow and everything will be mowed with a fairway mower and the greens, of course, with a triplex."

A GENERATIONAL GAME

In the spring of 2025, Cragun's Resort in Brainerd, a family-owned property for 85 years, was sold for a reported $19.5 million. The sale is believed to be the largest resort transaction in Minnesota history. And while said buyer is local and one that insiders note is long versed and respectful of Cragun's history and milieu, the deal represents a slowly, slightly, but nevertheless changing Brainerd Lakes culture of kinfolk-run resorts.

In turn with a few of the region's courses grabbing big-ticket green fees from city visitors and home buyers from the Twin Cities — lovingly referred to as "aliens" by locals — turning once-modest lots into proverbial McMansions, the area is no longer the humble fishing getaway it once was.

> When you live with the people who are using your product, you look at it a little differently."
>
> — Scott Hoffmann

And yet, at Crosswoods, the culture remains impressively inclusive and affordable.

So it goes with land upon which Stone's father originally built his own par-29 golf course before the progeny eventually evolved and constructed four 9-holers of his own.

"I love the family aspect at Crosswoods. That's what I spent my career with," Hoffmann says. "It's a situation where you just have to convince one or two people that something is the right way to do it and they make a decision and you move forward. And they're community-oriented, they have a deep love for the area. When you live with the people who are using your product, you look at it a little differently."

The property was and is impressively generational: Stone's wife runs Crosswoods' food services. One of his daughters is a PGA professional and his other daughter played college golf then married a college golfer. Both offspring and their spouses are part of the operation.

"All the kids expressed interest in coming back to Crosslake and working in the family business," Stone says with pride.

Because of the region's changing face of commerce, a family meeting aimed to discern Crosswoods' future.

"We had a discussion as a family, asking, 'Where do we want our business to go?'" Stone says. "We could see the changes in the area, with golf booming and some places obviously going for that upscale feel."

The new addition isn't so much aimed at competing with the area's high price-point courses as it is focused on enhancing the allure and options of a time-honed threshold that Crosswoods has already crossed.

"The quality of the golf is going to be competitive with any course in the area," Stone says. "The style of golf at The Farm is completely unique to almost anything in Minnesota, for that matter."

Echoes Hoffmann of The Farm's intent and playability: "I don't think it's as much meant to compete [with the high price points] as it is to offer a course where you can stand on the tee, swing away, and not be restricted by tree-lining and water.

Eyeing the new nine as what might well be a personal course creation epilogue and certainly a passing of the baton to Crosswoods' next generation of family members, Stone might be enjoying a post-round pint with his clients — but he isn't ready to kick up his spikes on that porch just yet.

"We really enjoy the people who come to our course. We connect with them and it's so much more enjoyable to run a family business that way," Stone says. "Here, we look forward to the people you meet every day and having them come back, rather than being a golf mill and just kinda trying to rack up numbers."

Judd Spicer is a Palm Desert, California-based writer and senior Golf Course Industry contributor.

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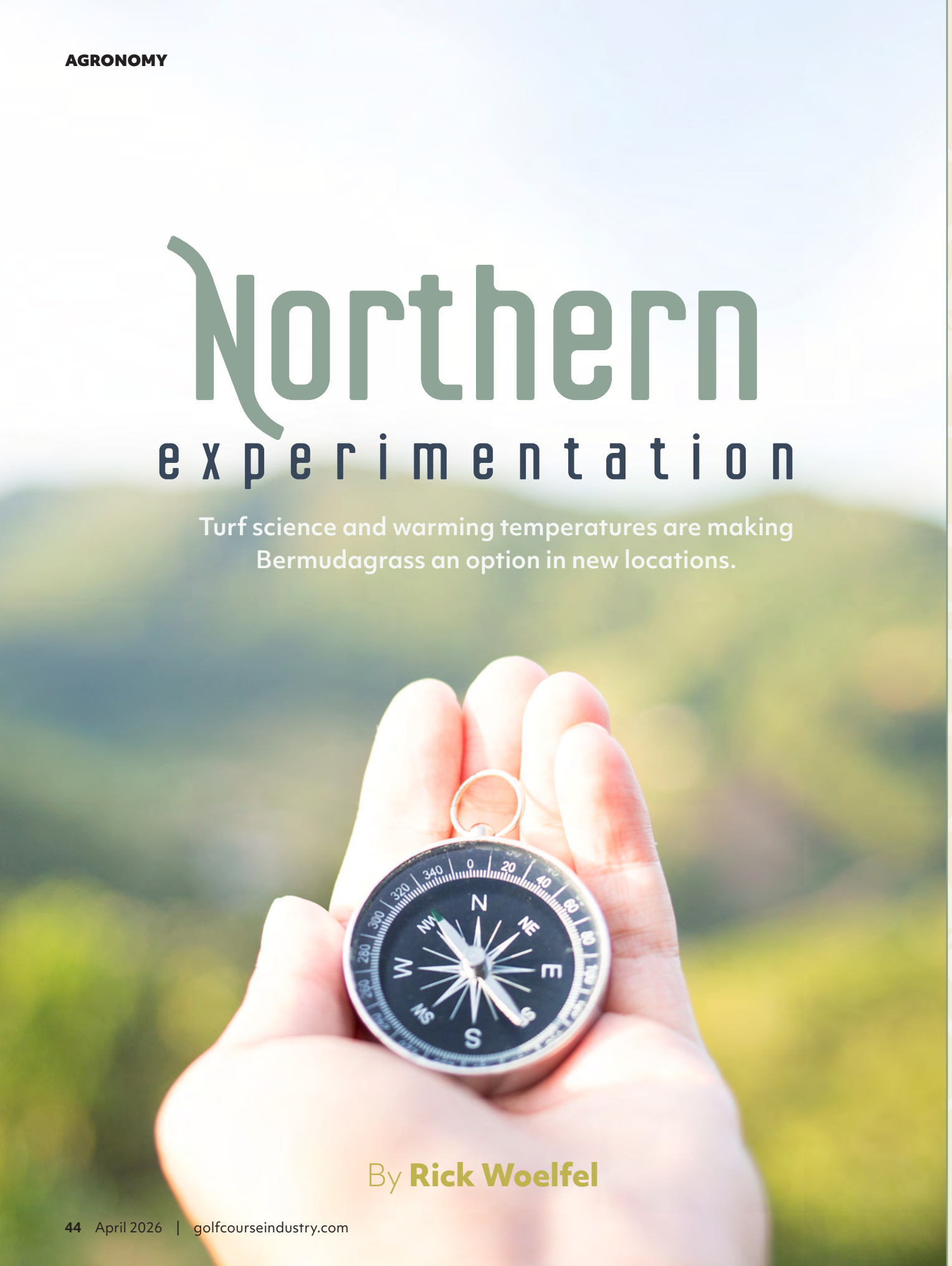
Northern experimentation

Turf science and warming temperatures are making Bermudagrass an option in new locations.



By **Rick Woelfel**

There was a time when Bermudagrass greens, tees and fairways were utilized exclusively in traditional warm-weather settings. But the landscape might be changing. Thanks to advances in turf science, and in part due to climate change, some superintendents and stakeholders in locales farther north are considering utilizing Bermudagrass at their clubs.

At the Union League at Torresdale in Philadelphia, superintendent **Andrew Dooley** and team installed Tahoma 31 Bermudagrass on the tees and fairways on the club's 9-hole short course, which opened for play in spring 2024. (The greens there are comprised of three different varieties of bentgrass).

Developed at Oklahoma State, Tahoma 31, like other strains of Bermudagrass, thrives in hot weather, a quality that Dooley, who works in the heart of the Transition Zone, finds appealing. With a team also responsible for maintaining an 18-hole championship course through the summer heat and humidity, Dooley and the Torresdale team had to get strategic about available resource allocation for a short course.

"We knew, depending if we had a lot of play, we weren't going to be out here dragging hoses and hand watering," Dooley says. "So, we were looking for a vibrant turf that would do really well in hot humid conditions."

Mark Schuhl, the club's assistant superintendent, says maintaining Bermudagrass the past two summers has been a new experience. "[There are] definitely lots of different maintenance practices," he says. "I've only worked with cool-season grasses, so it's been quite the experience working with Bermudagrass. And I definitely, really enjoy it. It's been a great learning experience for me. But very different than cool-season grasses for sure. Bermudagrass loves the heat. Bentgrass does not love the heat, so usually in the summertime, all our cool-season grasses are under stress, and that's when the Bermudagrass is loving life."

Dr. Dennis Martin is a professor at Oklahoma State and was part of the team that created Tahoma 31. He notes that Bermudagrass thrives in the summer sun but suffers in the shade.

In the not-so-distant past, the idea of utilizing Bermudagrass in the Philadelphia area would have been outright dismissed. But Tahoma 31 was developed with the Transition Zone in mind. It is a product of more than a decade of work by Oklahoma State's Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and was officially introduced to the golf market roughly a decade ago. The variety is also utilized frequently on outdoor sports fields.

"It is a particularly good fit for athletic venues, continuing a trend as a number of our past releases have proven to be extremely popular with the National Football League, Major League Baseball, the Beijing Olympics and college sports fields," says **Yanqi Wu**, a plant genetics professor at Oklahoma State.

In recent years, Tahoma 31 has been installed in numerous NFL stadiums in the Mid-Atlantic and Midwest, including Soldier Field in Chicago and Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia. At the collegiate level, it has also been installed at Purdue University's Ross-Ade Stadium, among others.

When it comes to golf, numerous superintendents have started utilizing Tahoma 31 on their ranges — and perhaps elsewhere.

Charlie Miller has spent his entire 36-year career in turf at The Springhaven Club, a private club in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, roughly 20 miles west of Philadelphia. He's been the head superintendent since May 1996.

Miller recently converted a portion of his seventh tee into a test site that might have been transplanted from Penn State, his alma mater. The forward stand is comprised of bentgrass, the primary strain of grass on his fairways — emphasis on primary. The rear stand is a swath of Tahoma 31.

Miller took this approach after considering the microclimate and the state of the turf at his club.

"Our golf course is really flat," he says, "and we have what we call a Heinz 57 mix. We have bentgrass, ryegrass, *Poa annua*, a little bit of Bermudagrass here and there. "

Miller calls the task of maintaining the varieties of turf in his fairways "difficult."

"They all like different things," he says. "Some like more heat. Some don't do well in the heat. So that makes it difficult to keep good, consistent playing conditions."

And the weather patterns Miller has been dealing with in recent years have made that task more challenging than ever.

"We struggle with drainage and we lose grass in our low spots any time we get saturated for any period of time," he says. "We had almost 10 inches of rain in July of 2025. We were in excellent shape before that, but it rained for I think six days in a row and we just stayed wet. And we lost grass."

That history led Miller to create his in-house site and compile information that would help him provide optimal playing conditions. Miller also wanted to prepare members for the day they might have to make a decision about regrassing their fairways.

"Creating a monostand of grass, one type, makes it easier to maintain consistency," he says. "Not that bentgrass doesn't have problems. Not that Bermudagrass can't have problems. But maintaining consistency simplifies maintenance. So, my thought was to try an area here so the membership can see what they could have once they get tired of having problems every summer when we

© ADOBE STOCK

get heavy rain. And that seems to be the norm now. We don't get half an inch of rain anymore. We get two inches of rain all at once, or we get no rain. Hence, the Bermudagrass, which requires less water.

"This is just an experiment to show the members that, down the road, if we want to make a change, we've already got some experience with what to expect, what it takes, what it costs, what the restrictions might be as far as keeping carts off it. It's just kind of an educational thing, planning for the future. Because sooner or later, they're going to get tired of losing grass on fairways in the summertime."

A PRIME ENEMY of any Bermudagrass is, of course, winterkill. While Tahoma 31 is intended to be more cold-tolerant than other varieties of Bermudagrass, it is still vulnerable to winter weather.

Dooley has 30 acres of Tahoma 31 at Torresdale. He lost three of them during the winter of 2024-25.

"We went into winter dormancy very, very dry, which probably was the main factor in about three acres of turf death of the Tahoma 31 going into the spring," he says. "Fortunately, we've got a really passionate, dedicated team here. Nobody shied away from hard work. And we were able to sod and resprig some three acres, so the month of June and part of July was about getting everything back to where it needed to be. Since the heat turned up, the humidity turned up in July, everything has been great, everything filled in well."

To prepare for the winter of 2025-26, Dooley and his team raised the mowing height on the short course to three quarters of an inch in mid-September. They also added potassium to their treatment regimen in the weeks leading up to winter dormancy and overseeded with ryegrass, which ideally will result in an earlier greenup this spring. "We'll have to make a decision in June, whether we spray out the ryegrass or whether we just kind of let the Tahoma take its course and take over in June and July," Dooley says.

At Springhaven, Miller notes that while bentgrass is predominant in the Mid-Atlantic, that might not always be the case.

"The bentgrass offers a real nice playable surface," he says. "It's kind of the standard people want in this part of the country. But whether we like it or not, the climate is changing and it seems to be getting hotter for longer. Bermudagrass thrives in the heat, which is the bulk of our golf season — the summer months, the busiest months. So, I think somewhere down the road, it might be 10 years, it might be longer, Bermudagrass might become a standard turf for fairways in this part of the country." Miller adds that Bermudagrass would allow his club to reduce water usage at considerable savings.

"We pay for every drop," he says. "Bermudagrass requires less water. When do you do most of your watering? In the summer months? So, we could potentially save a good amount of money every year in perpetuity if we ultimately select Bermudagrass."

On the downside, installing Bermudagrass would result in a decline in cart revenue in the offseason. "When it's dormant, you don't want to be running carts all over it," Miller says.

Martin is glad to see the enthusiasm that turf professionals like Dooley, Miller and others have for Bermudagrass but tempers that enthusiasm with a dose of reality.

> It's just kind of an educational thing, planning for the future. Because sooner or later, they're going to get tired of losing grass on fairways in the summertime."
>
> — Charlie Miller

"We're always cognizant of the fact it's still Bermuda and there are still limitations on its performance, both from shade especially in winter," he says. "It can do well throughout the summer, the fall and the spring, but it only takes a few bad days or a few bad weeks in winter to knock it out."

Martin emphasizes its vulnerability to cold weather.

"Long-term exposure to the teens, or even lower, in the root zone, because that's where the rhizomes are at," he says. "The closer you cut the Bermuda, the shallower the rhizomes appear. A Bermuda stand can look good up top, but if you really want to read its healthful condition, take a cup cutter, cut it open, look in horizontal view, and you want to see lots of healthy white rhizomes, as many as could possibly be there.

"As you go farther and farther north, where you actually freeze the soil for days on end, that ultimately limits Bermudagrass. It's not so much the air temperature per se, in the short term, although that can cause you a bad top kill. And are you frozen solid several inches deep for several days, or weeks, on end? Bermuda, right now, with current technologies, has no hope to overcome that, unless you have heated root zones. That's where you see some of these sports fields that not only supplement light, they also have heated root zones."

Rick Woelfel is a Philadelphia-based writer and senior Golf Course Industry contributor.

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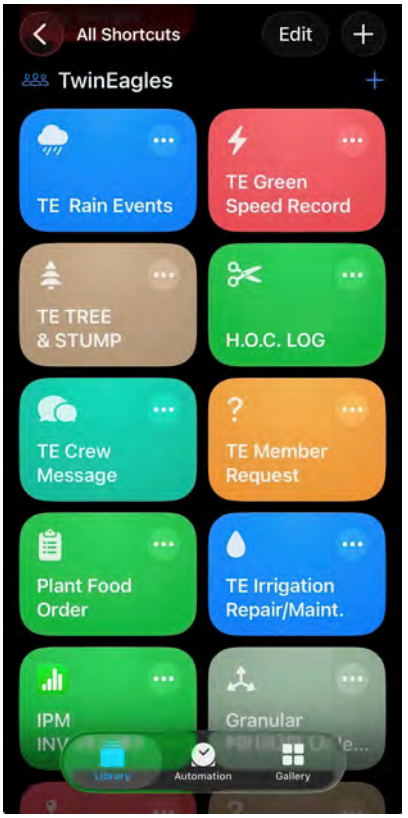
Globetrotting consulting agronomist **Terry Buchen** visits many golf courses annually with his camera in hand. He shares helpful ideas relating to maintenance equipment from the golf course superintendents he visits — as well as a few ideas of his own — with timely photos and captions that explore the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



"Shortcuts" App

With the latest iOS software updates, Apple iPhone, Mac, MacBook, iPad and Watch users have a free Shortcuts App on their devices that can be accessed easily by typing "shortcuts" into the search tab near the bottom of their home screens. **Gabe Gallo**, director of golf course maintenance at The TwinEagles Club in Naples, Florida, is a proficient user of Shortcuts, with typical tabs such as crew messages, green speed records, rain events, H.O.C. log, member requests, trees and stumps, plant food orders, irrigation repair/maintenance, IPM and granular fertilizer orders. Shortcuts do numerous tasks besides keeping detailed records, such as sending texts or emails to the agronomy team. The devices can search and do things automatically, opening Apple apps, researching on YouTube, customizing anything you want. Gallo uses between 50 and 60 shortcuts, with more than 300 actions, streamlining his entire operation. Shortcuts even automates multi-step tasks with a single tap or Siri command. Gallo sends an automatic text at 7:45 every morning, wishing his wife a good morning, sending her the weather report and telling her he hopes she has a good day. There is a slight learning curve, which is quickly shortened by tech-savvy superintendents/directors/assistants/equipment managers. The Talon Course was designed by **Jack Nicklaus** and **Jack Nicklaus II**, and remodeled by **Chad Goetz** in 2021. **Gary Player** designed the original Aerie Course, which transformed into The Eagle Course and was designed and remodeled by **Steve Smyers**.

Leaf Blowers & Charging Station

Seven Stihl BGA 86 154 mph 36-volt rechargeable leaf blowers and two Stihl AL301-4 lithium battery chargers, capable of charging four batteries at one time, are mounted on the charging station shelf. There are also spare batteries for a quick change-out to fresh ones, along with Milwaukee chargers and spare batteries for their LED light towers. The shelf has a 1-inch square tubing frame, welded to a 27-inch high and 19-inch angle back brace bolted to the wall, with a 12-inch by 94½-inch stainless steel top, with eight electric outlets installed above. The hooks that hold the leaf blowers in place are available at Home Depot or Ace Hardware. It took less than four hours to build, and it cost about $300 for materials and $800 for electrical work. **Darren J. Davis**, certified golf course superintendent, and **Guillermo Gomez**, equipment manager, of the Olde Florida Golf Club in Naples, Florida, conceived and built this excellent idea. **Rees Jones**, president of Rees Jones, Inc. and **Greg Muirhead**, senior vice president, are the original and renovation designers since the club was founded. Davis was the 82nd president of the GCSAA and is currently the GCSAA Centennial Celebration Committee chair.

TERRY BUCHEN, MG, is president of Golf Agronomy International. He's a 57-year, life member of the GCSAA. He can be reached at 757-561-7777 or terrybuchen@earthlink.net.

NAMES

Alex Aloisio Jaime Basurto **Dan Bieganek** Lee Carr **Bill Coore** Geoffrey Cornish **Ben Crenshaw** Darren J. Davis **Andrew Dooley** Pete Dye **Tom Fazio** Gabe Gallo **Steven Gilbert** Chad Goetz **Guillermo Gomez** Gil Hanse **Alexis Hernandez** Enrique Hernandez **Damon Hitti** Scott Hoffmann **Steve Johnson** Rees Jones **Joselyn Kent** Jeremiah Lockhart **Mark Lyon** Alden Maddocks **Dr. Dennis Martin** Perry Maxwell **Brenda McNulty** Jim McPhilomy **Rusty Mercer** Charlie Miller **Daniel Mills** Johnny Morris **John Paul Morris** Greg Muirhead **Mark Mungeam** Jack Nicklaus **Jack Nicklaus II** Arnold Palmer **Cherelle Park** Gary Player **Donald Ross** Mark Schuhl **Steve Smyers** Jordan Spieth **Jeff Steen** Payne Stewart **Mike Stone** Bryan Stromme **Stanley Thompson** Jim Wagner **Tom Watson** Beau Welling **Anthony Williams** Rick Woelfel **Tiger Woods** Bubba Wright **Yanqi Wu**

COURSES

The Aerie Course at The TwinEagles Club Boca West Country Club **Buffalo Ridge at Big Cedar Lodge** The Canary at Long Cove **Cliffhangers at Big Cedar Lodge** Cobbs Creek Golf Course **Cowboys Golf Club** Cragun's Resort **Crosswoods Golf Course** Cuscowilla on Lake Oconee **Duke University Golf Club** Ekwanok Country Club **The Country Club of Fairfield** The Farm Golf Links at Crosswoods Golf Course **Hot Springs Country Club** Inverness Club **Kinsale Golf Club** Mountain Shadows **Mountain Top at Big Cedar Lodge** Ozarks National at Big Cedar Lodge **The Palmer Course at The Woodlands Country Club** Payne's Valley at Big Cedar Lodge **The Player Course at The Woodlands Country Club** Sleepy Hollow Golf Course **The Springhaven Club** Streamsong **Table Rock Lake at Big Cedar Lodge** Taconic Golf Club **The Talon Course at The TwinEagles Club** Teeth of the Dog at Casa de Campo **Teton Pines Country Club** Twin Hills Golf & Country Club **Union League at Torresdale** University of Louisville Golf Club **Weissinger Hills Country Club**

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AI: IGNORE, ADOPT OR RELY?

***Dave** here …*

I've leaned into Dad Life. I constantly make fun of myself, the way I have evolved into mid-adulthood and how I navigate personal, professional and relational tasks in work and in life.

Have you ever seen the insurance commercials where a group of adults are being coached not to become like their parents when out in public? They're joking about early dinner times, having stereotypical conversations with strangers and stressing over minor details. I often don't realize that's a reflection of my current self. Retrospectively, I'll laughingly look back at a day's events and realize I'm often that guy.

Although **Jeff** and I have always written these articles in a joint, singular voice, I didn't want to bring him down to my level of unapologetic, mid-life, un-cool dad-mode. I wear Hokas (not the cool ones), I confidently whip my family's minivan, we go out to dinner at 5 p.m., I don't let my fuel gauge get below a half tank, I buy my clothes (and everything else I do and do not need) at Sam's Club, and I frequently complain about any possible kid's practice, sporting event or school function being too late. Flag football practice starting at 7 p.m?! Are they nuts?!

Now armed with some self-deprecating satire and context, I'll bring Jeff's perspective back in line with mine …

Although we both have several old-school tendencies, we pride ourselves on staying current with technology. Not only in the turf industry, but for our business as well. Technology has and will continue to be thrust into our personal and professional lives at the speed of light. It's our responsibility, especially in offering the best service and support to our clients, to be at the tip of the spear of new technologies.

Artificial intelligence is certainly at the forefront of the expanding technology in the turf industry as an end-user interface platform and tool, and the hardware and cyber infrastructure powering other advancements. With AI still in its early stages of development and adoption, we would like to preach a cautionary tale.

We've read and reviewed countless emails, assignments, evaluations and recommendations from industry peers that were so blatantly and ignorantly derived from AI that the accuracy and authenticity were fatally flawed. In some instances, it was used so poorly in the incorrect application that the communicator lost all credibility they once had or were attempting to earn.

These instances have been evident across our desks in countless situations. We felt it prudent to list a few examples below:

- An email from a prospective client trying to define the scope of work they needed us to fulfill — lots of big, fancy words with no substance or purpose necessitated additional meetings, time and avoidable dialogue.
- Assignments in professional development initiatives where several submissions all had the same phrases, anecdotal cliches and exact word choice.
- Agronomic programs that called for not only mistimed applications, but certain products at rates that would damage turf.
- Club governance reaching out to us questioning the credibility of another professional due to their obviously AI-generated content delivered to the club's stakeholders.

These mistakes led to, at best, poor outcomes and, in some circumstances, loss of trust.

We've been asked several times if we use AI to help write reports, analyze data and/or make recommendations. Although we have and will continue to use specific AI platforms in certain scenarios, we take a much more cautionary, old-school approach and adoption strategy.

Whether right or wrong, we found AI is a great tool to help proofread, build templates, facilitate ideation and confirm general concepts, but we have not and likely never will rely on it to do actual work for us. To take it a step further, we have even used AI software platforms that can effectively analyze a document or deliverable to determine whether it was AI-generated.

We rely on a hybrid strategy to utilize AI. We seek means and methods where we can implement AI to improve efficiency, optimize processes and maximize our knowledge base under the reliance of human intuition and experience.

By no means are we stating our approach is correct and other approaches are incorrect. We're simply sharing our experiences of how this technology is infiltrating our industry and being adopted by our peers, colleagues and clients.

As AI evolves, we'll keep working to be on the frontlines — and cautiously lean into the old-school mentality.

DAVE DELSANDRO and JEFF CORCORAN are former superintendents and co-founders of Agronomic Advisors, a consulting firm that assists and advises industry professionals on every aspect of golf course management. Contact them at dave@agro-advisors.com and jeff@agro-advisors.com.

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