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Congratulations! You made it to 2026!

Superintendents endured a year as trying as any in recent memory. Our 2026 Numbers to Know survey quantifies their outlook on the obstacles they faced and conquered to keep golf thriving.

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CHEERS TO INDUSTRY MENTORS!

Imagine your career, or possibly your life, without meeting the individual whom you consider a mentor.

Imagine if you had a chance to honor that person by sharing what they've taught you with others.

Mentorship defines many industries, especially one as unique as golf maintenance, where early mornings, varied weather conditions, and working weekends and holidays represent norms. To celebrate the oversized role of mentorship in golf maintenance, operations and management, *Golf Course Industry* and The Aquatrols Company are introducing the inaugural Excellence in Mentorship Awards.

The program represents the evolution of the annual Super Social Media Awards, which we're retiring after a memorable 14-year run. Seriously, how many things last 14 years these days?

Sharing defines thoughtful and tactful social media usage. Sharing also defines impactful mentorship.

The Excellence in Mentorship Awards debut at 2:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 4, 2026, at The Aquatrols Company booth #2341 at the GCSAA Conference and Trade Show in Orlando. We'll recognize the first class of honorees with an engaging and educational discussion about mentorship. Bring your mentor, your industry friends or just yourself to learn best practices to help you impact the trajectory of others.

Music will begin at 2 p.m. and follow the discussion until 5 p.m. Around 3 p.m., we'll give a "CHEERS" to mentors everywhere. Yes, drinks will be served throughout the entire three hours. Sometimes the best lessons become apparent over cold or warm beverages. Think of the valuable late-evening chats over cold drinks or pre-sunset coffee conversations you've had with a mentor.

Guiding somebody isn't easy. It means stopping and restarting tasks to address the needs of somebody else. Or late-night phone calls and messages. Or candid, yet necessary, conversations. Or working longer hours to satisfy somebody else's insatiable desire to improve. Or staking a personal reputation on somebody else's ability or potential. Or taking a chance on an individual others might have shunned.

Those who have done any or all of the above assert it's worth the effort.

Unfortunately, it's too late to honor somebody for a 2026 award. The first nomination period arrived and departed in a nanosecond, as we made an early December 2025 decision to debut the awards immediately. Why wait to share, right?

But this program is designed to endure. We're already accepting 2027 nominations. Email me a few paragraphs describing what your mentor has meant to you or the industry, and we'll save it in a secure file.

Future awards and discussions will honor all segments of the industry in addition to superintendents. Assistant superintendents, equipment managers, technicians, researchers, instructors, architects, builders, owners, association leaders, consultants and sales professionals are strongly encouraged to nominate their respective mentors.

For those who can't make it to Orlando this year, *Golf Course Industry* plans to share video of the discussion on our website and social media feeds. Find additional lessons from the Orlando discussion in our March issue.

Sharing, after all, makes this industry — and life — special.

Everybody in the industry is encouraged to participate in the 2026 celebration and discussion, either live or virtually.

Turfheads trio

Seeking more ways to amplify your engagement with us in 2026?

Senior editor **Matt LaWell** executed a soft 2025 launch of Turfheads Trivia in our Thursday Fast & Firm newsletters. LaWell, one of the longest-tenured and easily the best bar trivia host in northeast Ohio, asks a weekly turf, golf or industry question to subscribers. Anybody who answers a question correctly enters a monthly drawing for *Golf Course Industry* swag.

Also, in December 2026, two splendid reader-driven sections return for their sixth and 11th years, respectively: the Turfheads Guide to Grilling and Turfheads Take Over. Quiet winter days represent a great time to email us your recipe or article well before the Oct. 30 deadline.

Guy Cipriano

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GOLF COURSE INDUSTRY

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

Vol. 38 No. 1
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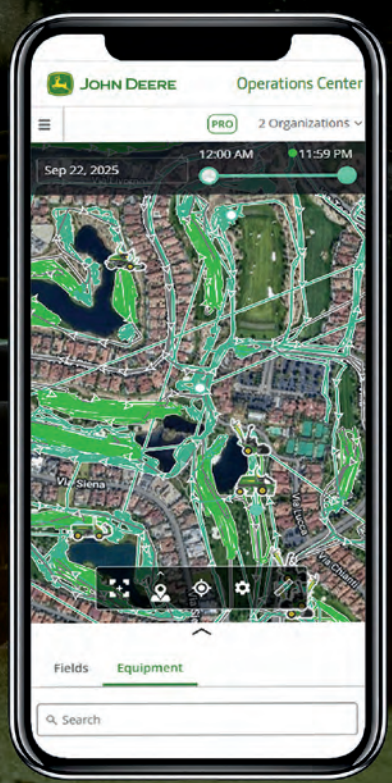

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PGA TOUR OFFICIAL GOLF COURSE EQUIPMENT SUPPLIER

Reviving Palm Cove Golf

Guided by Stanford Golf Design, Florida superintendent Jim Kilgore and his team have taken the steps to turn a dying property into a private, thriving facility.

By *Kelsie Horner*

Palm Cove Golf has undergone numerous transformations since superintendent **Jim Kilgore** joined the staff in 2024. Those transformations on the Florida course are taking a dying property and reviving it with a reimagined golf experience.

Originally designed by **Gary Player** and later redesigned by **Chi Chi Rodriguez**, the course had just changed ownership when Kilgore stepped in to lead the restoration effort. Sinkholes dotted the fairways, bridges had collapsed and equipment sat unusable. The irrigation system had failed, no plant protectants had been applied in nearly a decade and fairways couldn't be made out from overgrowth.

"When I first walked the property, the course felt abandoned. It had lost its identity — overgrown, [unkempt] and underperforming," Kilgore says. "Now, it has a heartbeat again."

Restorations on the facility began in September 2024. Kilgore and his team have taken the turf and the course from surviving to thriving. To do that, all tee boxes and fairways were completely redone using Celebration Hybrid Bermuda and TifEagle. All bulkheads on the course were replaced, repairing eight failed structures found throughout the layout.

"These new systems now stabilize key edges, prevent erosion, and reinforce the course's layout and playability," Kilgore says. "They also support proper drainage and water control, which is crucial during Florida's rainy seasons."

The bulkheads also assist in environmental protection, managing runoff and sediment on the property. "It's a serious investment — one that protects both the course's integrity and the surrounding ecosystem, while also reducing future maintenance," the superintendent adds.

The facility is working with Sanford Ferris Golf Design to install a new irrigation system. The system offers a full digital map of water infrastructure, allowing users to control every sprinkler head, rotor valve and other key locations.

In the future, they plan to implement Mach 1 Bermuda on greens and more native grasses in out-of-play areas. "It helps visually frame the course and supports our sustainability goals," Kilgore says.

Other major enhancements led by Sanford Ferris Golf Design include:

- Expanding the driving range area by more than 100 yards
- Lengthening and widening fairways
- Repositioning and enlarging tee boxes
- Reshaping numerous greens

"Their goal was to refine, not erase, and they did it masterfully," Kilgore says.

The 18-hole course has also transitioned from public to private. The change allows Kilgore and his team to focus on consistency and planning. "Going private means planning every detail in advance: traffic patterns, aerification schedules, bunker rotation, play speed and even shade patterns on greens," he says.

Kilgore says it's also a change in mindset — curating an experience, building a culture and providing a consistent environment.

The maintenance team has helped rebuild a failing property. Due to time and effort, their work has brought energy back to the facility.

"This place has required more of me and my team — more of our time, more of our energy, more heart — than anywhere I've ever been," Kilgore says. "We come back every day because we believe in where this is going.

"This wasn't just a restoration. It was a rescue. And to be part of the team that brought it back — that gave it life again — that's something I'll carry with me for a long time."

Kelsie Horner is Golf Course Industry's digital editor.

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Tartan Talks 114

Butler

Ty Butler's 2026 includes an opportunity to resuscitate a shuttered golf course along a large lake providing drinking water for a giant city.

Butler is combining with the Landscapes Unlimited Project Development Group on a major project at Wolf Creek Golf Club, a public course along Lake Livingston formerly known as Cape Royale. Wolf Creek is 70 miles north of Houston. Without Lake Livingston's 1.7 million acre-feet of water, sustaining life in Houston would be an enormous challenge.

People in Houston and surrounding communities also need places to recreate. They temporarily lost one golf playground when Cape Royale went defunct in 2018. But the Trinity River Authority, a conservation and reclamation district that owns the course, opted to revive the course. The project represents Butler's biggest effort since establishing his company, Brio Golf, in 2015.

Butler joined the *Tartan Talks* podcast to discuss Wolf Creek, mowing fairways with a seven-gang unit growing up in Arkansas City, Kansas, and why he wants to eradicate par from the game.

"It's a beautiful property," Butler says of Wolf Creek. "The TRA is very excited about it, and we're very focused on doing a nice, upscale golf course, but being very budget conscious about it. We have been working very hard to keep the costs down so it's a responsible build to make it affordable for most Texans looking to play public golf in the south part of the state."

The full episode with Butler is available on the Superintendent Radio Network page of popular podcast distributor platforms.

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Annandale Golf Club

COURSE NEWS

Annandale (California) Golf Club started construction on a renovation-restoration of its historic golf course, with completion anticipated in spring 2026. Inspired by 1920s design work of **William P. Bell**, the restoration is led by Origins Golf Design principal **Todd Eckenrode**. … Elsewhere in California, Indian Wells Golf Resort is reopening its Players Course following a comprehensive renovation led by golf course architect **John Fought**. … Golf course architect **Brian Curley** and World Golf Hall of Famer **Fred Couples** returned to The Palms Golf Club in La Quinta, California, to modernize their 1999 layout. The restoration featured creek reconstruction, tree removal and fairway widening, among other touches. … Located less than an hour south of Perth, Australia, Links Kennedy Bay reopened following an 18-hole redesign that included the addition of more than 100 pot bunkers featuring synthetic revetted faces. The project was led by former tour professional and course architect **Graham Marsh**, working alongside Western Australian industry leader **Trevor Strachan**. … National Links Trust started Phase 1 of its rehabilitation project at Rock Creek Park Golf in Washington, D.C. Rock Creek Park Golf is one of the oldest public golf facilities in the country and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. … Landscapes Golf Management is managing Wild Ridge and Mill Run golf courses at Wild Ridge Golf and Event Center in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. … Troon is managing Hidden Valley Country Club in Reno, Nevada.

PEOPLE NEWS

Brothers **Bob** and **Joe Alonzi**, both members of the GCSAA and retired Certified Golf Course Superintendents, will receive the association's 2026 Col. John Morley Award. … **Jim Pavonetti**, CGCS, the superintendent at Fairview Country Club in Greenwich, Connecticut, will receive the GCSAA's 2025 President's Award for Environmental Stewardship. … **Chris Wilczynski**, ASGCA, owner and principal golf course architect of C.W. Golf Architecture, added his son, **Joe Wilczynski**, as design associate with the firm. Joe represents the third generation of Wilczynskis to graduate from Michigan State University and work in golf and turfgrass. … Hunters Run Country Club in Boynton Beach, Florida, hired **Joshua Levitre** as its new director of agronomy. … Eighteen GCSAA members will attend the 2026 GCSAA Conference and Trade Show thanks to the Kendrick B. Melrose Family Foundation.

INDUSTRY BUZZ

American Peat Technology acquired and is reopening DryJect Minnesota. … Envu is introducing Signature XTRA Stressgard liquid fungicide. … Sipcam Agro USA is launching Carve Xtra turf fungicide. … Bernhard and Company is distributing Soil Scout's underground wireless soil monitoring technology in the United States and Canada.

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Jill Seymour

CHARLESTON SPRINGS SOUTH COURSE

Even by the standards of her profession, **Jill Seymour** has been busy of late. Seymour is the superintendent at the Charleston Springs South Course, a public, county-owned facility in Millstone, New Jersey. She's been in that position since January 2018.

This past September, she was part of the team of volunteers that supported the Ryder Cup at Bethpage Black. Appearing on the *Wonderful Women of Golf* podcast with host **Rick Woelfel**, Seymour talked about how she became part of the crew.

"Honestly, it wasn't really on my radar," she says, "and then I got an invitation to come up there and join them I think a year ago. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

The crew Seymour was part of during Ryder Cup Week had an international flavor.

"**Andrew** [**Wilson**, the director of agronomy at Bethpage] was fortunate enough to have some former assistants there," she says, "and people from all over the world: Scotland, Ireland, Europe. Besides his previous assistants who were there, there were some new, fresh faces who came over from Europe. We had five additional females who came over. We had a couple girls from Finland, we had a couple girls from France and one girl from South Africa.

"So, that was just super cool, to get to know them and talk about different agronomic practices they might do. They were asking us about the weird things we were doing at the Ryder Cup that were completely normal for us. It was definitely a very cool, interesting experience."

Despite working long hours during the week, the team had a chance to network and exchange ideas.

"Even when you're on a bunker crew in the morning, you don't have to worry about the hum of the equipment," Seymour says. "You get to work together and talk about things. Different weather situations that are going on in different parts of the country, how we do things. Walking up and down the fairways and doing divots in the afternoon you're communicating, getting to know each other and different practices."

Seymour has always been an advocate for the GCSAA's First Green program. Soon after the Ryder Cup, she hosted a First Green event at First Tee Jersey Shore's facility in Lakewood, New Jersey, in conjunction with First Tee and the Girl Scouts.

"It was a great collaborative effort," Seymour says. "Logistically, it was a little bit more of a challenge than the First Green events I've held at my golf course. Obviously, I didn't have access to the equipment and finding volunteers [on a Saturday afternoon] was a little more challenging, but it really turned out great."

Seymour didn't get into the industry until she was 26 years old and had spent time in a different profession. Today, she embraces opportunities to share with students the career options that are available in turf.

"They can see it when I talk about it," she says. "I totally geek out about all this turf stuff.

"Even if you don't want to grow grass for a living, there are so many different avenues within our industry. You can go left, right, straight, back. There are so many different ways that we can go — and stay — in our awesome turf industry."

After spending more than two decades in turf, Seymour is most impressed by the industry's ongoing commitment to environmental stewardship.

"There was always this stigma back in the day that golf courses were killing the environment," she says. "And I think it's very misunderstood. We are so conscious about everything we do. Everything down to watering, buying chemicals. You don't want to overwater or waste water and you don't want to put the wrong chemicals down. So, I think what's impressed me is how very aware we are of what we're doing to the golf course — which is, in fact, impacting the environment."

> "Even if you don't want to grow grass for a living, there are so many different avenues within our industry."

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The Preserve Golf Club is preserving

The Mississippi course practices prescribed burns on a regular basis, protecting the surrounding wetlands and pitcher plant bogs.

The Preserve Golf Club in Vancleave, Mississippi, functions with environmentalism at the forefront. The facility was designed specifically to protect the land and habitats both on the course and around the property. Because of its sustainable practices, the 18-hole **Jerry Pate**-designed course earned the Audubon International status of a Certified Silver Signature Sanctuary.

Opened in 2006, the course is built on a sandy hill bluff overlooking the Mississippi Gulf Coastal Plains. Cared for by superintendent **Jeremy Stevens,** the grounds hold a wide range of biodiversity among wetlands and native grass.

When general manager **Stephen Miles**, CGCS, first visited the property, the plant life and vegetation captured his attention. Miles joined the club as the grow-in superintendent. "There were all these beautiful flowers that I had never seen before," he says.

Longleaf pines and pitcher plant bogs are found across the property. Pitcher plant bogs are unique, highly diverse habitat systems found in the southeastern United States. These bogs are frequently home to carnivorous plants that trap insects for food. "It rivals the biodiversity of the Amazon rainforest," Miles says. "Two to three different carnivorous plants are on our site, and they shoot up neat flowers."

The Preserve is surrounded by land owned by The Nature Conservancy, and the club works hand in hand with the non-profit. "It's been a good partnership," Miles says. "We've watched them and learned from them."

One technique learned from The Nature Conservancy is prescribed burning. Wildfires are a natural occurrence in North America and, when suppressed, brush can build up, creating even more of a fire hazard. The brush can also cover and bury unique wildlife. Controlled burns are a common practice to prevent areas from becoming major fire hazards. The Preserve does them often, protecting the land as much as possible, and Stevens is a Certified Prescribed Burn Manager.

Another major focus of the club is water protection. Miles says 99 percent of water used on the course is going through vegetative filtration, such as a wetland, before entering a body of water. "Wetlands are Mother Nature's filtration system," Miles adds.

The course is also home to many different animals and birds. Large eastern diamondback rattlesnakes have been spotted on the property. "You ought to see them," Miles says.

Coyotes, bald eagles, bobcats and sandhill cranes occasionally make a visit. And once, Miles says, he even spotted a Florida panther. "The guys tell me that I'm crazy, but I saw it in the middle of the cart path 45 minutes after dawn," Miles says with a laugh. "He looked like a lion, and I haven't seen one in a long time."

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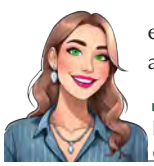

KELSIE HORNER is *Golf Course Industry's* digital editor. To submit ideas about conservation-focused programs or actions at your course, email her at khorner@gie.net.

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I RESOLVE TO...

It's New Year's resolution season. Have you made yours yet?

Every year some 40 percent of U.S. adults resolve to exercise more, eat less, save more and drink less. Within a week, 25 percent of resolution makers have ditched their good intentions and have returned to their old habits.

We get it — resolutions are easy to make and even easier to cast aside.

The human behavior (and resolution) experts say the secret to keeping your vows is to have a plan — one that's specific and realistic, has built-in accountability and provides for some backsliding, because we know there will be backsliding. With those guidelines in mind, let's get out our legal pads and Sharpies and write these five promises to ourselves in bold letters:

I RESOLVE TO … revise, update and maintain my agronomic plan. No matter how new to the job or how experienced you are, stating your goals and objectives is essential to staying on track throughout the year. As the saying goes, without a plan, any path will get you where you're going. What's more, when your plan is conscientiously prepared and presented, it's not only the most effective way to build support among your team and management, but also a reliable way to hold yourself accountable.

I RESOLVE TO … train, support and reward my team. In a shifting economy, where wage growth and inflationary pressures are on a collision course, keeping your team motivated and committed is at the top of every leader's job description. The job requires ongoing communication, training and purposeful planning to be effective. It's not necessary for you to be best buddies with your crew members — in fact, that's usually not a good idea. What's more important is that they know that you care for them, respect them and want to help them be more successful. Continuous training makes your job more gratifying, and it enables your team to perform at a steadily higher level, always improving.

I RESOLVE TO … take better advantage of technology. Advancement in the technological capabilities and advantages available to golf course superintendents continues to accelerate. Points of focus for 2026 should be operational efficiency, cost management and improved capabilities. Take advantage of the educational opportunities at the 2026 GCSAA Conference and Trade Show to seek out areas that can improve operational efficiencies at your course.

I RESOLVE TO … build trust with my team and my managers. Be mindful of the importance of trust. In 2026 — a midterm election year — we will hear plenty of promises, claims and counter claims that cause us to question motivations and intentions. Don't be a politician — be a professional. Tell people what you intend to do, how you intend to do it and when it will be done. And then make every effort to overdeliver. It's a simple path to trustworthiness.

I RESOLVE TO … be a respectful steward of our environment. If everyone were as capable and dedicated to environmental stewardship as golf course superintendents, we would live in a cleaner, healthier, more sustainable world. Sustainability and stewardship are categories where you shine.

Opportunities to become more capable stewards include:

- **Field days.** Conduct field days to introduce yourself and your team to your golfers, club members and other stakeholders. Tell them about the programs and initiatives you have built into your maintenance practices at your course — their course — to be a conscientious steward of the land and community.
- **Support for Scouts**. As the saying goes, "One never stands taller than when stooping to help a child." Invite local Scout troops and scouting leaders to visit your golf course. Show them how you can support their focus on learning more about the environment while earning stewardship badges.
- **Family days.** Schedule special days for your team to bring their families to see where mom and dad work. You'll see joy in the faces of your crew members' children when they get to sit on the mowers. They'll also appreciate learning how the place where their parents go every day is maintaining habitat for wildlife and butterflies.

Historians have documented resolution making as far back as the Babylonians some 4,000 years ago. There don't seem to be records of how many of their resolutions were kept. Will you keep yours? These are five that are certainly worth the effort.

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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Congratulations! You made it to 2026!

Superintendents endured a year as trying as any in recent memory. Our 2026 Numbers to Know survey quantifies their outlook on the obstacles they faced and conquered to keep golf thriving.

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Good tidings for a **green** and **prosperous 2026**

Cheers to another exciting year for golf made possible by your pursuit of excellence. As you plan for the year ahead, and manage the conditions of your club and course, we hope this State of the Industry report supports your success in the 2026 season.

We want you to know that Nufarm is here to help. Beyond dozens of reliable, go-to solutions and evolutionary technology like Anuew® EZ Plant Growth Regulator and Velocity® PM POA Management, we're introducing six new products, including fungicides, insecticides and premium herbicide solutions that will strengthen your agronomic toolbox.

A key priority for us in the year ahead will also be to share the important potential of our StayGuard™ herbicide on fertilizer. This technology is expanding to fertilizer offerings across the U.S., bringing new utility to efficient weed control.

Our commitment to the golf community remains strong. Through long-standing partnerships — from the EXCEL Leadership Program led in collaboration with the GCSAA to numerous local GCSA chapters across the country — we stay close to the real-world needs of the superintendent community to guide our innovation and give back in meaningful ways.

Nufarm's focus has always been on delivering next-generation solutions paired with dependable service and technical support. In 2026, we look forward to being at your side with new tools, new innovations and a continued dedication to helping your course perform at its best.

Jeff Eldridge

Jeff Eldridge, CGCS
Golf Segment Lead for Nufarm Turf & Ornamental

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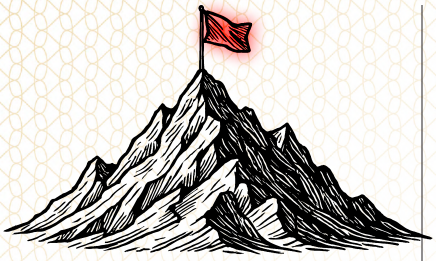


What did **you just overcome?**

You've likely conquered some gigantic challenges if you're reading this section.

From record play again nationally to volatile weather swings throughout multiple regions, superintendents enter 2026 hardened by what they encountered in 2025.

Our annual "Numbers to Know" report, presented in exclusive partnership with Nufarm since 2020, explores how the obstacles superintendents faced in 2025 affected their collective psyche and the performance of the industry.

Matt LaWell, **Kelsie Horner** and **Ron Furlong** crafted the anecdotes shared on the following pages. *Golf Course Industry* partnered with New Jersey-based Signet Research on the data by distributing a 33-question survey to print and/or digital subscribers working as superintendents, directors of agronomy, assistant superintendents, owners, general managers and management company executives. Results are based on 236 responses at a 95 percent confidence level.

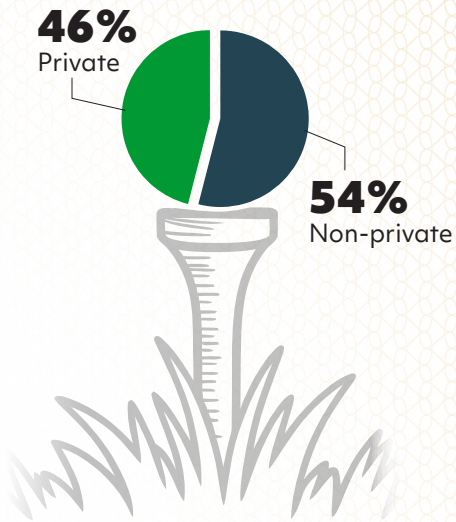
An annual donation to the Wee One Foundation is made in thanks for survey participation.

Who are you?

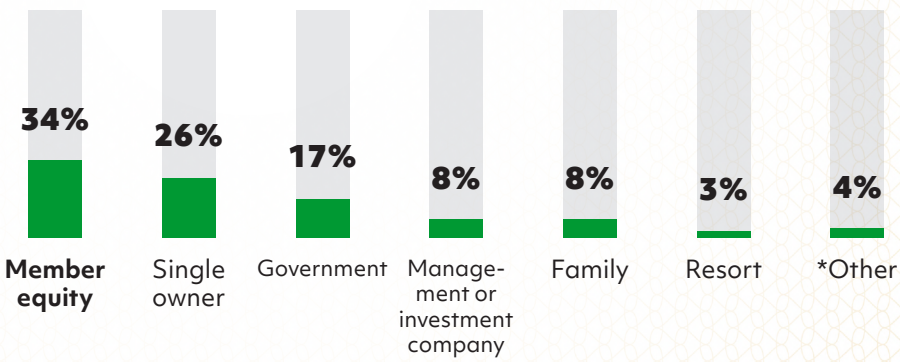
Superintendent, single golf course	**62%**
Director of agronomy or equivalent	**16%**
Superintendent, multiple golf courses	**7%**
Assistant superintendent acting on behalf of boss	**8%**
*Other	**7%**

Other responses included: Owner, general manager, director of golf/club professional, business manager

Type of course where you work



Who owns your course?



*Other responses included: Multiple owners, HOA, shareholders, university

Number of holes at your facility?

9	18	27	36+	*Other
9%	70%	8%	11%	2%

* Other responses included: 6 holes, 12 holes

Where is your course located?

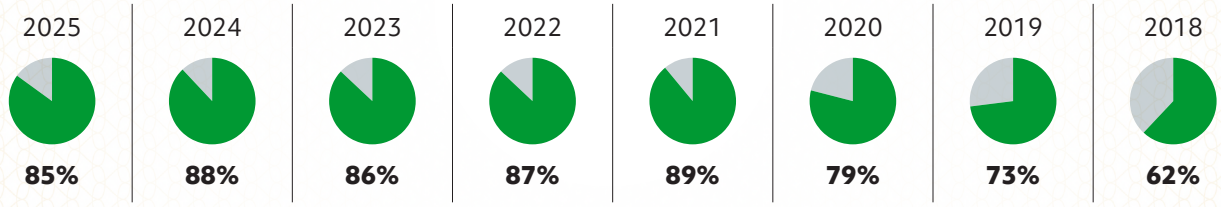
Northeast	**20%**
Southeast	**16%**
Central	**35%**
West	**22%**
Canada or elsewhere	**7%**

Budget!

Was your course profitable in 2025?

	All	Non-private	Private	Northeast	Southeast	Central	West
Profitable	**69%**	**81%**	**57%**	**74%**	**56%**	**70%**	**72%**
Broke even	**16%**	**8%**	**24%**	**11%**	**22%**	**15%**	**14%**
Experienced a loss	**11%**	**7%**	**15%**	**11%**	**14%**	**14%**	**6%**
Don't know	**4%**	**4%**	**4%**	**4%**	**8%**	**1%**	**8%**

Percentage of courses that were profitable or broke even since 2018



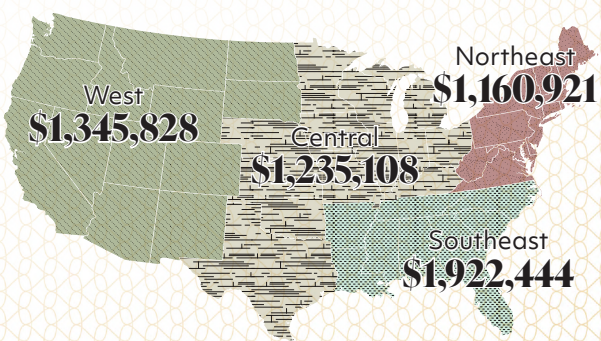
Projected 2026 non-capital maintenance budget...

...by **course type**

Non-private
$902,899

Private
$1.737 million

...by **region**



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Projected course improvement and enhancement budget

	2026	2025	2024	2023	2022
All	$383,751	$326,480	$410,843	$404,180	$226,371
Non-private	$228,112	$171,744	$316,850	$199,688	$136,379
Private	$539,389	$450,907	$503,905	$604,609	$312,407
Northeast	$248,650	$305,769	$275,784	$533,731	$312,407
Southeast	$585,729	$363,750	$413,467	$646,644	$189,286
Central	$226,421	$295,250	$360,927	$236,583	$167,339
West	$574,354	$405,658	$625,184	$443,044	$308,375

Average non-capital maintenance budget

2026 ..... $1.320 million
2025 ..... $1.344 million
2024 ..... $1.137 million
2023 ..... $1.047 million
2022 ..... $907,821
2021 ..... $1.044 million
2020 ..... $987,488
2019 ..... $845,705
2018 ..... $911,705
2017 ..... $798,200
2016 ..... $750,000
2015 ..... $697,000
2014 ..... N/A
2013 ..... $622,500
2012 ..... $651,392

Maintenance budget change compared with 2025

	All	Non-private	Private
Increase 20% or more	3%	3%	3%
Increase 10% to 19%	15%	20%	10%
Increase 1% to 9%	70%	61%	80%
No change	10%	12%	7%
Decrease 1% to 9%	1%	2%	0%
Decrease 10% or more	1%	2%	0%

85%

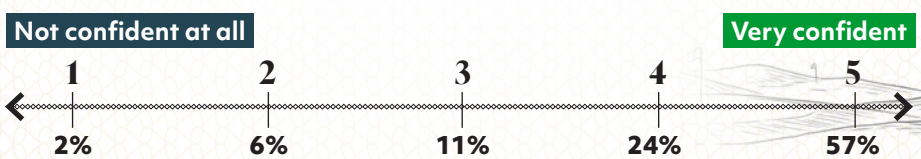
of courses were profitable or broke even in 2025

Percentage of budget dedicated to labor and overhead

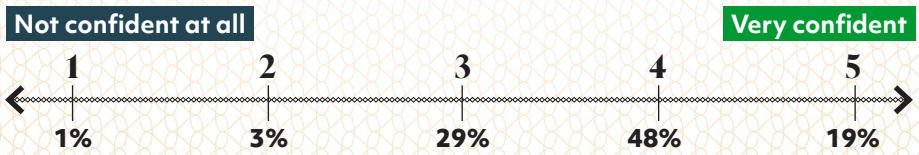
	All	Non-private	Private
Less than 40%	7%	13%	1%
40% to 49%	22%	26%	17%
50% to 59%	29%	33%	25%
60% to 69%	29%	17%	42%
70% to 79%	9%	6%	11%
80% or more	2%	3%	1%
Don't know	2%	2%	3%
Average	56%	53%	61%

Confidence in...

...your facility's finances



...overall industry finances



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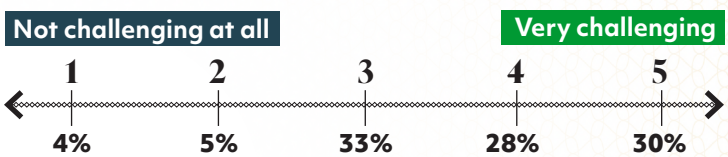
Nothing's normal anymore

How challenging would you rate 2025 for you and your department?



Some superintendents leave the golf course as quickly as they can after their work is done. **James Doepke** is not among them.

After five full seasons at Galena Golf Course, located in the northwest corner of Illinois, just miles from both Iowa and Wisconsin, Doepke describes himself as "a golf nut." He played his own course just about every Wednesday during league night. He joined as many as a dozen friends most weekends for 18 or 36 holes at other clubs. He played somewhere between 40 and 50 rounds across 2025.

"I do think it's important for a superintendent to play golf, because you see the golf course from the golfer's point of view," he says. "There are things I see when I'm golfing: *We missed this*, or *We gotta do this*, or *You're right, that does look bad*. So many of us are tired of being there and getting beaten down that the last thing you want to do is go play golf. I understand why guys don't play. I have good buddies who go sit on a lake and fish.

"But I'm a golf nut."

Even after the rigors of the last season.

Like so many superintendents across the Midwest in particular and large swaths of the country in general, Doepke worked through cool, then wet, then hot, then hot and wet, then hot and humid, "which led to umpteen issues with diseases and all the other crap that goes with it, blowing budgets out of the water, trying to keep grass alive," he says. He worked through about a month's worth of nights with temperatures of at least 70 degrees and humidity well over 50 percent. "And what that does to bentgrass is not good."

Doepke sprayed a variety of plant protectants about twice as often as he normally does — about every 10 days, rather than every three weeks. During the middle of August, much of the turf was as green as it normally is on June 1. He was mowing rough through the third week of September.

"By the end of the year, the grass had just given up on a couple of the greens where we don't have good air movement, good sunlight, things like that," he says. "We did some overseeding and stuff, dug the algae out of it, but algae was rampant at our golf course pretty much the entire season."

And within 10 days of shutting down for the season, the course was covered in more than a foot of a snow. No time to winterize the sprayer. No time to power wash equipment. No time to finish resodding bunker entrances. Just some agronomic challenges in addition to looming business challenges: Galena Golf Course will need to build a new clubhouse and install a new irrigation system in the next few years, with a season pass group whose average age now hovers around 55. "We're facing capital expenditures between $3 million and $7 million," Doepke says. "We are a financially solvent course, but we are not *that* financially solvent."

But there is more than the hint of a silver lining under big projects and so much snow cover.

"I have never had what you would consider a normal year here," Doepke says. "It's either been a drought or a flood. I'm not a fan of winter at all, but the snow is here, golf season is over, so let's see what the winter brings and take it from there. The last four winters, we haven't had probably a total of two feet of snow, let alone this early," he says. "So, this is good. This will help. Hopefully, we can get back to balance and have a normal spring.

"But there's nothing normal about the weather patterns anymore."

— Matt LaWell

Did you seriously consider leaving your job in 2025?

Yes
27%

No
73%

Facing the challenge

Superintendent **Doug Ward** just finished his final year at Belle Meade Country Club in Nashville, Tennessee, after running the maintenance team for 39 years. During his long tenure, he has seen the golf industry face challenges and go through ups and downs—but 2025 was one for the books.

The weather in 2025 could be defined as "brutal," at least for Ward. "It was very hot—extremely hot," he says. "I can't say that it was the worst that I've ever experienced, but it's certainly in the top five for sure.

"It seems like every summer is a little bit more challenging, or maybe a little bit more extreme than the last. Sooner or later, you're going to have that challenge looking you square in the face."

An extreme summer in the Transition Zone is something superintendents can count on. But thanks to Ward's experience, a solid irrigation system and a strong agronomic plan, the private facility was able to withstand the extreme heat and humidity. Ward's best advice for superintendents when it comes to dealing with something as uncontrollable as the weather is to stay on guard. "Know what your plans are, how you're going to manage your water," he says. "Be diligent with that and be aware. Take care of yourself, going into it. You need to be on a good cultural program."

Ward has a strong fungicide program, and he aerates three times a year — twice conventionally and once with a DryJect system—which helps prepare the course for unexpected conditions.

Intense weather combined with an influx of golfers leads to limited opportunities for agronomic work. "The challenge of maintaining the greens with that much play on your golf course, I think that's the overriding theme of golf courses in general right now," Ward says.

Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the course handled around 21,000 rounds a year. Now that number is above 30,000. Maintaining the course without interrupting play, especially while hand-watering, is a challenge and requires a creative solution. "In certain cases, it's almost impossible," Ward says. In the future, he can see the potential need for autonomous mowers and an earlier start time.

When it comes to dealing with weather, lots of play and daily challenges as a superintendent, Ward believes the most important thing a superintendent can do is to support his crew. Back in 2020 and 2021, Belle Meade had a difficult time attracting and maintaining staff. Now, Ward says that challenge has shrunk. He prioritized allowing for a flexible schedule for his employees, being mindful of their lives outside of work—a necessity in the current work climate.

But more essential to maintaining the team is to ensure everyone feels loved and cared for. Ward and his team often spend time over meals or at crew events. "You just have to believe in your guys," Ward says. "Support them and treat them as your greatest asset there. You cannot take those people for granted. Show them you love them. Show them that they're the most important asset there is in the business."

Based on Ward's experiences, he believes the stress on superintendents will only grow in the coming years. "I think it's just definitely going to be more and more pressure put on the superintendent from here on out," he says.

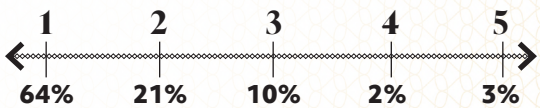
Ward is retired now, but his advice for those in the industry remains crucial: "Be aware that it's definitely not a cakewalk out there. It's not going to be automatic from here on out — not that it ever was — but it's certainly going to be more demands put on superintendents from not only a quality standpoint, but from daily play.

"You just have to be prepared to put up with the additional challenges."

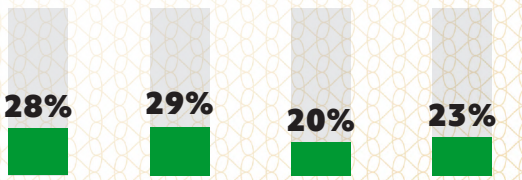
— Kelsie Horner

Concern about losing your job in 2025

Not concerned at all — **Very concerned**



Most consecutive days worked in 2025 without a full day off



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Program A, all season

High above much of the rest of West Virginia, **Forrest Smith** and **Richard Ward** tend to 27 holes of almost heaven.

Ward is the superintendent of the 18-hole championship course at Pipestem Resort State Park, located more than 3,200 feet above sea level and situated near the state's southern tip. Smith is the superintendent of the 9-hole par-3 course, and also handles the spray and insect control programs. Between them, they have worked more than a quarter of a century at Pipestem Resort and more than 80 years in golf course maintenance.

"And of all my seasons," Smith says, "I think this one has been the most difficult."

Weather is a key factor everywhere, of course. It is somehow more key in West Virginia, where snow can melt and temperatures can spike from freezing to 70 in what "seems like a matter of hours," Smith says. He laughs and clarifies himself. "It's not *that* fast. But it does change quickly." To hear Smith recap it, the difficult 2025 started out a little wet, then got real dry, then got hot and wet, which saturated the 27 pushup greens. The clay in the soil held those temperatures. Turf wilted and spotted with disease.

On top of a weather roller coaster, the irrigation system — some of it 25 years old, some of it 50 years old, all of it a mix of composite asbestos and cast iron — didn't pop up until the middle of June. "We just had places that were closed we couldn't find," Smith says. "Valves either wouldn't open or they would indicate they were open and they weren't. And when they were open, they wouldn't close.

"It's a battle we always go through. Hopefully, with what we've done, fixing the mainline valves that have failed, will be a big help in the future. … Just trying to keep the old man alive for another year."

Before every season, Smith plots out plant protectants and other products he plans to use on the turf. He normally opens the season with his B Program — "the cheaper products that I know will get us started," he says. When the season kicks into more difficult agronomic situations, he switches to his A Program, the more expensive products.

"I was in that mode all year," he says. "When we saw the *Pythium* pressure and the ABW pressure, things like that, kicking in early, we just said, 'We're in battle mode.' And all the indicators were off this year. There was no consistency to what was happening."

There were some moments of zen throughout the season, though. Smith often traveled the hour from his home in Mount Hope, just south of Beckley, to the course with his son, **Ethan**, a 21-year-old junior at Marshall University. When Ethan was younger, he would play video games while his dad watered the greens. There were occasional rides in the Cushman. "We had fun," Smith says. Now, father and son have worked together for parts of the last three seasons.

"I let him get a little sleep in the morning before we get there," Smith says. "He's helped me remember when I was that age and didn't know anything. I try to keep that in mind when the younger people come in."

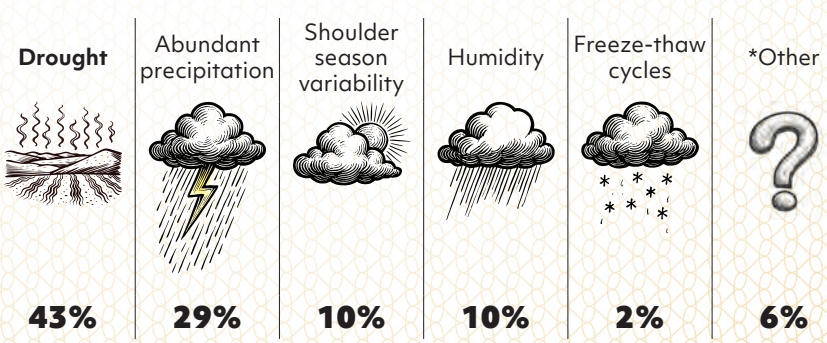
Smith wants to remember 2025, too.

"I'm glad we had it," he says. "When you've been here for a while, it's nice to be humbled. We've had a lot of success, but I don't mind the failures. People sometimes think you're not going to fail, and we do. I'm glad we went through 2025. We got rocked pretty good. 2026, we'll load back up. We have some younger guys we're going to teach some things this winter, and that starts in January."

Looking on the brighter side, "It was a good fall to overseed," he says with a big laugh. "I just hope that last snow mold application I put down in October is going to hold!"

— Matt LaWell

What weather-related challenge at your course poses the biggest threat to failing to meet golfer expectations?



Other responses included: Salt intrusion, winterkill, lack of growing season, monsoon season

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Adapting with the times

Have you experienced difficulty filling any of the following positions in the past year?

Full-time hourly staff	**40%**
Part-time hourly staff	**32%**
Assistant superintendent	**30%**
Irrigation/spray technician	**22%**
Equipment manager	**20%**
None of the above	**29%**

After spending more than 30 years in the industry, regional director of agronomy **Eric Johnson** has learned a thing or two about adaptability. That skill has gotten him through many challenges, and especially the year of 2025. Johnson graduated from Oregon State University in 1995 and was hired at Chambers Bay Golf Course in 2012.

The Washington facility stays open year-round, so the tee sheet stays full consistently — even in the winter. Instead of having the off-season for maintenance projects, the course closes every Tuesday from November to February to allow for the turf team to complete focused tasks. Even on crappy weather days, Chambers Bay stays busy.

"Once the first tee time goes, they're right on top of each other and then chasing us," Johnson says. "Once the golf course is full, it's pretty challenging for us to get out in front of play to accomplish anything."

With an influx of golfers, high traffic areas require more upkeep. "We don't have a lot places to move people off of traffic areas, so a lot of those tight focal points get beat up," Johnson says.

Johnson adds communication is key for getting through the busy seasons. "The biggest thing is to communicate within your property and all the weekly managers going on with that department — trying to plan as far as possible ahead on things with traffic and staffing and all that stuff," he says. "That's our No. 1 goal."

An influx in golf, an abnormal weather season and staffing difficulties makes for an ill-fitting trio. Turf pros all over dealt with one — or all of them — in 2025. Holding consistent staff is an issue plaguing the turf world right now. Superintendents are having a hard time maintaining and attracting staff.

"It's a pretty competitive market right now with golf courses compared to landscape companies; their rate of pay is higher," Johnsons says.

To adapt to staffing problems, Johnson has worked with his team to allow for more flexible schedules for the maintenance crew.

"We have six guys that probably work three or four days a week, and one guy comes only for the summers, on Friday and Saturday nights, and does range maintenance," Johnson says. "A lot of the guys have another primary job. Anybody that can't work five days a week, we'll find a way to make it work if they're worthwhile."

Despite staffing issues, Johnson says he's learned how to handle things. He needed to make staffing changes during the financial crisis of 2008 and ensuing Great Recession. When the facility had to close for six weeks in 2020 because of COVID-19, the team shrunk. Those experiences helped him learn how to adapt, and he will have those skills in his back pocket for the future.

During stretches where work can be tough to handle, Johnson has a plethora of people to lean on. Three of his sons work in the industry, providing an outlet for comfort and advice.

"It's nice to talk to them and see what they're going through," Johnson says. "They always have some good ideas. Their generation has a lot more information coming at them compared to what I had when I started."

Johnson also turns to other superintendents, both from nearby courses and others within KemperSports, which manages Chambers Bay. "There's always plenty of support within our company," he says.

2025 required adaptability from superintendents everywhere. Although Washington didn't have as intense of a weather year, Johnson and his team have faced challenges in other ways. The superintendent's adaptability is one way he got through.

— Kelsie Horner

What would most help you balance the amount of play your course receives with meeting golfer expectations?

33%	**33%**	**18%**	**10%**	**6%**
More employees with turf backgrounds	**Regular closures for maintenance**	Better equipment	Later tee times	Increased budget for supplies

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Fighting the schedule

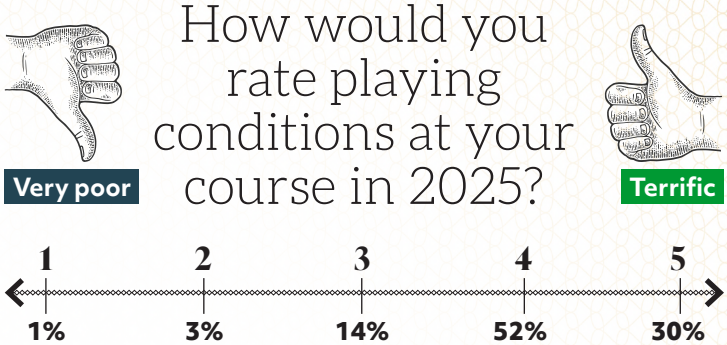
Shawnee Hills Golf Course superintendent **Brad Vecchio** has been in the industry since high school. He graduated from Ohio State ATI, worked as an assistant at numerous courses and found his way to Shawnee Hills in Bedford, Ohio, as superintendent in 2020. Through his years on Ohio turf, Vecchio has experienced the golf industry through many challenges, including the crash of 2008, and the golf surge through the COVID-19 pandemic. Each year brings its own set of challenges. 2025 brought many, but the most difficult aspect for the Cleveland Metroparks course was keeping the employee schedule full.

Vecchio hired fewer seasonal maintenance team members. "Seasonal help will make or break the course," he says.

Did playing conditions in 2025 fail to meet your expectations for any of the following reasons?

Weather	**44%**
Cart traffic	**43%**
Lack of moisture	**39%**
Staffing issues	**32%**
Aging equipment	**30%**
Too much play	**26%**
Overabundance of moisture	**22%**
Substandard course infrastructure	**20%**
Disease pressure	**20%**
Weed pressure	**19%**
Insect pressure	**9%**
Budget cuts	**5%**
None, conditions were satisfactory	**18%**

How would you rate playing conditions at your course in 2025?



"It almost broke us this year."

Vecchio struggled to attract staff, and even when he did, scheduling was difficult. Staff frequently requested time off and availability was limited. This isn't just a battle at Shawnee Hills; it's a challenge superintendents face everywhere.

Due to staffing shortages, Vecchio often had to change plans. Instead of mowing all greens, tees and fairways in one day, half the tees were saved for the next day. From a golfer's perspective, the change was not noticeable. For Vecchio and the full-time staffers, it was frustrating. Limited staff means limited tasks completed each day.

To combat the scheduling issues, Vecchio plans to hire a few extra people in 2026. "I'm going to give myself a little more leeway," he says. "Versus this year, I was already shorthanded."

2025 was also a record-breaking revenue year for the facility. The number of golfers on the course has increased every year since the start of COVID-19. 2025 was the first year the numbers were even slightly down, but still not by much. Tee sheets were filled frequently through November.

Despite the challenges 2025 brought, the pressure on Vecchio hasn't changed. "The pressure is what we put on ourselves," he says. "The golfers are here. We've got to give them a great quality course, no matter what kind of budget we have."

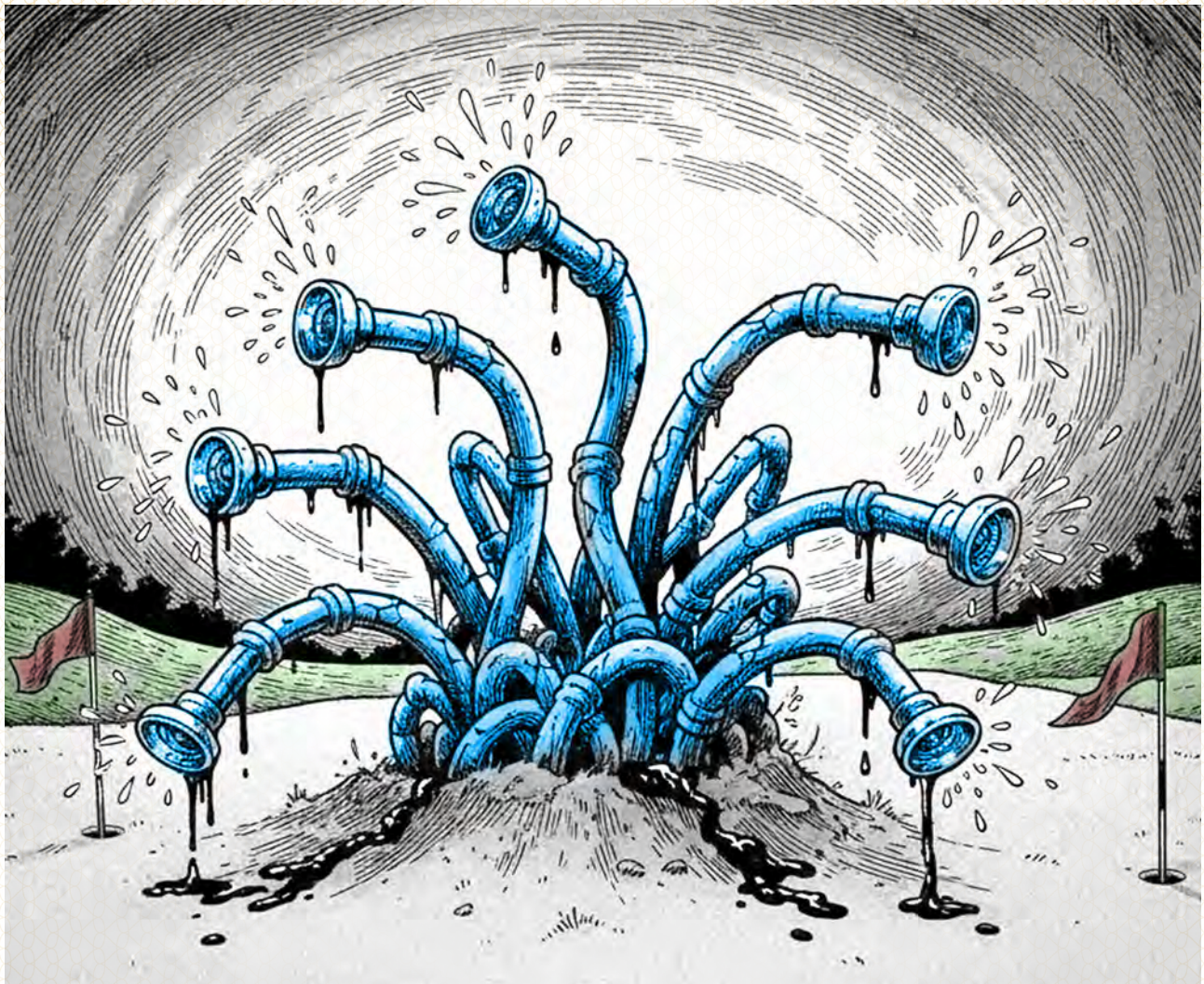
Having a strong agronomic plan in place is key for getting through unexpected events like weather and staff changes. Ohio endured a wet spring, a hot and humid summer, and playable weather through the fall. "When the unexpected comes up, we're already kind of ready for it," Vecchio says. "When big storms come up, we've been through it before. We know what to do. We're ready. The biggest thing is just being prepared for it."

The Cleveland area also faced several stretches without rainfall. Shawnee Hills operates with two ponds for irrigation and, at one point, those ponds were just about empty. "We didn't run out completely," Vecchio says, "but that was the biggest thing, was trying to adjust our watering, knowing that our lakes were running low."

For superintendents and assistants facing pressures—agronomic or otherwise—Vecchio says the best thing to do is reach out to other industry pros. In the Cleveland area, most superintendents have each other's phone numbers and will often ask questions and seek advice. "Don't be afraid to reach out," he says. "That's the biggest thing."

No matter what battle you're facing, community can help you through.

—Kelsie Horner



It came from the pipes!

Ron Furlong is working with a 35-year-old irrigation system that somehow feels older — and without confirmation of a replacement any time soon. His story and his solutions are emblematic for what many faced this past year.

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I am certainly not the only superintendent to be operating with an outdated, aging irrigation system. For anyone who has worked on a golf course with a system past its expiration date, you understand the challenges involved. For all you others who possibly have had the good fortune to work with nothing but newer systems in your golf course maintenance careers, this article might seem a bit like fiction—horror fiction, at that. But I attest that everything you are about to read is true. Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent.

OK, the "horror" thing might be stretching it a bit, but honestly, is there anything more important to a superintendent than the reliability of the irrigation system? If it's not your No. 1, I'm sure it has to be your No. 2. Perhaps you don't really understand this fully until you've had to operate with an irrigation system past its prime.

2025 was another year Avalon Golf Club had to limp through with an outdated system. The western Washington course opened in 1991 and, as you've no doubt guessed by now, is still operating with the original system.

This is not to say everything is original. The pump station is fairly new, and the three pumps have been replaced and upgraded a few times over the years. The software we use is newish, and the controllers on the course have also been updated.

However, the biggest thing that has not been updated during those 35 years—and the biggest part of any irrigation system—is the PVC in the ground. The pipe, along with many of the original heads and valves, are still out there in operation.

The problem associated with operating with PVC that is five, 10 or even 15 years past its expected life, depending on who you talk with, is, perhaps obviously, reliability. To be completely honest, I'm surprised that the old pipe in the ground still, for the most part, functions. Perhaps this is the problem: We haven't gotten a full cataclysmic failure event.

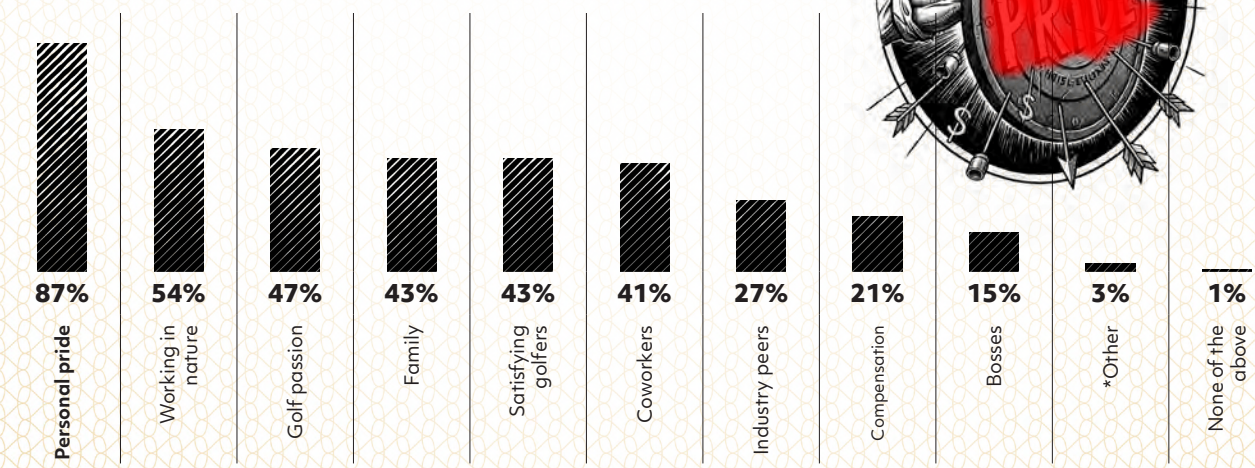
What we get instead is a break here, a break there. We might go a few months in the middle of summer with no issues. But then something will happen. And then something else. What happens with most with these "breaks" is the glue at the bell-ends fails. There are a few holes on the lower end of the golf course where we have literally replaced each and every stick of pipe over the years because of this issue.

Golf courses are now, for the most part, installing HDPE when renovating or updating their systems. This pipe, although more expensive than traditional PVC (which is still an option), lasts much longer in the ground and requires significantly less maintenance.

Mathew Rico, Rain Bird Irrigation specialist at Pacific Golf and Turf in Seattle and around the greater western Washington area, is my local rep and a former superintendent. He raves about HDPE.

"Most importantly is the longevity," he tells me. "With traditional PVC you can expect a 30-year life

What keeps you motivated during a challenging stretch?



Other responses included: Showcasing the course, stubbornness, faith

at best, while with HDPE we are being told to expect three times that, around 90 years."

I don't know about any of you, but anything with a 90-year life expectancy sounds pretty darn good to me. I mean, my goodness, I'll probably even be retired by then!

"Fusing is an instantaneous fix for HDPE pipe," Rico explains, "as opposed to using glue and primer everywhere and waiting for it to dry."

And, of course, waiting for it — as is the case for us at Avalon — to someday fail.

"HDPE is more flexible as well," Rico says, "thus easier to install. Contractors love this because they can carry it in larger pieces and you don't have so many butt-ends that could cause water hammer issues."

Another problem associated with an older system is the sprinkler heads and the valves. Avalon still has a fair amount of original Rain Bird 90 fairway heads that have been in the ground and throwing water for 35 years. And a pretty good amount of original gate valves are still out there as well. The failure of the original gate valves has been quite noteworthy in the last couple years. They're dropping like flies. I truly believe we have indeed hit our life-expectancy wall with these gate valves.

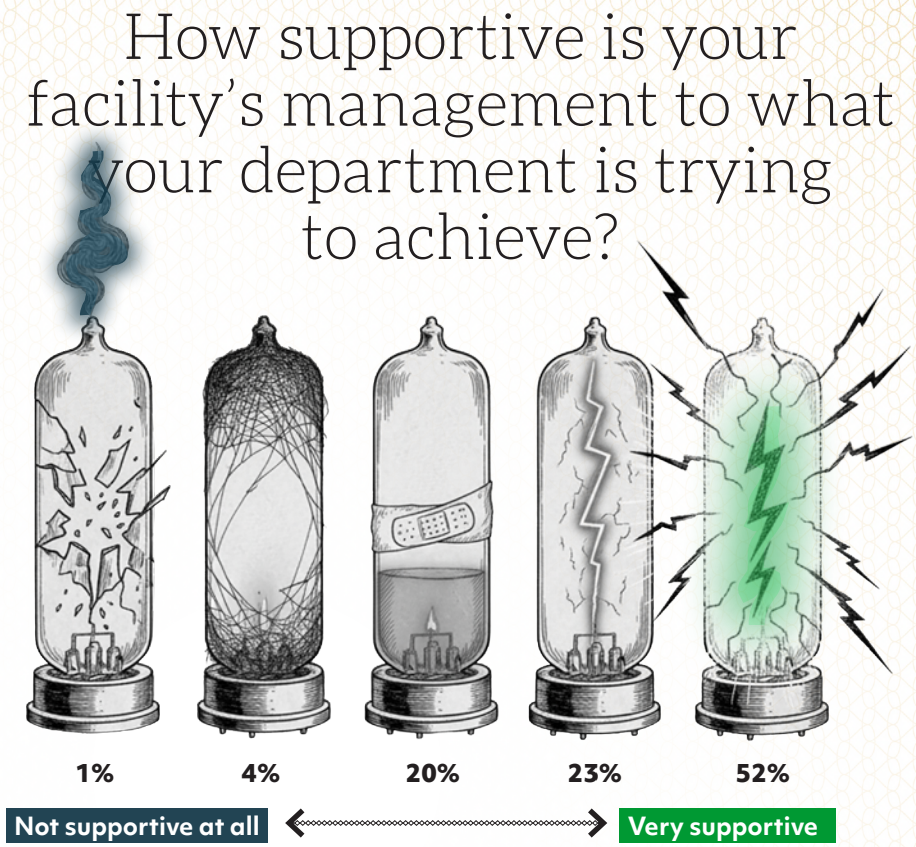
Earlier, I mentioned that one of the problems with the slow failure of our PVC here at Avalon over the years is that it has been random and sporadic. A leak here, a break there. Somehow there has been a big cataclysmic failure event. The reason this "slow death" is more of a problem is that our overall ability to maintain and Band-Aid the system has perhaps been the biggest factor in ownership not pulling the trigger on a complete new system. Maybe we've been our worst enemy with our ability to keep the system functioning all these years.

With the price of new irrigation systems these days it's hard to fault ownership — and I certainly don't. I more than understand the hesitation to spend $5 million or more (we have 27 holes) on a new system when we're still figuring out a way to make the old one work. But, like anything, this is only sustainable for so long.

Getting back to 2025 and how, exactly, we faced the challenge of this past year:

First, and perhaps most important, we now have a very experienced, professional irrigation tech in charge of the system. It's invaluable to find someone who is experienced and skilled at maintaining an older system, and who doesn't get overwhelmed when the crap hits the fan, who can look an irrigation break in the face on a hot day in July and tackle the problem. Oh, and then tackle the next one. And the one after that. Trust me, I know how important this is. We literally went through five or six individuals in this role over the last decade and none of them was up to this challenge. But there are people out there. It's just a matter of getting lucky enough to find one.

Another proactive step we took this past year was beginning a plan to replace all original valves that are still out on the course. Many of them have been changed out over the years when we've had issues. But with gate valves, you don't want to run into an issue when you need the valve to do its job. Fixing breaks midseason with valves that don't work, or break just when you need them can be a bit horrific. Your pipe break issue has suddenly doubled into a pipe break repair coupled with a valve replacement. We have decided to take a proactive stance on valve replacement throughout the system, slowly making our way, replacing anything original — or, in some cases, not original but still well past its life.



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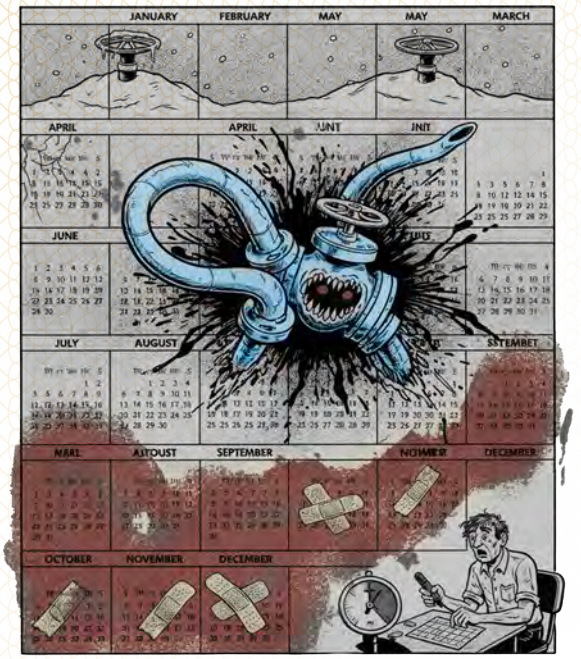
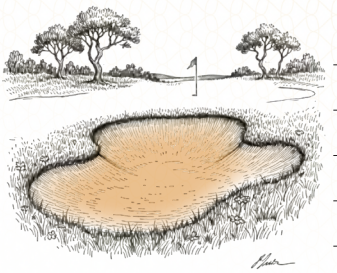


Months you feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the job

January	**4%**
February	**3%**
March	**6%**
April	**17%**
May	**17%**
June	**34%**
July	**54%**
August	**56%**
September	**37%**
October	**16%**
November	**8%**
December	**3%**
Feel this way year-round	**4%**
Don't feel overwhelmed during any month	**18%**

Areas of your course addressed through capital improvement projects over the last five years



Bunkers	**53%**
Trees	**49%**
Cart paths	**46%**
Irrigation	**41%**
Drainage	**41%**
Tees	**39%**
Practice areas	**34%**
Greens	**23%**
Fairways	**16%**
Water features	**12%**
None of the above	**8%**

Same goes with the old heads on the course. Those 35-year-old Rain Bird 90 canister type heads have been trying valiantly to continue on with their service to our golf course, but their time has either come or is nearing. Like the valves, we are making our way through replacing as many of these heads as we can. With the sprinkler heads, and the fairway heads in particular, we decided to go with refurbished heads instead of new heads for two reasons. One, cost. We can get a refurbished head for a quarter of the price of a new head. And two, because we do plan on having a new system in the future, it seems silly to put new heads out there if they might be replaced before their lifespan is even close to being up.

We also changed how we water in 2025. Unfortunately, we strayed from watering with the computer at night over the last few years. With the unpredictability of our system and that simple fact that it isn't "tight" like a new system would be, we have more peace of mind watering from the controllers. Consider this a bit old school. But we feel we have more control over the system and how much we water when we do it ourselves. Having a couple trustworthy waterers on the crew who don't mind coming in extremely early is essential for us. A bit anti-AI, which, frankly, sounds good to me right now.

For all its warts, 2025 included a promising note: we finally hired an irrigation designer. This is always the first step toward a new system. Get the design and the bid. See how you can make the finances and timing work in the future.

Unfortunately, our biggest challenge in 2025 is also going to be our biggest challenge in 2026. Realizing this, if not half the battle, is certainly a good portion of the battle.

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

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- Apply at temperatures 70-90°F
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A tale of two seasons (smushed into one)

Week after glorious week, rain poured down on Marshall Country Club. Where so many other courses scattered around southern Michigan remained dry, the 18 holes along Lyon Lake received half an inch or more every week from the start of the season, to Memorial Day, through the Fourth of July, into the first days of August.

"We didn't really need to use our irrigation system at all until August," superintendent **Joshua Coles** says. "It made life easier. I didn't have any real explosions where it was so wet that we couldn't do anything or we couldn't control the growth or anything. Mother Nature made it much simpler than in years past. The whole time, I'm thinking, *What's coming next?* Because it's too good to be true. I was dealing with a little more disease than normal because it was a little wetter. But it was too good to be true."

Marshall Country Club is one of three golf courses in Marshall, Michigan — population: 6,822 — located about 30 miles north of the Indiana-Ohio state border. It's also situated in "a weird, little valley," Coles says, that often delivers weather far different from whatever neighboring cities receive. Throughout the first four months of the 2025 golf season, that was a good thing. Sure, Coles was working through a little more disease pressure than normal, especially summer patch in fairways and dollar spot on greens, but that seemed a small price to pay for not turning to the irrigation system for more than two straight days through early August.

Over the last three or four months, though, it was not.

The rain stopped. The drought that so many other folks had already endured hit Coles hard.

"From the last week of July, the lake that we pull from, we lost almost three feet of static water depth," Coles says. "I had a foot of water left to pull from with a month to go. We got into the 90s quite a few days there, 40 percent humidity, and we were losing two inches a day from our lake just because of evaporation. Before we knew it, we were starting to pull from the bottom of the lake. Our heads were clogged up, our pumps are going down. I was out there every night, making sure the pump wasn't clogged up with soot and mud from the bottom of the lake. We started to see some decline in the turf at that point.

"Every day, I just went out and cleaned around the intake, and we got a couple of rains. That got us through. We were two weeks away from being in a very bad position if we had gone any longer than we did and actually needed the water."

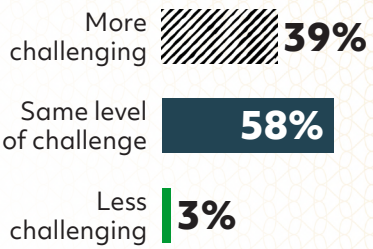
The winter provides its own challenges: During Coles' 13-season run, Marshall Country Club has transitioned to a public course and equity membership has dropped from about 175 to 50. There are still about 175 total members, but the club is not financially able to keep him working full time through the winter. He works in the shop, grinds with one or two other team members, but there is no winter course maintenance. He normally starts prepping equipment and the turf around March 1 in anticipation of an April 1 opening. His compensation does include housing "right next door," but that doesn't help him fill out his team of about 10. "Most people can't take those two or three months off." Thankfully, his assistant **Drew Lasky** is among those folks who come back season after season. So are his parents, **Connie** and **Doug**. Connie learned how to mow rough. Doug helps with oil changes and some more mowing. Most of the members volunteer to help clean up the course in the spring and with other projects throughout the season.

Coles says the job is a perfect fit. He grew up in Marshall and has known most of the members since he was a kid. "I put a lot of hours in," he says, "but it's rewarding — helping and pleasing the people I've grown up with my entire life."

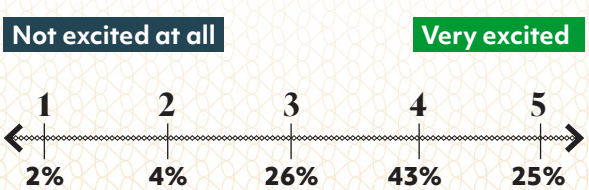
Even during the wettest — and driest — of seasons.

— Matt LaWell

Challenge of being a superintendent now compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic



Excitement level for 2026 peak golf season



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YOU'D BETTER GET BETTER

After more than 40 years in this business, I think it's safe to say that I've officially become a crotchety old man. Some — many, in fact — will point out that I've been one for quite some time, to which I plead guilty. But if nothing else, it grants me license to survey the industry and its participants with a discerning eye and pass judgment.

Don't like it? Sue me.

As I hope you've come to realize by now, my main concern in this column isn't turf care, green committees or even golfers too stupid to obey a "no carts beyond this point" sign. No. My focus, month after month, is you. Specifically, your personal growth. Helping you become not only the best superintendent you can be, but also the best boss, best employee, best role model … really just the best person possible, at work and at home.

One of the more disturbing traits I witnessed over the last year is the ability of many people, superintendents and others, to mess up interactions with other people. How we interact with others, whether on the job, with family, or in those day-to-day moments, define who we really are.

So, I'm calling out everyone — including myself — for poor interpersonal behavior as described in the examples below. Do any of them sound familiar? Before you answer, consider whether your boss, staff, spouse, kids or that customer-service rep you got on the line accuse you of any of the following? Be honest. For their sake and your own.

My way or the highway. Are you always right, no matter what the subject? Are you spouting your always-right points of view without intelligent backup or real-life experience? If nothing else, it's statistically impossible for one person to be correct all the time. But more than that, you're shortchanging yourself by not accepting someone else's thoughts, opinions or experiences. Don't confuse your opinions for facts. Don't automatically reject other perspectives. And when it turns out you weren't right? Admit it.

Immediate no. How do you react to feedback or constructive criticism? We've all seen salespeople, construction crews and maintenance workers hear something and get angry, start yelling, or otherwise refuse to accept what's been said. Rather than responding with the quick "No, you're wrong," toughen your outer layer and accept advice that comes your way. At least listen without interrupting and immediately reacting negatively. There may be more than a kernel of truth in what's being said to you: Others wouldn't offer suggestions and ideas unless they cared about you or your course. So, drop the defensive shield and open your mind to what others have to say.

Finger pointing. Be accountable for your actions. Rather than finger-pointing or placing blame elsewhere, accept responsibility. Nothing is worse for morale than shifting blame to someone else, particularly an underling. You'll never regain their trust if you pass off the mistake as someone else's and don't admit your mistake. And even when others are partly at fault, good leadership begins with taking responsibility and, as quickly as possible, leaving the mistake behind and working toward a solution.

Are you listening? My father always said, "The more you talk, the less you know." The ability to listen — and not just listen but really hear what is being said — seems to be a vanishing skill. The fastest way to lose someone's respect or interest is to talk over them, interrupt or dominate a conversation. You won't learn anything by closing your ears and opening your mouth: The goal is intelligent dialogue and a constructive exchange of ideas.

Snap judgments. Don't assess others too quickly. Don't be prejudiced by their name, accent, looks, the car they drive, the clothes they wear, the company they represent or any other obvious attributes. Judge by what they think and say. If you don't like it or agree with it, at least you're making a judgment based on fact, not fancy.

Too confident. The examples above are very similar because they're all driven by the same negatives: ego and overconfidence. No matter how good you think you are, there's someone smarter. You can learn something from almost everyone if you open your ears, close your mouth, and recognize that the person or people you're dealing with deserve your understanding and respect. That would be a good start for all of us.

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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HIGHER OR LOWER?

Height of cut will vary by playing surface, season and grass type, among other reasons. Tinkering with different leaf lengths will help you determine where turf is thriving.

By **Lee Carr**

True or false: The lower the height of cut, the higher the maintenance costs.

True, but it's complicated.

When the HOC is .100", how can that *not* be complicated? The machines, operators, inputs and growing conditions for that area of turf must be near perfect.

"There is a direct correlation between HOC and high-quality putting surfaces," says **Noy Sparks III**, superintendent at Fossil Trace Golf Club, a municipal course in Golden, Colorado. "High-quality putting surfaces require more maintenance, which can increase costs. Lower heights reduce a plant's ability to withstand stress. Whether it is heat, traffic, disease or a different challenge, more inputs are needed to help keep these playing surfaces healthy and strong."

In Johnstown, Colorado, **Mitch Bryden** is the superintendent at Bella Ridge Golf Club, which opened in 2025. Leading the grow-in since 2023 after experience at several courses, including helping with the grow-in at TPC Colorado in Berthoud, he understands. "Lower heights cost more, and there are many reasons why," Bryden says.

A lower HOC means the turf needs to be mowed more frequently, which translates to more fuel, inputs, labor and equipment maintenance. At Bella Ridge, the tees, fairways and rough are a 90/10 blend of Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass, the greens are 007XL bentgrass, approaches are Dominator Blend bentgrass, and native areas are sheep and hard fescues.

"Fertilizers, pesticides, wetting agents and watering all factor in," Bryden says. "With blue/rye blends, I use less water on the fairways than I do on the rough. In Colorado, water is like gold, so being able to conserve water with lower heights can be a saving grace." The bentgrass greens and approaches are very drought tolerant, and Bryden uses 30 to 50 percent less water on the bentgrass than he disperses on the rough.

"Bentgrass greens and approaches, however, take more regular sprays by spoon feeding fertilizers, growth regulator, pesticides and wetting agents," Bryden says. "So, again, that causes more wear and tear on the equipment, and it takes more manpower. If someone is spraying, a task somewhere else isn't getting done. The gamut of everything for greens and approaches is expensive."

© BELLA RIDGE AGRONOMY STAFF

Mowing rough two or three times a week to maintain their HOC "means the crew is following the mowers to ensure clippings are blown," Bryden says. "We don't treat our roughs with nearly as many chemicals or as much fertilizer, though, nor mow them as much, so the lower heights are still more expensive."

HOC is considered often at Sara Bay Country Club in Sarasota, Florida, where **Carlyle Merring** has been the superintendent since 2018. Sara Bay is a historic, charming **Donald Ross** design, with undulating greens and a lot of character. It's very walkable, and renovations, including greens and bunkers, were completed under the guidance of **Kris Spence** in 2023. Sara Bay celebrates its centennial this year.

The greens at Sara Bay are TifEagle Bermudagrass, the collars are TifGrand, and the tees, fairways and approach areas were planted with Bimini Bermudagrass sprigs. The rough is a combination of Bimini, 419 and common Bermudagrass. In peak season the greens are at .120", collars are .250" and tees are .450". Fairways are .500" and the rough stays at 2".

Though discussed regularly, "we try not to change heights as much as possible," Merring says. "We tend to change the HOC and stick with it for a while, though we did change them a few times last year. Greens pretty much always stay between .110" and .130", and tees and fairways will be between .400" and .500"."

The rough is markedly denser during the growing season, and once or twice a year it is scalped down to an inch. "Scalping will improve the appearance of Bermudagrass," Merring says. "You are removing old senescing leaves and extra material that is not needed, so you encourage fresh growth from a lower point in the plant."

At Fossil Trace, the HOC is rarely discussed because it rarely changes, keeping the root-to-shoot ratio pretty consistent. The fairways, tees and roughs are Kentucky bluegrass and peak season is April to November. Tees and fairways are mowed at .500" and the roughs are mowed at 1.5". Greens are a mixture of Dominant bentgrass and *Poa annua*, with the HOC in the growing season around .110". The HOC will occasionally change during periods of high stress or intense disease pressure. Just some reasons to consider changing the HOC.

CONSIDERATIONS

It takes work, but there are great reasons to change the HOC, like going low to invigorate Bermudagrass, or keeping the grass a little longer to increase the potential for photosynthesis, withstand increased traffic, mitigate disease and pest pressure, or cool the turf. After a decision is made to change the HOC, machinery is adjusted accordingly.

"Yeah, we are removing the reels or the cutting units,

and changing the bed knives to adjust the HOC," Merring says. "That's a big reason that we don't mess with the HOC that much. It's very labor intensive." It also requires a lot of coordination and communication with the team, but changing the HOC can be helpful.

"We had an El Niño winter a few years ago and we raised heights on greens up to .130" for a month or two," Merring says. "We raised the HOC in fairways after hurricanes, because we couldn't get out there and mow for 10 days. Certain circumstances — heavy rains, high disease pressure, wet winters, or other environmental stresses cause us to deviate from our normal heights to maximize turf health."

Fossil Trace, known for its incredible scenery, including dinosaur trace fossils visible from the 12th green and chimney incinerator from the 1940s in the first fairway, is a popular **Jim Engh** design. "We're fortunate to have the resources and support necessary to deliver an exceptional golf experience," Sparks says. That includes having the staff necessary to maintain the desired HOC.

The team consists of 12 full-time staff members: two assistant superintendents, an irrigation technician, horticulturist, mechanic, assistant mechanic and five senior maintenance workers. In the growing season, the team includes an additional 15 to 20 seasonal employees.

Factors influencing HOC

Here is a quick reference to help you — or those you are helping educate — remember the components guiding decision-making for height of cut:

- Turf variety
- Pace of play
- Aesthetics
- Climate
- Soil type
- Playability
- Weather
- Equipment available
- Labor available
- Budget
- Equipment manager's schedule
- Performance data
- Disease pressure
- Weed and insect pressure
- Administrative and member preferences
- Irrigation
- Use of fertility
- Use of plant growth regulators
- Other inputs
- Visual contrast

If the HOC needs to change — due to stress factors that could lead to a reduction in turf quality — Sparks makes the decision to raise the HOC. "Though ultimately I make these decisions," he says, "I involve our agronomy staff to get their input and to help them develop their turf management skills." Sparks acknowledges that it is not about the metrics, but the playability, and he checks greens performance by hitting a few putts every day.

How do you know your HOC? Prism gauges are a popular tool for measuring, but in general, the cutting settings are expected to be accurate. It's good to double-check HOCs when switching machines, particularly if changing brands, though many leaders rely more on visual indicators.

"We take a bench height and set it to that, and then we make observations out on the course," Merring says. "We can then make adjustments up or down once we see what it looks like on the actual playing surface. I'm not so concerned about the number, it's really about how it looks and how it plays. We make small adjustments from there."

Some superintendents track their HOC data. Others don't. By all accounts, it's more about what is working for the course and the turf. The same is true for HOC during cultural practices. Some courses cut low before aerifying, some don't.

"Our aerifications happen in early April and early September," Sparks says. "In April, we are at .125" on greens and start dropping once we are healed from aerification until we reach our normal in-season HOC. We start raising the HOC mid- to late October, and remain at .125" through the off-season." Fossil Trace hosts 45,000 to 48,000 rounds annually. The crew only changes the HOC on greens. Roughs, tees and fairways remain steady year-round.

Sara Bay has heights that fluctuate to provide contrast, though the HOC for the rough is steady. "Bermudagrass at 2" in July and August is pretty thick, and at 2" in January and February is not so bad," Merring says. "It can get beat up from traffic when it's not growing as vigorously, but it gives us a really nice visual contrast. Bermudagrass, when it's beat down, makes it hard to notice small changes in heights. Our HOC differences give us good definition between the rough and the short grass, and the greens and the collars."

Principles for HOC can be learned through formal education, like not removing more than one-third of the leaf during a single mow, or by being introduced to cutting practices and terminology. Personal philosophies vary. "You really learn the fine details about it on the job," Merring says. "You learn from experience and you can make your own changes."

Another reason maintenance costs more at a lower HOC is that "your visual appearance threshold is higher — you notice more imperfections," Merring says. "Mowers need to be sharper. You notice anything that is off a little bit and you notice it very quickly. If there is an issue with a greens mower that is not cutting right, you spot that immediately."

The Sara Bay staff is very experienced, which helps. "We have one staff member who has been here for 26 years, and two who have been here for 30," Merring says. "We have very little turnover. It's a great club to work at, it's a golfing club, and the membership is here for the course. They enjoy it, which is really nice for them and us, and we're always striving to make it better."

Like Sparks, Merring tries to get out there. "It's not as much as I would like, but I do enjoy playing, especially here," he says. "It's important to be able to see the golf course from the members' perspective and to experience the course conditions. It helps us put out a better product. The chef should taste the soup!"

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

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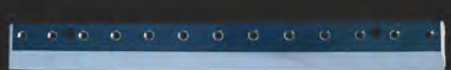

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SUPER SAVER

What happens when a life-and-death situation occurs during an educational discussion out on the turf? Instincts — *and the most important training a golf industry professional can receive* — take over.

By **Judd Spicer**

Writer's note: While reporting a story for Golf Course Industry about zoysiagrass, the events described herein, witnessed first-hand, usurped the original assignment.

ROGER KING DIED ON THE ZOYSIA. THRICE.

A day later he had a procedure in the hospital and, a day after that, he was home.

Across circumstances frantic, timing fortuitous, preparation deliberate and action exacting, the life-saving efforts to revive King seemed, in the moment, both chaotic and miraculous.

And though both descriptions may be true, what actually occurred on this near-fatal day was much more calculated and far more inspired.

GRASSY GATHERING

The loudspeakers were situated, tech tested and mic live across **Tyler Truman**'s two-plus acres of test plots. Sun City Palm Desert residents, nearly 100 in attendance, gathered their collective carts in organized shade amid the atypically warm late October afternoon.

Truman, the longtime director of agronomy and grounds at Sun City and a past president of the Hi-Lo Desert Chapter of the GCSAA, prepared to present sanguine findings on his sample work with zoysiagrass, a hybrid strain that could someday prove a grassing revelation for the Coachella Valley's costly and labor-intensive annual autumn overseed.

Calling the cache of residents from carts to plots, the 55-and-over group (along with one dog) collectively strolled over to the well-marked and specifically signed 7x7 testing turfs as Truman placed mic toward mouth and started his spiel.

For the next 15 minutes, Truman spoke to a captive audience about his methodology in testing, discussed the dozens of different zoysia varieties sampled and explained the massive potential water savings in transitioning to a year-round turfgrass for his grounds' 36 holes — with nary a hint of the esoteric nor a suggestion of superiority.

Rather, per his personality, the superintendent spoke to residents with a neighbor's tenor, a tone light and malleable, educated and understanding. Think: Seeing one's fourth-grade teacher outside of school on a Saturday afternoon.

The residents soon graduated from captive to curious and questions ensued — good questions. Ranging from nascent to elaborate, Truman addressed an organized cache of queries, evidencing both his own acumen and the resident's genuine passion for their golf and grounds.

Providing an explanation of "Sprig or Seed" to discussion of divots to varied questions of budget, course rating, timeline and beyond, Truman moved from one inquiry to another to another, his intellect impressive and manner unchanged.

And then, *everything* changed.

MAN DOWN

A distinct murmur in the gathering. One of those moments in life where casual ascends to surreal; a gray moment, opaque and strange. Time standing with stillness.

Said stillness, like a vehicle with the ability to go from 0 to 100 mph in one second, is then broken. Real time catches up with alarming suddenness, breaks through the confusing cloud and people regain their bearings.

"I was, like everybody else, watching Tyler give the presentation," says **Joe Johnson**, director of golf at Sun City's Mountain Vista Golf Club. "And we had a lot of our admin people there, because the zoysia conversation is a big topic for the community. We got into the Q&A session, and then I heard something to the effect of, 'Man down!'"

Echoes Truman in reflection: "One minute, I'm talking about the zoysia, and then I hear a woman say something like, 'This guy just dropped!'"

The guy was Roger King.

Big, bald, bearded, barrel-chested and seemingly more than mere years advanced from Sun City's 55-year-old minimum threshold, King lay on the zoysia, motionless.

A circle formed around him. From a vantage macabre, the zoysia plot signs appeared as headstones. Most residents — some surely out of respect for the fallen man before them and others out of mere horror — moved away.

And yet, amid the primeval of Fight or Flight, others did not.

Though his situation was undoubtedly dire, King was and is a very, very fortunate man.

"At that moment, I went right towards him, and the people who performed CPR also went directly to Roger," Truman says "Once I knew the CPR had started, I verified that somebody had called 911."

While Truman instantly and instinctively pivoted from zoysia MC to triage chief, King's good fortune found fellow residents **Wayne Gilstrap**, an Army veteran and, soon, **Tracy Hobday**, who worked with CAL FIRE for nearly three decades before retiring as a battalion chief, providing rapid Fight response.

"Wayne was on him within seconds," Johnson recalls. "When Roger hit the ground, right away there was no pulse, no breathing. It's my understanding that Roger flatlined three times. I mean, he was in and out. You could tell by Wayne's voice whether Roger was responsive or not."

"I was listening to the grass presentation just like everybody else, and then a lady shouted something, and I saw Roger on the ground," Gilstrap remembers. "So, I immediately went to him. And when I noticed no pulse and didn't see a rise and fall of the chest, I just started compressions."

Initially monitoring the situation and staff response, Hobday assessed that a gentleman assisting Gilstrap required respite.

"I could see Tyler taking action and then, a couple minutes in, I just felt like the gentleman who was doing compressions needed a break," Hobday says. "So I offered to take over compressions, and we had 911 on the phone, which was put to my ear and the operator was pacing me on the compression rate."

Over the course of the next 15 minutes, when medics arrived, Truman took charge of emergency and

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Nearly 100 members were in attendance for the zoysiagrass disussion at Sun City Palm Desert, where the life-saving incident happened.

logistical response.

"I went to my team, the office admin people that were here, and told them we needed the AED [Automated External Defibrillator]," Truman remembers. "And then Joe stepped in and let me know they were able to get ahold of one of the marshals, and he was on his way with the device."

Such availability and proximity of the defibrillator amply aided King's good fortune; a year ago, Sun City's' Emergency Preparedness Committee recommended that every marshal carry an AED.

"I called my marshal and told him to drop whatever he was doing and get the AED over," Johnson says. "And, luckily, he was close, right over on the first tee of our Santa Rosa Course, so he was able to get over in just a few minutes."

While a vocal Gilstrap ("C'mon, Roger! You can do it, buddy!") performed mouth-to-mouth and a tireless Hobday ensued with compressions over the 15-minute span, Truman operated with concise purpose.

"He moved with a sense of urgency," Johnson says of Truman. "But he was also calm; not panicked. He just knew what to do."

Evidencing focus under the weight of time, Truman made the smart and strategic call to have a staff member go to the community's main gate to meet the medics. With the test plot and emergency situation located in a non-addressed location, Truman's quick thinking saved critical minutes.

"When responding to an emergency, it's crucial to have a specific place where responders can go," Truman says. "When calling in, responders might just go to the clubhouse address. Having staff that was able to meet responders right at our [front gate] guard shack and bring them down this way was so important."

With the medics en route, the AED was activated on multiple occasions as King lay lifeless.

"We shocked him, and there was no conversion," Hobday says. "So, we continued with compressions and a woman, **Patty Chandler**, was down there on his wrist taking pulse and letting me know if my compressions were working until the medics arrived."

Said arrival presented its own challenges. Aided by Sun City staff, the fire truck was led along a winding, downhill cart path,before being guided under a bridge that accesses the community entryway.

All the while, Gilstrap's ongoing chorus of rally and support ("You can do it, Roger!") narrated a scene that seemed ever dire.

"If they come to a little bit and they have somebody familiar or someone saying words of encouragement, maybe it'll make you fight a little harder," Gilstrap says. "That's the way I look at it. Little different, but same kind of thing in the military: somebody gets shot and you need to talk to your buddy, keep 'em going."

With the fire truck on scene and Hobday's vigorous compressions ensuing, medics assessed the severity of the situation.

"What freaked me out more than anything was once the fire department got there — even though they were so calm — was that they were doing some extra work," Johnson remembers with pause. "Roger wasn't dead, but he wasn't quite with it. And so I saw the paramedic trying to find a vein and get an IV going, but his veins had collapsed. So, the paramedic then drilled a hole in

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either Roger's tibia or fibula with this little hand drill, and just really lean in to drill a hole into Roger's leg bone so he could give him epinephrine right into the bone marrow."

More than 25 minutes into the life-saving efforts, an ambulance arrived, guided in a manner mirroring that of the fire truck. With King showing faint signs of life after flatlining three times, it took four strong men to arch him onto a tarp-stretcher before carrying him to the transport.

Gilstrap stood and helped ensure a clear path for the ambulance as the man he'd just help save was placed inside. Adrenaline pumping, the Army veteran spat on the zoysia in an undoubted expression of victory.

NOAH BUILT THE BOAT BEFORE IT RAINED

Sun City is a unicorn. Located on the east edges of the Valley's epicenter, the community boasts nearly 5,000 homes and 200 employees to match Truman's 500 acres of turfgrass. Provided the property's senior population, it's said that an emergency vehicle enters the massive community five times a day. (With dark humor, residents refer to it as the "Sun City taxi.")

Such data cumulatively considered, the community takes pride in preparation.

"People know that we're a little bit isolated here, so in the event of an earthquake or something, we'd need to take care of ourselves for a little while, because there's a chance that first responders might not be able to come in for a day or two," Truman says. "There's a pride taken here in being self-sufficient. People want to know what to be able to do if put in a situation to try and save their spouse or their friends."

In lieu of accepting individual praise, the respective life savers are fast to acknowledge the cumulative effort in bringing King back to life.

"I was just a piece of the puzzle," Hobday says. "There are a lot of pieces that need to come together to have this kind of outcome."

While King's resuscitation was fulcrumed by the incredibly good fortunes of having Gilstrap and Hobday at his side that day, the fact that he's able to tell the tale didn't occur by mere happenstance.

"There's an old saying in the fire department: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," Hobday says. "You apply that and you'll typically be prepared for most anything."

"I'm just thankful that I had the training, and that I was out there at the right time to help him out," Gilstrap echoes.

All Sun City managers are trained to administer CPR and use the AED, along with stop-the-bleed, and all course marshals have received concurrent defibrillator training. Saving King's life has since elicited further readiness.

"Yes, we acted quickly, but, because of this situation, we've now decided that if there are any presentations made on the golf course or anything like that, an AED will be on-site," Truman says. "We have so many locations out here — our softball field, our putting course, fitness centers — that have AEDs already on-site. But based on what happened here, we've gone out and purchased three more AEDs."

Balancing the situation's delicate dance of preparation and personality, Truman sees a bit of both.

"Being trained in CPR and AED, and then also having emergency training, that can come into it," he says. "But I think some of it does come down to personality. There are some people, regardless of training, who will freeze."

Persona aside, reflecting on his professional past finds Truman wondering to what degree properties are truly prepared for such situations.

"Being at other places, I think there are some courses which might have an AED. But do they know how to use it?" Truman wonders. "I think that at all courses and country clubs, staffs should be trained on all this. My guess is that a lot of places aren't. And it's not just about having something in place for an emergency — it's also about practicing the response."

Training resources

Course owners and operators seeking to train and certify staff on CPR, AED and Basic Life Support have a host of online and in-person resources, including:

- American Heart Association (cpr.heart.org)
- American Red Cross (redcross.org)
- Cintas (cintas.com)
- HSI (hsi.com)
- National CPR Foundation (nationalcprfoundation.com)
- National Fire Department Registry (apps.usfa.fema.gov)
- National Safety Council (nsc.org)

"I think anybody that works at a golf course in any capacity should have some sort of CPR and AED training, and then to have a least a few defibrillators on hand so you can do what you can do until the fire department or medics arrive," Johnson says.

Roger King died on the zoysia.

Thrice.

With good luck, fine fortune and careful preparation on his side, he lives to see the light of a desert peak-season anew.

"This happened on a Wednesday," Johnson says. "At the hospital the next day, they put a pacemaker in him. And then he came home on Friday. That Sunday, he sent me an email saying, 'Hey, Joe. It's Roger King. I died Wednesday and came back. Can you please get me the names of the people who brought me back to life? I'd like to reach out and acknowledge them.'"

Of such acknowledgments, Hobday says: "Talking to Roger was special, but getting a card from his wife was also very special. I think what sometimes we forget is that, while he's here and survived and that's great — it's also about all the people he survived for."

"Roger called and told me he wanted to take me to dinner or buy me a drink or something," Gilstrap says, his tenor ethereal. "And I just told him not to worry about it, that I'd see him on Tuesday at our 'Menz Putterz' group."

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

PLAN AGAINST STUPIDITY

Sometimes, your most expensive commitment is the one you don't make. Like not having a master plan for your golf course, because you think it's too costly. Next thing you know, you're spending money twice on the same thing because you didn't plan or sequence properly. Or you find yourself applying Band-Aids on what could have been addressed more efficiently.

In an era of major course renovations, where $15 million to $20 million projects are norms, it is understandable if there's reluctance among members and club decision makers to develop a long-term vision. But the key to having a master plan is that you do not have to implement it all at once — or even at all.

The main benefit of having developed such a document is that it allows for long-term planning of everything from equipment purchases to maintenance practices and how to fix things that are broken. It also gives you a project list that gets prioritized so you can budget funding and labor accordingly. Most important, it takes stupid off the table. That green committee member who's jonesing for an island green or flash white sand (at $220 a ton) for your steep-faced bunkers? Tell him it's not in the plan and he goes back to sulking in a corner.

At every facility, whether municipal, a privately owned daily fee or a membership club, there are people who think that spending any money on the golf course is a crime. Luckily, there are generally more responsible people around golf who take pride in their course and think proactively about how their game could be made better and more fun by improving their home playing surface.

The starting point of a master plan is simply to take a long-term vision of the property and to anticipate needs that go beyond mere infrastructure to include aesthetics, strategy and sustainability. That means thinking about the property in a holistic way, not simply fixing broken pipes or barren ground. It means transcending the nature of one's own (limited) golf game and thinking about how the course fits the needs and capacities of the entire membership as well as future clientele.

Costs for such a plan vary widely, from $15,000 to $250,000. There are no industry standards for the scope of the work. The quality will vary from a simple, annotated color plan of the course to a detailed bound book presenting course evolution, hole-by-hole detail, an itemized budgetary spreadsheet and 3-D graphics of hole-by-hole before and after.

It's understandable if clubs want to recruit the most famous architect they can secure. After all, it helps to make the case to the membership if you hire a well-known designer with an impeccable portfolio of U.S. Open restorations. But there are only a few such architects, and most of the time they won't be interested, or they will already be too busy. Besides, there are dozens of fine architects of various levels of experience, and you can get a lot of value out of lesser-known names if they want the work and are willing to put the time into the project.

The fee is only part of the equation; in any case, it will be a small part of the larger budget over the long run. Indeed, over five or 10 years, there will be an evaluation of everything from irrigation, drainage, greens, bunkers, trees, teeing ground equity, mowing lines, turfgrass species and possible (partial) routing, practice range, short game area and cart paths — plus maintenance building, clubhouse, parking and landscape.

Once a plan is established, there will be further contractual commitments, including construction bidding and project management during the actual implementation. Those phases will often entail a flat fee for the drawing work and an additional cost for work in the field, usually based on a percentage of total project work.

The main thing is the initial phase — mapping out what is feasible. Only then will a green committee or renovation committee work with the designer and the board to draw up financial planning that can serve for a multi-year process, including capital, loans, initiation fees and assessments.

Again, having a plan in place does not mean you will implement it all at once, or even at all. It all depends upon money available over time. The main thing is the basic plan, followed by priorities. Some of it will be a slow, steady march. Occasionally, there will be opportunities for a major lift — or even a total shutdown.

In the absence of a master plan, a club can meander and lose focus. With one, a club can confidently proceed in addressing its long-term vision.

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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ALL in

Gamble Sands is betting big that another brilliant course will make it a true destination.

By **Matt LaWell**

There is no quick route to arrive at Gamble Sands.

You could fly into Spokane International Airport, then meander near the Columbia River, ultimately heading 130 miles west along US-2 and Washington state routes 174 and 17. If you prefer bigger cities and a little more green along your drive, you could opt for an arrival at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport and speed 220 miles on I-90—the country's longest interstate—and US-97.

Or, if you're golf course architect and licensed pilot **David McLay Kidd**, who has designed all 50 holes at the ever-expanding Evergreen State resort, you could fly yourself 70 minutes high over the viridescent landscape, from Bend, Oregon, to Brewster, Washington, to work on new layouts.

That last option is absolutely the quickest if you can swing it.

"I spend my entire life traveling," Kidd says. "If I were going to drive it, Highway 97 runs through Bend to Brewster. The last thing it is is straight, but it's hard to get lost." Flying his own planes is the difference between sleeping in his own bed or somewhere along the road. "It makes a massive difference to the project outcome and to my life."

It certainly made a massive difference in Brewster, where Kidd designed and spearheaded construction

© DARIN BUNCH; MATT LAWELL, OPPOSITE

of the original Gamble Sands course more than a decade ago, the 14-hole Quicksands short course during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, and now the new Scarecrow course, which opened last August. Filled with fescue like its predecessors, Scarecrow helped fill tee sheets from its midsummer opening day to the end of the season. It is also helping to cement Gamble Sands as a genuine destination—no matter the circuitous roads leading there.

FOR DECADES, THE land surrounding what is now Gamble Sands was reserved for agriculture. Much of it still is: The Gebbers family only entered golf after six generations of growing fruit. They still grow so many apples that the nearly-four-mile drive along Lagrange Road off SR 17 is dotted with wooden fruit crates piled high. The family is reportedly the world's largest cherry supplier.

Turns out, their land is perfect for golf.

Kidd still has the email that introduced him to the property on Nov.15, 2007. "I just looked at this site in Brewster, Washington," wrote **Tom Christy**, who worked then for OB Sports Golf Management. "Can you come have a look? It's really good."

Where the hell is Brewster, Washington? Kidd remembers thinking.

He checked a map, headed out and "knew pretty well instantly," he says. "All sand on a beautiful plateau, looking down over the mighty Columbia, with the northern Cascades, snow peaks, mountains in the distance. It's just a gorgeous canvas to work on and an amazing frame to surround it with."

Kidd practically lived on site throughout construction of the first course, from 2012 to early 2014. The course welcomed 5,500 rounds its first three months.

Discussions about a second course started in 2015, with Kidd helping original superintendent **Chip Caswell** and the Gebberses scout land for 18 more holes and the necessary infrastructure. **Josh Truan** entered every conversation after Caswell left for Golf Landscapes, Inc. Formerly the assistant superintendent, then the golf course superintendent, Truan was promoted in 2024 to director of agronomy.

"We were getting ready to start building it in 2019 and then the pandemic hit and everything went to hell in a handbag for a little while again," Kidd says. The Gebberses were still on board, Truan says, they were just waiting "to see how the world reacted. They were watching cash flow and making sure they could do it without cutting any corners."

Every corner is now proverbially crisp. Attention shifted to Quicksands, which opened in 2021, and "once the short course was open and the pandemic was long behind us," Kidd says, "we got back to work on the second course."

Kidd handed over daily work for Scarecrow to **Nick Schaan**, a longtime collaborator and current partner at DMK Golf Designs — not because he tired of Truan, but because of what he has learned from course developer **Mike Keiser** during his work at Bandon Dunes, where his second course design is "already on the cards": different architects for different courses on the same site makes for more interesting golf.

"The Keiser method is a very good one," Kidd says. "We were thrilled and honored the [Gebbers] family wanted to use us again for the second 18, but we could see the risk. Even if I tried to do something different, if I was leading the charge every day, I would probably fall back into commonalities with the first course, because that's how my eye works. By taking a little bit of a backseat, I allowed Nick to lead the charge and see the course on a micro basis through his eyes. Same team, twisted a little bit differently—a bit like a Beatles song where **John** took a little more lead than **Paul**."

Construction started during the spring of 2023, with six holes grassed and most of the course shaped by the time a cold, deep winter hit. Snow piled up, temperatures dropped to freezing and stayed there for months. Kidd calls it a "good winter." Then the sun showed up, the snow melted, spring started to stretch its legs and construction ramped back up.

"The second season, you're all guns blazing as soon as the weather allows you to start grassing," Kidd says. "And then you grass through the whole summer in order to get the course grassed out at least six weeks before the grow-in season ends."

Another good winter. The finishing touches. A name. And an August 2025 premiere.

THERE ARE PLENTY of reasons why Scarecrow should succeed both agronomically and financially. It features both perfect sand beneath the

Famous fescue

"Without fescue grass, Gamble Sands is not Gamble Sands. I don't know that you could even begin to argue that Gamble Sands is not the finest fescue golf course in North America. There is nothing else even close as a pure fescue golf course. Chambers Bay has *Poa* greens. All the courses at Bandon have *Poa* greens. The arid climate here, the fescue grass, just makes for a golf course that plays exactly like a Scottish or Irish links in the summertime, and **Josh Truan** is key to that critical component. That's something often that is lost. Fescue is key to the success of Gamble Sands and it's only because of its very, very unique climate and soil types that it works so well. It's not something that could be replicated elsewhere." — David McLay Kidd

Truan

Kidd

Schaan

surface and perhaps the best fescue anywhere on the continent above. It links together 18 holes that feel familiar but not the same. The views, of course, are magnificent. Its maintenance budget is healthy without being exorbitant.

And it is the beneficiary of an ideal relationship between architect and superintendent. Kidd met Truan and his wife, **Amber**, when they arrived at Gamble Sands. Their professional relationship developed into respect and friendship.

"Josh is a wonderful collaborator," Kidd says. "When we were dreaming up ideas for Scarecrow, we had a superintendent who was all in. Sometimes he said, 'Yeah, I can figure that out,' and sometimes he said, 'No, I couldn't do that. You're making life really hard if you do this or that.' We found a common ground where we get the design we're after but we also have the buy-in of the superintendent so we feel confident he can deliver the end product and have the golfers enthused."

A superintendent who fights during construction "can be challenging," Kidd says. Take without give can lead to "dumbing down the design to make it easy to maintain." There is nothing dumb about Scarecrow.

"It was awesome to bring David back," Truan says. "This is his spot: the family trusts him; they love what he does. He can do pretty much whatever he wants to do. And honestly, I didn't really want to work with anybody else but David and his team."

What separates Scarecrow from the original Gamble Sands course? Both courses feature wide fairways, soft greens and fescue. But where Gamble Sands is designed for golfers to play below their handicap, Scarecrow plays about three to five shots more difficult. The topography is a little more dynamic, the greens are a little smaller, the bunkers — Scarecrow features about 30 acres of them — are more penal.

Scarecrow also features some of the new infrastructure discussed as early as a decade ago. A new maintenance facility, more centrally located between all 50 holes and scheduled to open as early as this month, will cut down the longest maintenance drives from about 20 minutes to five. The first hole on Scarecrow is three minutes away in a cart.

The new facility will also house 73 new pieces of Toro equipment — including 13 fairway mowers, five Sand Pros, five rollers and seven blowers — that will arrive next month. The original maintenance facility will become more of a fabrication workshop and, in a nod to a healthy relationship between the maintenance team and the pro shop, provide storage space for extra merchandise.

"We're all on the same team," says Truan, who used to step into the kitchen when necessary, grilling steaks and burgers — though he says he is not qualified to make risotto. "If I need to store 10 pallets of merchandise at our old maintenance shop, that's what we'll do. Obviously, we have our limitations, but the success of Gamble Sands is up to every individual. Either we all win or we all fail, and people have jumped on board with that. If we're not making money, none of us have jobs. And there was a time when we were struggling to make money and pay the bills."

Not so much anymore. Remember that when the original course opened 12 years ago, it handled 5,500 rounds its first three months. Last summer, Scarecrow handled 12,000 rounds during its first three months. Truan is projecting Scarecrow to jump to about 21,000 rounds next season and the total rounds played across all courses to top 40,000 — and, if everything clicks, creep near 50,000.

"We've upped our overseeding just to handle traffic, we've put more fertilizer out just to help the plants grow," Truan says. "We're setting up to be successful three or four years from now."

Truan relies on a team of 20 to 22 full-timers and as many as 40 more seasonal crew members. Everybody works on every course, moving wherever the need is greatest. Key among them are superintendent **Rob Ackerley**, head mechanic **Paul Harrild**, assistant superintendents **Kevin Fitzpatrick** and **Shane Pregschat**, assistant mechanic **Leonard McCracken**, irrigation technician **Mark Tostenrude**, spray technician **Alber Torres**, foreman **Rambo** (too cool and too efficient for a last name), office administrator and maintenance chief of staff **Maggie Cerda** and — "she would kill me if I didn't include her," Truan

Gamble Sands by the numbers

50: Holes across the Gamble Sands course, the Quicksand short course and the new Scarecrow course

5,500: Rounds played on the Gamble Sands course during its first three months open in 2014

12,000: Rounds played on Scarecrow during its first three months open in 2025

21,000: Projected rounds played on Scarecrow in 2026

40,000 to 48,000: Projected rounds played across all three courses in 2026

303: Shortest route to Gamble Sands, in miles, from Vancouver, British Columbia

207: Shortest route, in miles, from Seattle

77: Number of guest rooms on property, up from 37 in 2024

20 to 22: Number of full-time agronomy team members

says, laughing — Amber.

Truan is looking forward to building up his staff, and one big reason why he wants to keep so many of them through the harsh Washington winter: He was laid off his first year at Gamble Sands after moving 1,000 miles north from The Links at Spanish Bay. He was the assistant superintendent then and he was not expecting it. He keeps his team busy, handling just about every project internally.

"A guy like my best greenkeeper, Rambo, he's going to get more things done than another assistant superintendent, because that's his job. If we elevate guys like him because they've earned it, it's going to make us all better. And they're happy."

Yet another reason why Scarecrow should succeed.

EVERY SEASON IS a new adventure for Truan and his team. Eighteen new holes. A new maintenance facility. A fleet of new equipment — and, perhaps on the same day, a new baby. Maybe even *another* new course?

"We were kind of joking about opening a third course back in July, before we opened Scarecrow," Truan says. "Everybody could see the tee sheet, could see where we were at and that this was going to be successful."

We need to do another one, Truan remembers Kidd saying. *Can we finish this one first?!* Truan responded.

Give. Take.

"I haven't seen a rendering yet, but there's a kind of routing," Truan says. "It's kind of like Field of Dreams, right? If you build it, they will come."

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In the heart of Bristol

A Rhode Island course is providing a golf oasis for players of any skill level, located in the middle of the city.

By **Kelsie Horner**

Inside the urban, historic city of Bristol, Rhode Island, amid the boat manufacturing and sailing hotspots, sits a 24-acre golf safe haven. Bristol Golf Park, opened in 2023, brings a unique, exciting angle to the game. The public facility offers customers a 9-hole par-3 layout, where golfers can enjoy a quick round on foot or by cart.

The coastal course is literally in the middle of the city. A road runs through the course, and principal **Robert McNeil** says, "You can't go through Bristol without driving by Bristol Golf Park." Bristol is home to a major deepwater seaport and the Bristol Waterfront Historic District, featuring colonial and 19th-century architecture.

Before Bristol Golf Park's opening, the property had a previous golf history. The land was used as an 18-hole course back in the 1980s and later operated as a 9-hole layout for nearly 30 years. Water flowing through the property was getting contaminated and entering the nearby oceans. To solve water quality issues, the land was reimagined as a 9-hole par-3 course atop an

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environmentally friendly stormwater management system.

The opportunity to manage the course fell into Northeast Golf Company's lap. McNeil, who owns National Golf Company and is an architect himself, and the company are responsible for operating three other New England 9-hole courses: The Orchards (Connecticut) Golf Club, Met Links (Rhode Island) and Kings Crossing (Rhode Island) Golf Club. Even more are in the works.

When his team took over the project, in partnership with Vigilant Brewing, the stormwater project was complete. His team grew in the turf and made some minor adjustments to the **Tim Gerrish**-designed layout. From there, Northeast Golf Company has built the culture and environment from nothing into something special. McNeil operates as the course's superintendent, and his son, **Billy**, is the director of operations.

"If we can put golf courses in markets where there's a lot of people, and they're very visible and they're very playable, that's going to go a long way," McNeil says.

The reimagination resulted in a compact, quick-to-play golf course and a new course partner for First Tee Rhode Island. Holes are located close together to make for smoother rounds. McNeil and his team have incorporated ways for golfers to adjust their tee shot length. "I'll call them informal tees. They're just huge areas of fairway where you can put the tees anywhere on the golf course," McNeil says.

McNeil and his team aimed for playability, adaptable to both the experienced golfer and those newer to the game. "I think the best part about the whole golf course is everything is playable," McNeil says. "We have a set of tees that we set up called the white tees that you can literally putt yourself around the golf course if you want to."

The course plays at 1,277 yards from the back tees and 1,204 from the front. Golfers start their round on a downhill 207-yard shot and cross the street to play holes 2, 3 and 4. They also play over water sources on three separate holes, providing aquatic challenges. Greens are small, encouraging target-oriented play. One of the course's notable holes is No. 8, a 115-yard shot over water to a triple-tiered green.

On the maintenance side, the property is "difficult," according to McNeil. When the course was built, the ground was wet and there's very little irrigation on the layout. "But the beauty is that there's a water source on the property, a spring-fed pond that feeds the golf course efficiently," he says.

When the company took over the property, McNeil says it didn't resemble much of a golf course. "It looked like little tees and little greens. That's all," he says. Through agronomic practices, the maintenance team has created visual fairways that flow and blend through the course. Due to precise mowing, players can now see the difference between the fairways and rough. "We took it to another level, agronomically, in the way we maintain it, so players could see what they're playing," McNeil says. "And that turned out really well."

The course is environmentally focused in numerous ways. The clubhouse is a small mobile building powered by solar. Everything on the course, in fact, runs on solar, reducing the property's carbon footprint. The onsite stormwater management program is positively impacting the course's water.

McNeil believes 9-hole short courses with relaxed, enjoyable environments are the kinds of facilities that will keep the game growing.

"I think these are the types of projects that will move the golf industry forward, which will grow the population of golfers out there, or at least sustain what we've created following COVID," he says.

Bristol Golf Park is already succeeding in growing the golf population. Young couples and families visit the course often, and the facility is located near Roger Williams University, which attracts students. Unique events like glow golf and holiday-themed scrambles dot the calendar. Food trucks and music are staples, providing an inviting atmosphere. "We've created a vibe there where it's just fun to play," McNeil says. "I could sit there all day and just watch people play and listen to what they say.

"We've got a lot of positive responses. I think with the young people and these young families — we're most proud of that."

Kelsie Horner is Golf Course Industry's digital editor.

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CREATIVE EMPLOYEE WORK SCHEDULES

Every golf course has its own maintenance and playing conditioning standards so employee work schedules can best serve everyone involved. Labor and other employee-related costs typically range from 50 to 70 percent of the total annual golf course maintenance operating budget. This requires superintendents to identify and use time/motion studies wisely.

The volume of maintenance practices desired on weekends, employee overtime and flex-scheduling hours are among the most concerning labor-related circumstances. Superintendents are using FAIRWAYiQ, taskTracker, MyShyft or other platforms to perform labor flow charts showing exactly how long it takes to perform all tasks, which subsequently aids in work scheduling.

Aspects of employee scheduling include, but are not limited to:

- Work/life balance flexible hours
- Inclement weather
- Priorities changing daily
- Split shifts
- wapping shifts
- Syringe crews
- High school/FFA/retirees on reduced schedules
- Seasonal variations
- Four-hour off-peak hours extending the workday
- Tournaments
- Shotgun starts
- Aerification and other cultural practices
- Identifying peak and off-peak hours
- Outings
- Monday course closings

Additional budgeted employees hired to fill the gap when regular employees are off for sick days, vacation days and paid time off is trending. This ensures there's always a full crew when required. Other scheduling considerations and variations include, but are not limited to:

- Where superintendents require an hour or more of lead time so maintenance practices can occur ahead of play each morning
- Initial employee training and continual training during inclement weather
- Driving range/short game practice area scheduled closures for maintenance
- Employee referrals for prospective new employees
- Equipment managers and assistant mechanics varying schedules
- Staging equipment to get the employees out the door faster
- Coffee breaks out on the course or combining morning coffee breaks with lunchtime to reduce wasted time traveling to and from the maintenance building
- Cross-training employees
- Shutting off equipment engines as golfers play through
- Smartphone use by employees can be a major problem in lost productivity
- Supervisors should be present for all work schedules
- Employee work culture
- Staggered weekend crews
- Autonomous equipment operations
- Complementary hot meals and soda fountain drinks at lunchtime
- Employees having every other weekend off is not as popular because of having to work 12 days in a row

Below are a few examples of successful creative work schedules that are tailored for each superintendent's specific goals and objectives, figuring in a 30-minute lunchtime.

Two days off per week

This first schedule is popular, providing extra time to perform mowing tees, collars, approaches, fairways, intermediate roughs, roughs, raking bunkers and course setup on the weekends. This schedule is also popular with crew members because they have two days off per week. There usually is an assistant superintendent supervising each crew and they have

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the same days off as their crew members.
- Tuesday through Saturday, with Sunday and Monday off: half crew, assistant supervises the crew
- Sunday through Thursday, with Friday and Saturday off: half crew, assistant supervises the crew
- Full crews on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays only
- Crew members have two consecutive days off per week — one weekend day and one weekday
- 40-hour week for each employee

Longer workdays, more days off

Another potential schedule includes two separate crews, each with three days off in a row:
- Tuesday through Friday, working four 10-hour days
- Friday through Monday, working four 10-hour days
- Equipment manager works with first crew
- Assistant mechanic works with second crew
- Assistant superintendents work with both crews
- 40-hour workweek for each employee
- Both crews work together on Fridays only.

Split crews

Another schedule includes a dedicated full-time weekday crew and separate dedicated part-time weekend/holiday crew. The full-time crew works eight hours per day Monday through Friday. This crew doesn't work weekends or holidays and they work 40-hour weeks with an assistant superintendent on duty. The dedicated part-time crew works weekends and holidays, four to eight hours per day, with a supervisor also on duty.

Sunshine State schedule

The "Florida Schedule" is popular, with the crew working a half day on Fridays and four hours each on one weekend day:
- Monday through Thursday: Full crew works eight hours per day
- Friday: Full crew works four hours
- Saturday: Half crew works four hours, with 1½ days off per week in addition to remainder of Saturday
- Sunday: Half crew works four hours, with 1½ days off per week in addition to the remainder of Sunday
- 40-hour week for employees
- Assistants work one weekend day or alternate weekends with the other assistant.

Shorter weekdays, longer weekend days

Somewhat like the above schedule but working only seven hours per weekday plus one extra hour on weekend days.
- Monday through Friday: Full crew works seven hours per day
- Saturday: Half crew works five hours, with 1½ days off each week
- Sunday: Half crew works five hours, with 1½ days off per week
- 40-hour week for each employee
- Assistant superintendents each work one weekend day or alternate weekends with the other assistant

Full-throttle Fridays

This schedule is for when a superintendent wants to do full-weekend preparation on a Friday, which allows only a four-hour workday on Thursdays and four hours on each weekend day.
- Full crew works eight hours per day Monday through Wednesday and Friday, and four hours on Thursday
- Saturday: Half crew works four hours, with 1½ days off per week in addition to the remainder of Thursday
- Sunday: Half crew works four hours, with 1½ days off per week in addition to the remainder of Thursday
- 40-hour week for each employee
- Assistant superintendents each work one weekend day or alternate weekends with the other assistant

Two dedicated crews

Schedule example for two dedicated weekday crews and weekend crews:
- Monday through Friday: Half crew works 5 a.m. to noon with no lunch — equipment manager works with this crew
- Monday through Friday: Half crew works 1 to 8 p.m. with no lunch — assistant mechanic works with this crew
- Saturday: Half crew works 5 a.m. to noon
- Sunday: Half crew works 5 a.m. to noon
- Assistant superintendent supervises each weekday crew and each works one weekend day or alternates weekends with other assistant

When the course gets a "maintenance day"

This popular schedule is designed for when a course is closed on Monday (or another weekday) for routine maintenance practices, like Tuesdays after a Monday holiday. A half hour is blocked off for lunches on weekdays when employees work past noon.
- Monday: 6 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.
- Tuesday: 6 a.m. to noon
- Wednesday: 6 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
- Thursday: 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.
- Friday: 5 a.m. to noon
- Saturday: Half crew works 5 a.m. to 9 a.m.
- Sunday: Half crew works 5 a.m. to 9 a.m.
- 46-hour week for each employee
- Each employee has 1½ days off
- Assistant superintendents each work one weekend day or alternate weekends with other assistant

Morning and evening

Split/flexible work schedules are also becoming popular, especially with non-stop play during peak times of the day.
- Monday through Friday: 6 to 10 a.m. and 4 to 8 p.m.
- Saturday: Half crew works 6 to 10 a.m.
- Sunday: Half crew works 6 to 10 a.m.
- 44-hour week for each employee
- Assistant superintendents each work one weekend day or alternate weekends with other assistant

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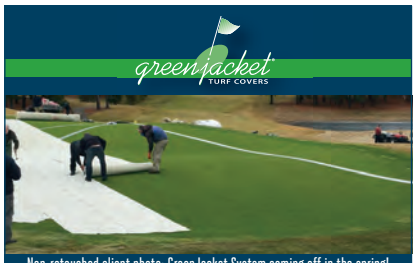

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OVERLOOK WATER QUALITY AT YOUR OWN RISK

Water has always been one of the most valuable resources on any golf course, but as individuals who moved from day-to-day superintendents into full-time consulting, we can confidently say that nothing influences turf health more consistently — and more quietly — than water quality. Fertility programs, equipment upgrades, labor efficiency, even plant protection programs all matter, but poor-quality water can undermine all of them at once.

Yet water quality is still one of the more overlooked aspects of golf course management, and it surprises us how many golf courses we visit that do not test their water regularly — or even at all! Many superintendents test soil religiously, monitor ET daily and scout turf weekly, but test water only when something goes wrong. In today's regulatory environment, with increasing pressure on water use, reclaimed sources and environmental stewardship, that approach is simply too risky.

During our years as superintendents, we recognized and truly appreciated that water brings its own chemistry to the table. Every irrigation source — whether well, surface, municipal or reclaimed — has a distinct fingerprint. That fingerprint shapes:

- The pH of soil and rootzone solutions
- Nutrient availability and solubility
- Soil structure and infiltration rates
- Sodium and chloride accumulation
- Disease pressure and stress tolerance
- Performance of fertilizers and wetting agents

In consulting, we routinely visit courses battling chronic turf decline, hydrophobicity or salt stress — issues that superintendents try to solve culturally, only to discover later that the root cause began with what was coming out of the irrigation heads.

Routine water testing is the superintendent's best insurance policy. A quarterly or seasonal testing schedule provides a baseline that helps you:

- Track trends, such as increasing salinity during summer drawdown
- Identify changes in source water, especially when multiple wells or storage ponds are involved
- Predict soil problems before they appear, such as SAR (Sodium Adsorption Ratio) creep
- Adjust fertility programs to compensate for bicarbonate or pH issues
- Improve product performance, especially foliar applications and wetting agents
- Meet regulatory requirements for reclaimed water or effluent irrigation
- Communicate clearly with boards, owners and regulatory authorities

Data empowers decision-making. Without it, changes in turf health often feel mysterious. With it, they become manageable.

One of the biggest lessons we learned after leaving the superintendent's chair is how expensive untested water can be. High bicarbonates can lock up fertilizers, forcing higher application rates. Excess sodium can destroy soil structure, requiring wetting agents, gypsum and increased labor. Chlorides can wipe out sensitive turf varieties and demand overseeding or renovation.

Every superintendent knows that budgets are closely scrutinized. Water testing allows you to justify inputs with science and anticipate costs. In a profession where surprises are rarely good, this is invaluable.

If there's one message we emphasize in every consulting engagement, it's this: test your water like you test your soil. Ideally:

- Test every major water source at least twice per year
- Test more frequently during peak-irrigation season
- Track results in a simple log so trends are visible
- Review tests with an agronomist or consultant who understands turf-specific thresholds

Better water equals better turf — and better communication with stakeholders.

As individuals who have lived the challenges of golf course management and now help superintendents navigate them, we can say unequivocally: water quality is not a minor issue — it's a foundational one. It influences plant health, soil chemistry, product efficacy, labor efficiency and long-term budget stability.

Superintendents who understand their water, test it regularly and manage it proactively will always be better positioned to deliver consistent, high-quality playing conditions in an increasingly unpredictable world. Water can be your greatest ally or your toughest adversary. Testing is what makes the difference.

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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