

Charlie Wilson has a pioneering place in our industry's turfgrass profession. And in a sense, all of the Green Section agronomists since him are his descendents.

He stayed in Maryland for about a year before he was re-assigned to California to gauge interest out there in a visiting agronomist service for USGA member clubs. There indeed was, and Charlie opened the first office of the Turf Advisory Service in Davis. From there he covered California as well as all of the states east to Colorado.

Three years after Charlie had opened the Davis office, the well-traveled O.J. Noer

hired him and Charlie moved to Wisconsin. And as they say, the rest is history. Charlie spent the next quarter century with Milorganite and retired in 1979.

While attending the Symposium last fall, I mentioned to Tisa Overman, Milorganite's marketing and sales manager, that it would be great to see Charlie again. In no time, it seemed, she had arranged for a small luncheon with Charlie at a Milwaukee restaurant.

I hadn't seen Charlie in probably 25 years, yet he looked almost the same when he walked through the restaurant door.

Charlie is 91 years old now, but you would never know it by seeing him – with his ramrod straight posture – or by talking to him. I swear his memory is like a steel trap. It seemed impossible he retired 32 years ago.

Charlie Wilson has a pioneering place in our industry's turfgrass profession. And in a sense, all of the Green Section agronomists since him are his descendents.

Likewise, agronomists who have helped me in person on the golf course – Lee Record, Carl Schwarzkopf, Stan Zontek, Jim Latham and Bob Vavrek – have him as a common ancestor. Others I have hosted at my course – Kim Erusha, Tim Moraghan and Jim Snow – can all look to Charlie Wilson as their forefather in the USGA.

Adam Moeller, an agronomist who interned at our golf course when he was a Wisconsin undergrad, probably didn't realize Charlie Wilson's place in the TAS family tree. Now he will. Charlie hasn't changed much, but the cars the agronomists drive sure have over the years.

One side note, I hope you enjoy the accompanying photos of Charlie and Ed Lowery that Stan Zontek tracked down for me before he passed away in September. GCI

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THE WAITING GAME

As opportunities continue to constrict, assistants discuss the uphill climb to their ultimate goal. Plus, tips to land that first superintendent's job. By Mike Zawacki

Assistant superintendents are a long-suffering lot. There are the early mornings, the long hours and the myriad thankless tasks that make up the routine day.

Then there's the waiting. The career uncertainty. The rejection and ensuing frustration.

More than ever before, the obstacles are stacked against the nearly 4,000 golf course assistant superintendents vying for a handful of superintendent opportunities each year. For them, it's the critical next step in their careers, the milestone that reflects a sense of place and permanency in the industry.

However, a prolonged economic recession and crawling recovery, combined with fewer and fewer superintendent opportunities and a reduction in the number of U.S. golf courses make it seem like an insurmountable summit to reach.

For the previous generation of young up-and-coming assistants, their mantra was "Superintendent by 30." Today, though, the average age for an assistant is 35, according

to recent research data provided by the Golf Course Superintendents Association.

Opportunities are short and the wait is long, so what keeps assistants in the game?

Nate Jordan is sort of the typical example of today's assistant superintendents. He's nearly 27 years old. Five years out of turf school and Jordan has completed internships and assistant's positions that have helped diversify and expand his portfolio of professional experiences.

Now, Jordan is ready to make his move. And he's fortunate, too, to have an iron in the fire with a Chicagoland golf course engaged in a hiring search (though by press time, Jordan had not been offered the position).

However, if this opportunity doesn't pan out, Jordan admits he'll feel frustrated.

"I don't think I'll feel like there's this big black cloud over me, and I don't think I'll be ready to throw in the towel just yet, but yeah, it'll feel like setback," he says during a recent lunch break at Mt. Hawley Country Club in Peoria, Ill., where he works. "However, it

will leave me with the desire to pursue other opportunities, maybe even a lateral move that will expose me to experiences that will make my desirability greater in the market."

Through the sheer overwhelming number of candidates vying for so few superintendent's positions, Jordan understands the odds are against him. "I recently applied for a superintendent's position in Central Michigan and I was one of 170 'qualified' applicants," he says. "The course narrowed its pool down to five (candidates)... I wasn't one of them."

Jordan has learned a lot in his pursuit of a superintendent's job. For one, he doesn't agree with the notion that the only assistants landing superintendent jobs are those from big-name facilities.

"The name of the facility is only going to carry you so far," he says. "I believe it's your skill sets that will carry you through to the finish."

Instead, the key, according to Jordan, is to use an assistantship to build a resume full of outcomes. "In this industry, everyone knows

“I don’t think I’ll feel like there’s this big black cloud over me, and I don’t think I’ll be ready to throw in the towel just yet, but yeah, it’ll feel like setback.”

—Nate Jordan,
Mt. Hawley Country Club





The hard facts

Industry veteran and GCI contributor Bruce Williams give it to you straight, and offers some key tip to secure your first superintendent's job.

There is surely a new normal in employment in the golf turf industry. Most who attend turf schools aspire to be golf course superintendents.

A decade or so ago the path to reach that goal was a bit smoother to travel upon. After graduation a year or two were spent as a superintendent in training or an assistant and then it was time for moving on up to that first superintendent's job.

Today, this road of ascension is quite longer and bit more treacherous. Many assistants find themselves with the same job title 8 to 10 years – or longer – after graduation from turf school.

The reason for this is a simple mathematical explanation. Using very conservative numbers we have at least 50 land grant universities that offer training for prospective golf course superintendents. If 20 people graduate from those programs a year that would mean 1,000 people entering the work force.

With negative growth in golf course development we are actually losing more golf courses than we are building in the U.S. Superintendents are like the rest of the population in that they are living longer and also working longer. In fact, many are staying in their jobs into their 70s. Add downsizing of staff and management positions and you can see that it is simply a matter of more supply than demand.

I would not want to dissuade anyone from entering this wonderful profession, but I would advise that they understand the timeline and competition for jobs that awaits them. There is always room for the best-qualified candidates if people prepare themselves properly.

Whether it is a student looking for an assistant job after graduation, or an assistant looking for his first superintendent's job, there are a few key points to consider that might help a person gain the competitive advantage.

- Always have your resume updated and ready to send out.
- Use action verbs in describing what you did at previous jobs.
- Always include references. You either have them or you don't and never put 'Available Upon Request.'
- Old-school resumes state career objectives. I prefer stating what you can do for the prospective employer.
- All resumes have the standard items of education, employment and such. Be sure yours covers any and all skills you have that the job requires.
- Know the facility you are applying to. With Google and other Internet search engines there is a ton of information you can glean. Align it to your cover letter.
- Consider hiring a career counselor who can help you with your resume, interviewing skills and overall career path. It could prove to be the best investment you ever made.
- Have a plan for your career and evaluate it annually.
- Know the steps you must take to accomplish your career goals.
- Develop a broad skill set as it will lay the groundwork for attaining you next position.
- Establish a network. People who are connected get the jobs.
- Volunteer and participate in chapter functions, turf club, a chance to speak and/or write for an industry trade publication.
- Continuing education never ends and prospective employers recognize its value.
- Develop a packet to bring to an interview that helps you to sell yourself.

Bruce Williams, CGCS, is principal for both Bruce Williams Golf Consulting and Executive Golf Search. He is GCI's senior contributing editor.

“It's the ability to keep your nose to the grind stone. It's a rare characteristic and it weeds people out of this industry. It's also an incredibly valuable asset because you make yourself into a human multitool.”

— Clinton Starkebaum,
The Glacier Club

what jobs an assistant does,” he says. “So I want to differentiate myself focusing on the outcomes of what I've been involved with – how I may have helped eliminate a cost, or reduced a labor input.”

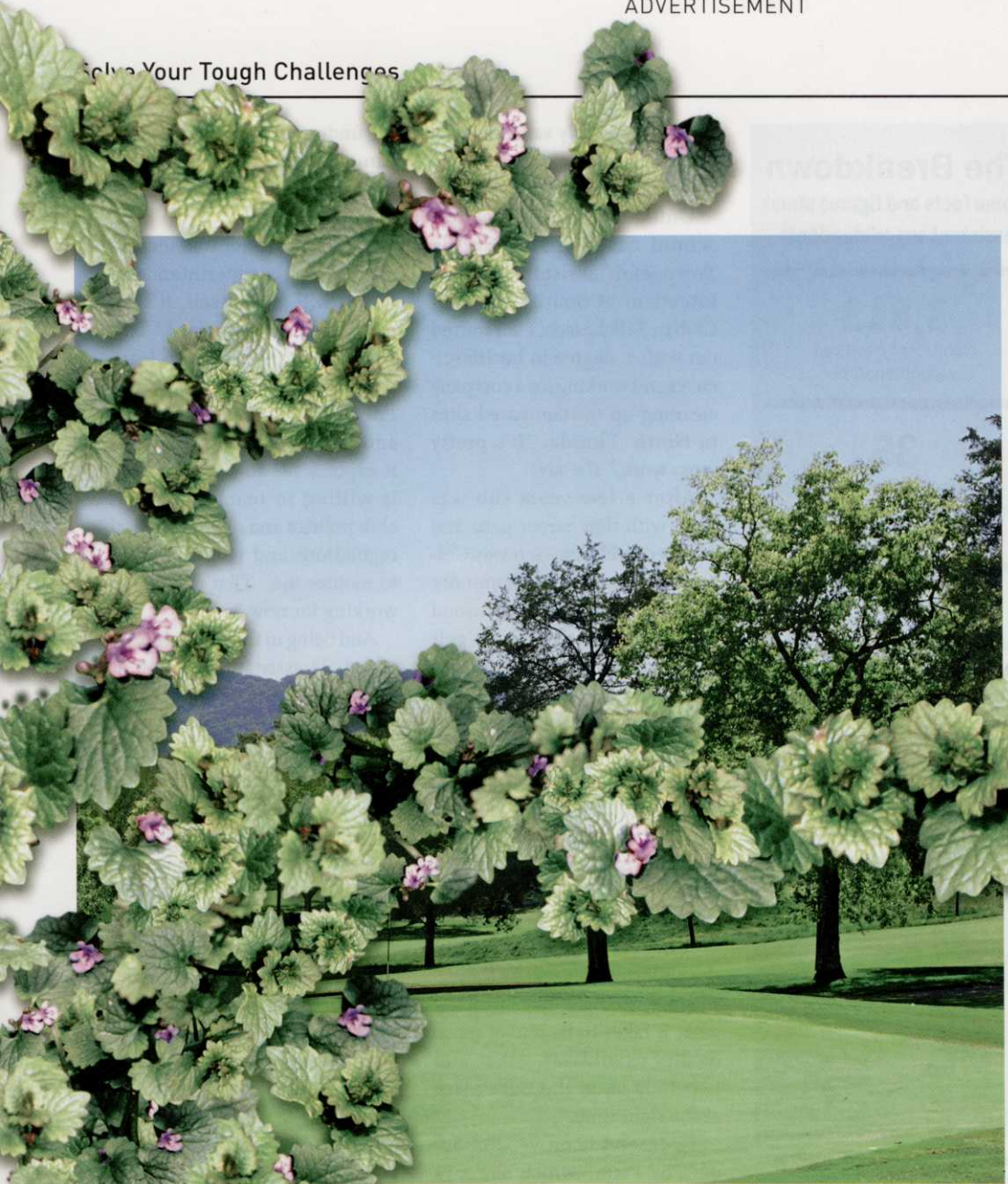
And contrary to popular belief among assistants, Jordan remains optimistic about the availability of superintendent positions.

“The way I see it, as course condition standards continue to rise and budgets continue to shrink, they will weed out (existing) superintendents who are not willing to make changes,” he says. “This will start to create vacancies for younger folks who are coming up in a time of tight budgets and limited resources and who have the potential to excel under those conditions. It's all my generation really knows.”

Clinton Starkebaum finds himself in a holding pattern.

The 25-year-old is hedging his bets for advancement and molding his career path around an opportunity that may present itself at the course where he's been an assistant for the last three years, The Glacier Club in Durango,

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Of course it's important find a distributor with a wide range of quality plant nutrition products to help balance your budget.

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Colo. The club is looking to add another nine holes to make it a 36-hole facility. When that happens, there's a solid chance the club will need to hire another superintendent. Starkebaum hopes to be the main contender for that position.

"I really haven't tried branching out (to pursue superintendent opportunities) yet because I feel like I have a good chance to advance from within," he says. "What I'm trying to do right now is learn as much as I possibly can and position myself as a key assistant... to be indispensable."

This scenario is a double-edged sword for Starkebaum. On the one hand there's a sense of security in the prospects of an opportunity. On the other hand, if this doesn't transpire, he's put many of his eggs into one basket. But filled with the vigor of optimism and youth, Starkebaum doesn't see failure as an option.

"I've told my boss a number of times that I have a strong desire to continue to learn and grow and to be the key choice when an opportunity presents itself," he says. "But I also understand that this is no guarantee."

Starkebaum has identified three keys to keep him on the right path to a superintendent's position – strong people skills; leadership skills and having an intimate knowledge of his course.

"The people skills are critical to keeping crews motivated and to work for you," he explains. "Leadership comes from leading by example, of displaying a strong work ethic, to motivate my crew during the season's doldrums.

"And I need to display consistency on a day-to-day basis," he adds. "There's a high expectation (among the club's membership) to deliver. What worries me the most – what keeps me up at night – is that the staff will be unmotivated to do the highly detailed work."

The Breakdown

Some facts and figures about assistant superintendents.

3,813

Number of assistant superintendents

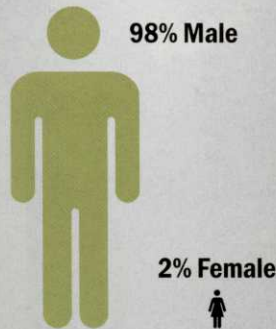
35

Average age of an assistant superintendent, the youngest is 18 and the oldest is 77.

4.3

Average number of years they spend as assistants before becoming superintendents.

Male vs. Female



Sources: Golf Course Superintendents Association of America

Focus and perseverance to deliver on all three of these key elements are rare commodities, and it's often what separates the wheat from the chaff among assistants. Starkebaum understands this and describes it as "managing the pressures of working on a course so that it doesn't cause you to crack." It's the a constant trait among successful superintendents, he says, and therefore should be a key asset in an aspiring assistant. "It's the ability to keep your nose to the grind stone," he says. "It's a rare characteristic and it weeds people out of this industry. It's

also an incredibly valuable asset because you make yourself into a human multi-tool."

Unlike the traditional turf school career path, Carole Townsend, assistant superintendent at Southwood Golf Club in Tallahassee, Fla., started out with a degree in health sciences and working for a company cleaning up contaminated sites in North Florida. "It's pretty gross work," she says.

After a few years she was done with that career path and enrolled in Florida Gateway College (then Lake City Community College) to study turf. Townsend had worked part-time at a golf course to earn money during her undergraduate studies.

And like many of her up-and-coming colleagues throughout the golf industry, the 38-year-old remains positive about her prospects for advancement. In fact, Townsend maintains a rather clear outlook about her career path.

"I believe for quality people, the opportunities will be there," she says. "So right now I'm doing what it takes to be one of those quality candidates... that and hopefully be in the right place at the right time."

Townsend is on version 3.0 of "The Plan," which she says is healthy.

"I think as you learn more about your profession, and get better at the job you do, it's only natural to reevaluate where you want it to take you," she says.

In talking with her colleagues in the industry, Townsend says for some people the path is too cut and dry. "They believe that you come out of (turf) school, work X number of years as an assistant and then become a superintendent. But it's much more complicated than that."

"My next position may not be to move up to a superintendent's position," she says. "For me, it may make more sense to make a lateral move if it means work-

ing under a superintendent who can teach me more and better prepare me for a superintendent's job.

"A turf professor told me this about being a superintendent: 'Grass will grow itself, it's everything else that's hard.' This is so true... and I need to learn those 'other' things. That's why I'm willing to make a move to another assistant's position if it exposes me to someone who is willing to teach me about club politics and environmental regulations and who is willing to mentor me. That's what I'm working for now."

And being in the slim minority of female assistant superintendents isn't a career ceiling in and of itself, Townsend says.

"From my experience, (sex) is not an issue unless it's made into an issue," she says, adding that there may be some cultural issues with male crew members who are not used to answering to a female superior.

"Twenty years ago, I believe your sex was more of an issue," she says. "I feel like in today's society it's not a big deal anymore. If you prove you can work hard, then it never becomes an issue."

Above all else, one thing produces the most anxiety for Townsend about taking that next step and becoming a course superintendent. "How will I know when I'm ready?" Townsend says. "How will I know I'm ready to go forward and succeed as a superintendent?"

More than the number of applicants or their unique credentials compared to hers, it's these particular questions that haunt Townsend the most when an opportunity presents itself to vie for an open superintendent's position.

"Then again, I'm sure every assistant submitting for that same position is wondering that, too," Townsend adds. "And of course, we really won't know that answer until we have the job." **GCI**

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ARE YOU AS HEALTHY AS YOUR GOLF COURSE?

I'm sorry to note that 2012 was a particularly tough one in the golf-maintenance and design industry with the deaths of four friends and fellow professionals: John Harbottle, Greg Breningmeyer, Bob Pinson, and Stan Zontek.

Besides feeling bad about each individual passing, their too-early deaths got me wondering if there's something unhealthy about what we do. I came to realization that we aren't paying enough attention to serious industry-related health issues.

We all agree we've figured out skin cancer. I can't believe there are many superintendents who don't cover themselves with sunscreen and see a dermatologist at least twice a year in search of spots and lesions.

While we're good on skin, we're pretty bad on just about everything else. And if we don't get a grip on these problems, we're going to be burying more of our own too soon.

I'm looking forward to the national meeting in San Diego in a few months, as well as the many regional and local sessions I attend, as a way to meet old friends and make new ones. But it worries me greatly when the first part I see of a colleague is what's hanging over his belt. Not the "Freshman 15" we used to joke about back in college but the "Industry 25" – or more – that seem to be affecting more and more of our peers, young and old.

Extra weight, sometimes verging on obesity, is one problem I see. But it's symptomatic of the issues affecting us all, and especially those who've made it to the top of the profession and a certain age. We may be doing well in many aspects of our jobs, but our bodies could be ticking time bombs.

Think back to when those of us 50 years plus started in the business. We didn't have the equipment, technology, and other advantages enjoyed

by our younger counterparts. When I started working on a maintenance crew, I walk mowed greens, tees, and mowed around the clubhouse grounds. After that I either manually sprayed or hand-irrigated, walking from green to green with my syringe loop. I hand raked bunkers.

But moving up the ladder also meant moving less. Going into management meant going indoors, being physically less active while supervising and training others to do the tasks I used to do. Reaching the top rung is great, but it involves being chained to

a desk or the seat of a golf cart.

I've also noticed that while we've changed our work habits, many of us haven't changed our eating habits. A cheeseburger, fries and Coke aren't so bad if you're outdoors and moving around all day. But if you're at a desk think about having a salad instead.

At least as dangerous as extra weight is extra stress. With age come responsibilities both inside and outside the job, particularly to one's family. We're all worried about keeping our jobs, satisfying committee people and owners, keeping current on advances in agronomy, going to conferences, long hours, late nights, and competition from young bucks. Then there's the general malaise throughout the golf industry the last few years. It's enough to make you sick. And it can.

On the upside, I don't see as many superintendents smoking today as I used to, but in certain parts of the country guys chew tobacco. Hey, I'm no saint and I'm the last one to tell you or anyone what to do. But I hope you'll take a good look at your habits, your waistline, and your blood pressure. Then look at the picture of your wife and kids sitting on the desk and ask if you're being fair to them as well as yourself.

As I said before, the industry has done a good job educating us about skin care. Now it's time we look inside our bodies. And I'm not just talking to my fellow 50-year-olds. You might think you're being active because you occasionally help the crew roll out some sod or dig a trench. But if it's not consistent exercise it's not doing much good. And it's certainly not enough to be rewarded with a fat, greasy burger in the clubhouse at lunch.

Attitudes are starting to change. I know quite a few superintendents

(continued on page 49)



Rise in risk

The CDC's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) recently released 2009 data on U.S. adult health risks and behaviors. Among U.S. males, health behaviors for tobacco use and binge drinking decreased and chronic conditions including obesity, diabetes and hypertension prevalence increased from 1999 to 2009. Here are other key findings:

- Men who reported themselves as obese – a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 30.0 to 99.8 – bincreased from 19.9% in 1999 to 28.5% in 2009
- Men who had their cholesterol checked and were told that it was high increased from 29.6% in 1999 to 39.6% in 2009
- Men who reported having diabetes increased from 5.9% in 1999 to 8.8% in 2009
- Men who reported having hypertension increased from 23.0% in 1999 to 29.8% in 2009

Source: cdc.gov

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USE YOUR HEAD

Superintendents must weigh whether to upgrade their irrigation heads or go for a total system replacement. Successfully selling either concept to your membership is another matter.

By Jason Stahl

When Steve Cook went to his membership with a proposal to upgrade Oakland Hills' irrigation system more than a decade ago, he had a specific sales plan: talk playing conditions, and nothing more.

"I think it has to revolve around that," says Cook. "I think you get lost in the weeds when you start talking about agronomics, root systems... Their eyes start to glaze over."

Cook wanted to stop the "bandage" approach of continually upgrading or fixing parts of the system. At the time, they were looking at upgrading the controllers, and he realized they were trying to put lipstick on a pig.

"I said we were better off letting [the irrigation system] fall apart and plan a full upgrade three to five years down the road," he says. "I advised that we pocket our money and put it in the bank and wait till we were ready to do the whole thing. Eventually, you have to replace your car because it won't last forever."

Cook broke it down for the members in the simplest terms so they could understand his rationale and know that it had nothing to do with making his job easier but that it was all about trying to provide better member services and being a good steward with their money.

"We told them we could decrease the water window from 12 to 8

hours, which would mean better playing conditions and better member service," says Cook. "We told them we would not be in their way as much, we wouldn't have to hand-water as much – and there were some labor savings that went along with that."

Instead of having three old 60-hp motors, he reasoned, let's install a variable frequency drive (VFD). "And if there are cost savings over 10 years, that's great," Cook told them. "But let's not get lost in how many kilowatts or money we're going to save. We're putting in a state-of-the-art VFD drive, which is the best we can do right now and I know it's going to be better than the pump station we currently have."

Cook stayed away from the environmental angle, saying while that may have been a valid selling point at a course with wetland areas, it wasn't for his course.

"All I said was that we were bound to be better stewards and not be throwing water out needlessly," he says. "One of the things I kept telling them was that, at the time, we had no choice but to overwater because our coverage and pressures were so bad. So we had a wet golf