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THIS IS HIS TIME

AFTER BIDDING HIS TIME FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS, **RONALD MCWHORTER** SHED HIS TITLE AS A CAREER ASSISTANT AND TOOK ON THE MANTLE OF SUPERINTENDENT.





BY TRENT BOUTS

Ronald McWhorter had been through some “closed door moments” in his time as an assistant golf course superintendent. The kind of moments when the latch clicking behind you signals a bullet is on its way. You know the boss is taking aim. The only question worth asking is whether you will survive the hit.

Until this particular day last November, McWhorter, 46, had survived the worst of these encounters with little more than bruised pride and his ears ringing. He was too good at what he did, too dedicated, too conscientious, to slip up so badly he should be fired. Sadly though, that standard is not always insurance enough these days. He knows good people can lose jobs to bad times.

McWhorter had 27 years in the business and every single one of them on The Landing course at Reynolds Plantation in Greensboro, Ga. He’d helped build the course, starting as a laborer barely out of high school then slowly but steadily working his way through the ranks. No one on the planet knew that acreage better than him. He’d been an assistant since 1991, the first assistant since 1998.

Still...

So when his golf course superintendent, Lane Singleton, closed the door behind him that day, McWhorter swallowed hard. He remembers thinking, “Oh, oh. I didn’t know what to expect.” He’d been on course when his phone buzzed. Singleton’s text was short, maybe sharp? He wanted to see McWhorter in his office. McWhorter texted back explaining that he needed half an hour to finish what he was working on. He asked if that was ok. Singleton didn’t reply.

They were 30 unsettling minutes and after a couple more, once he’d arrived and Singleton started talking, McWhorter was on the verge of tears. He hadn’t been fired. He’d been promoted — to golf course superintendent. He was overwhelmed.

“I felt like a little kid,” he says. “I almost started crying. It was definitely a shock. We’d had some closed door moments before. Sometimes good. But sometimes for, let’s say, corrective measures. But this really caught me by surprise. I was in awe. I didn’t know what to think.”

After 27 years, who would?

Typically, only monks invest that kind of time in one place without complaining.

That parallel is not so crazy, because McWhorter has always seen his work, his purpose, as service. It helps explain his patience, which should not be taken for a lack of ambition. “I wasn’t pushing hard to get that title,” he says. “That’s not because I was complacent. I just wasn’t going to go knocking doors down to get it. I felt time would bring about the change. My purpose is just to be a servant, to serve my company and my co-workers.”

He lives by the same philosophy outside of work. Heavily involved in his church, McWhorter also occupies a seat on the Greensboro city council, winning election in 2002. He is chairman of the Greene Country Recreation Department and the Lake Oconee Area Development Authority. He was invited to run for

council. He was appointed golf course superintendent. When service itself is your ambition opportunities present themselves, eventually ... maybe.

McWhorter is African-American. Statistically at least that puts the chances of him becoming a golf course superintendent at about the same as an African-American playing on the PGA Tour. Like it or not and for reasons the golf industry has tried various means to address, the game looks like less of a mirror on American society than it does a filter.

The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America has no definitive numbers on the ethnic make-up of its mem-

bership. The association no longer asks about race on application forms and even when it did those questions were optional and therefore often left blank. Still, GCSAA's director of member relations, Scott Woodhead, CGCS, says it is fair to describe African-American membership as a "very small percentage."

This month, the World Golf Hall of Fame and Museum launches a new exhibit "Honoring the Legacy: A Tribute to African-Americans in Golf." Among the individuals celebrated is John Shippen, who in 1896 became the first African-American to play in the U.S. Open and later became the

first black greenkeeper. Now here we are in the 21st century yet McWhorter is an anomaly as much for the fact he is an African-American superintendent as he is for waiting 27 years to get the title.

Last decade, GCSAA launched a committee to "identify barriers to" and "develop programs to attract" diversity. The GCSAA diversity task group operated over four years before falling victim to cutbacks driven by the recession. Rafael Barajas, CGCS from Hacienda Golf Club in La Habra Heights, Calif., served on that group.

Barajas moved to California from Mexico at 16 to help

support his family. Today, he is a GCSAA director and says diversity remains part of the association's mission. His own experience as an immigrant, his observations over nearly 35 years in the business and his work with the task group lead him to make a significant distinction when it comes to the question of diversity. Rather than ask why there are not more African-Americans or other minorities among golf course superintendents, he argues, the real question is "Why don't they want to be?"

"It's difficult to pinpoint," he says. "But it's not the profession's fault. The industry is not excluding anybody. You could





Ronald McWhorter, third from left with Jim Thompson, Brandon Hayes and Tad Hopkins, all from Reynolds Plantation; Chris Thornton, from Athens Country Club; and Tom Howard, from The Creek Club, at the Georgia GCSA assistant superintendent championship in 2012.

be bright pink for all we care. We want you as a member. But how do you bring people in if they don't want to come in."

"No, you don't see many African-Americans in turfgrass

management," McWhorter agrees. "But I am seeing more and more black people playing the game. I definitely hope that me being a golf course superintendent helps open some eyes

for young African-Americans. But it's not just for guys. We have career days where the company sends us to speak at schools and I tell them this can be for ladies, too."

"Obviously it was long overdue," Lane Singleton says of McWhorter's promotion. "It was a great time for our crew, for Reynolds Plantation and the community. Whether it's with his church, or the number of committees he's on, Ron is a very, very busy guy. I can't say enough about him. He hardly ever takes a day off. I don't know when he sleeps."

"Some of the guys say I'm out of my mind," McWhorter laughs. "But I get in here some-

times at 4:30 a.m. just to have my quiet time and get ready for the day." Getting ready includes planning tasks for the day but often includes "a few chapters of the Bible" or whatever else he is reading at the time, most recently, Rick Warren's "A Purpose Driven Life."

McWhorter's workmates wanted to take him and celebrate his promotion and that of Brandon Hayes, who was elevated to superintendent of the Great Waters course the same day. Singleton's responsibilities had increased steadily in recent years and with the new title of vice-president of agronomy there was room for both Mc-

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Whorter and Hayes and step up a notch.

A celebration seemed reasonable but McWhorter said, "No, thanks, I'm good." Instead, he texted his brother and his sister then later told his mother. "She was like a kid in a candy store, all excited," he says. "Then she says..., 'So what does that mean?' My dad didn't know what it would mean for me either." Golf had never been part of the family experience. McWhorter only took up the game itself in 1991. Today his handicap hovers around 10.

Perhaps there was a need for McWhorter himself to have some time to process the news. While he'd been in golf nearly three decades, he hadn't always entertained the prospect of being the main man. The spark came during a career development meeting led by Billy Fuller, the former leading superintendent who now runs his own golf course design company.

"That was the first time I had any inkling," McWhorter says. "I was content but still hungry to learn. With every promotion comes more expectation. It has led me to look now with more of a magnifying glass. Before it was okay to say, let me get back to you. Well, the buck stops here now so I have to have all the information at hand at that moment. You're like a doctor on call all the time."

In 2008, McWhorter completed a Principals of Turfgrass Management course at the University of Georgia. He is a regular at Georgia GCSA seminars but the overwhelming weight of his education has come on the job.

"I've had great teachers," he says, rattling off superintendents he has worked under: Butch Foust, Steve Brady, Dennis Echols, CGCS, and of course Singleton,

who arrived at Reynolds Plantation 14 years ago and was a co-assistant with McWhorter

Echols speaks of McWhorter with similar regard as Singleton. "I have had the pleasure of working with many good assistant superintendents throughout my career," he says. "I have been honored to work with a few great assistants, too. Ronald is definitely one of the great ones. He is a true gentleman who exemplifies honesty, truthfulness and integrity...with his solid foundation of golf course management, and personal commitment of being a Godly example, he will continue his career, making positive impacts on others and the golf industry."

"I felt like a little kid. I almost started crying. It was definitely a shock. We'd had some closed door moments before. Sometimes good. But sometimes for, let's say, corrective measures. But this really caught me by surprise. I was in awe. I didn't know what to think."

— Ronald McWhorter

McWhorter certainly regards himself as part of the industry, not merely a passenger. He hopes to one day serve on the Georgia GCSA board of directors and is quietly mindful that he is breaking ground with the potential for "making positive impacts on others."

This spring he played in a fundraiser for the Georgia Golf Environmental Foundation at TPC Sugarloaf in Duluth, Ga. A story announcing his appointment as superintendent appeared in the Georgia GCSA magazine shortly beforehand. McWhorter was touched by the greetings and congratulations he received from colleagues. Still, he wasn't running about high-fiving anybody. Indeed, he still hasn't celebrated with his workmates from Reynolds Plantation.

"I'm sort of low-key when it comes to that sort of thing," he says. "I celebrate within." GCI

Trent Bouts is a Greer, S.C.-based writer and frequent GCI contributor.



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NEED AN IRRIGATION TECH?

They're a great asset to not only the golf course, but also to the irrigation system.

When it comes to irrigation maintenance and repair the responsibility at most golf courses usually falls to the assistant superintendent or second assistant. Why? Because repairs and troubleshooting need to be done by someone who is responsible and has the ability and understanding of how important the irrigation system is to the overall maintenance and operation of the course.

If water management is a factor, due to limited water supply or public perception, there is even more reason to have a management-level employee dealing with the irrigation system. Have you ever thought of designating someone to perform all your irrigation maintenance or hiring an irrigation technician instead of letting it fall to the assistants?

An irrigation technician is a great asset to not only the golf course, but also to the irrigation system. Having a staffer who is solely responsible for maintaining the irrigation system helps the system operate better, have fewer problems and most likely save water. Irrigation technicians are proactive with maintenance as opposed to being reactive, which is the case at most courses.

Most high-end courses have irrigation technicians, with some facilities employing more than one. Whether there is an irrigation technician (or technicians) is usually dependent on how large the irrigation system is or



how much trouble it is causing. Most high-end courses have irrigation technicians, with some facilities employing more than one. Irrigation technicians are proactive with maintenance as opposed to being reactive, which is the case at most courses.

how much trouble it is causing.

Intuitively, the more sprinklers the system has the more maintenance it requires. Likewise, an older irrigation system needs more maintenance. Consider designating an irrigation technician if system maintenance is taking too much of your or your assistant's time, or if it is taking more than 75 percent of one of your staff's time.

There's no hard and fast rule. I know many 18-hole courses without an irrigation technician, and at least one course with three. One irrigation technician can maintain approximately 2,000 or so sprinklers with their associated controllers, valves,

wiring and piping, but this will vary by course and number of holes.

What duties will an irrigation technician perform? First and foremost, addressing issues as they occur. These will include: broken pipes, leaking fittings, weeping sprinklers, non-operating sprinklers and controller or wiring issues. Routine work includes troubleshooting the system as necessary, as well.

When immediate issues do not have to be addressed, the technician can level sprinklers and set them to grade, check sprinkler arcs and nozzles and perform audits to (VINCHESI continues on page 62)



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THE EDITORS



It seems colorants are having a real impact on the superintendents who are using them, and influence those who aren't to get with the program, according to recent research.

Golf Course Industry, in partnership with BASF, engaged in a three-year research project that identified superintendent trends with regard to colorant use as a turf management tool and how those attitudes changed during that time.

The research identified that the majority of superintendents (70 percent) are using colorants at their course, primarily to enhance their turf's aesthetic look. Secondary uses include as a marking agent for pesticide apps, and for colorants' plant health benefits.

This was a 5 percent increase from three years ago, when about 65 percent of superintendent respondents indicated they used turf colorants.

More than half (56 percent) of superintendents say that they use colorants for their plant health benefits, primarily to protect turf from sun damage and stress. In addition, superintendents say they also utilize the benefits colorants provide in improving turf growth in the spring.

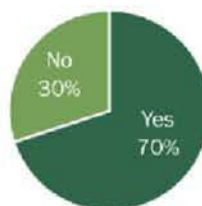
On average, superintendents are budgeting around \$2,900 annually on colorants. This spending has increased over the last three years for 56 percent of superintendents. Of those superintendents, 22 percent indicated they're

COLORANTS: By the numbers

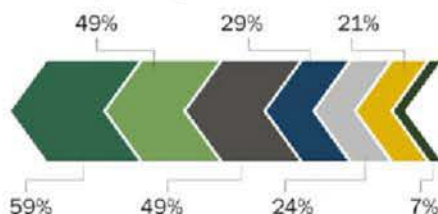
The majority of superintendents (70 percent) indicate they are using colorants at their course, primarily to enhance their turf's aesthetic look. Some secondary uses include as a marking agent for pesticide apps, and for colorants' plant health benefits.








On average, superintendents are budgeting around \$2,900 annually on colorants. This spending has increased over the last three years for 56 percent of superintendents. Of those superintendents, 22 percent indicated they're spending 20 percent or more than they were three years ago.

Do you use colorants at your course?



How are you using colorants?



-  Enhance aesthetic look of turf
-  Marking agent for pesticide applications
-  Plant health benefits
-  Mask discoloration of damaged turf
-  Avoid and/or reduce overseeding
-  Special events or tournaments
-  Other

"Other" included divot mix, sand colorant, and warming up turf as it emerges from winter.