

A NEW BREED OF SUPERINTENDENT

Today's superintendent spends most of his time managing and convincing people. Growing grass? That's the least of his worries

by SHERRY CHRISTIE

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Ten years ago superintendents were called greenskeepers. All the average golfer knew about them was that they were nice guys who always seemed to be out moving sprinklers or mowing—invariably, in the middle of his play.

These days, a golf course superintendent, just back from a professional turf seminar, may have a pocketful of notes on urea-formaldehydes, phosphorous/lime ratios, plant clones and apomictic hybrids, and he may be about to go out to try and sell a \$100,000 automatic irrigation system to his management. But to John Q. Golfer, he's still the head gardener, with a little extra status because someone saw him playing the course by himself on Monday morning.

Today's golf course superintendents are better educated, better trained and more sure of themselves than were their predecessors. But, ironically, the more expert they become, the more they end up selling their expertise to the people paying their salaries.

They have to. Pressures are greater. Clubs that once shrugged and went along with parched brown fairways, don't anymore. Well-traveled golfers, who might be in Boyne Highlands one day and Delray Beach the next, have begun demanding the same championship standards at home, year-around.

For the average superintendent, this demand for excellence means keeping his head above an ever rising flood of sophisticated new products: nitrogen urea fertilizers, non-mercurial fungicides, triplex greensmowers and verticutters and aerators. No wonder universities now offer majors in turf management. And no wonder top superintendents' salaries have doubled and tripled what they were 10 years ago. Exper-



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tise is necessary to manage a tight budget, to maintain a playable and photogenic course and to be able to sell every major decision to an ever watchful management committee.

Superintendents have changed. The men taking over jobs now are in their 20s and early 30s, are university trained, analytically minded and are not afraid of selling their expertise.

At 34, Don Clemans has been in the business 19 years, in Indianapolis, St. Louis, Detroit and now at Columbus (Ohio) CC. He feels that the golf superintendent's job is getting tougher and he is blunt about the reason why.

“Maybe 75 per cent or 85 per cent of the business today is not really growing grass, but learning how to coordinate people and how to convince them that you need to do this or that. Going out and actually doing the job—that's the least of my worries.”

Clemans has almost made a career of turning golf courses around. In St. Louis, he gave himself an ulcer working 18 to 22 hours a day on the job, putting in a quarter-million-dollar irrigation system and supervising \$756,000 worth of improvement in three years. At Columbus CC, which hosted the PGA tournament in 1964, the members had almost resigned themselves to a 100 per cent turf failure annually when Clemans arrived in 1971. He recognized the problem as compaction and broke the seven-year losing streak by aerating the club's 70-year-old fairways five times last year.

It seems incomprehensible to Clemans that clubs are more willing to pay for a pound of cure than an ounce of preventive maintenance. He thinks the ultimate absurdity already has arrived: “People will

go out and spend fantastic sums for artificial turf on football fields—\$250,000, \$350,000—when the grounds man, the year before, could've asked for another \$5,000 to put the grass in great shape and they wouldn't have wanted to spend the money."

For the average golf course superintendent, life is a running battle with the finance committee, a kind of pinch-fisted Argus. But fighting for money to carry on his projects is a demon every superintendent has to face. The most successful combine turf expertise, salesmanship and business acumen, but these qualities rarely appear in one man. All professionals keep detailed records, but the real skill is making those records sell turf programs.

At Brookside CC on the other side of Columbus, Ed Etchells' annual budget for this year ran to eight pages. Eight pages of explaining and convincing, not just listing numbers. When Etchells presents something this complete, it's hard to fight it. He sells his own judgment in such a professional way, that he's been able to accomplish much in his career.

Like many of today's crop of younger superintendents, Etchells, 29, spent three years as assistant superintendent, translating his education into practical knowhow. His first superintendent's job involved constructing a golf course from scratch for a housing development. After that he spent 2½ years as superintendent of an august private club on Philadelphia's Main Line, renovating the fairways and irrigation system and 2½ years at Brookside.

Most of these improvements have called for a hard selling job on each club's financial committee, explaining the problem in terms they can understand. Etchells' early background in business equips him to talk in detail about turf and landscaping in one breath and profit and loss in the next. He believes in preparation: Shoulder-to-shoulder in his office bookcase are thick, three-ring binders from turf product suppliers, books on turf and soil and textbooks with titles such as "Money and Banking," "Accounting Principles"

and "Communication Through Reports."

Education is indispensable to the new superintendent. One farsighted veteran, who got his bachelor's in turf science 10 years ago, comments now, "A lot of turf students are taking short courses, which give you a certificate but not a degree. But you need a B.S., a master's, all you can get. The more degrees you have, the more money you can earn."

The money eases the pressure of the job. At the same time, it makes the competition for jobs at top courses stiffer.

"I had a young man working for me while he was taking the two-year course at Michigan State," Don Clemans reports. "He went on for his bachelor's; he has one more term to go. He's already picked up a club at an \$11,000 a year salary, and he hasn't even graduated from college yet. In 1961, when I graduated from college, I got a house and \$5,200 a year, and that was crowding the people who had been in the business for years."

"Salaries have almost doubled in five years," says Ed Etchells. "At the top, now they are talking about \$30,000 to \$35,000. The field has skyrocketed."

Is there a danger that superintendents may price themselves out of the market? One championship course superintendent cautions, "There are a lot of good clubs that don't want to pay that kind of money. You may be the best but they won't hire you because you want \$20,000 and the green chairman makes only \$15,000 in his own business."

There seems, however, to be a almost unlimited supply of young men willing to take that chance. Ten years ago, you could count on the fingers of one hand the schools that offered credit in turf management. Today, there are 20 or 25, the best known being Penn State, Michigan State, Purdue, Colorado, Rutgers, Texas A & M, Rhode Island, Ohio State, the University of California and Maryland. The men who graduate from them see their job as a business not as a trade. They learn it as a business and are ready to use their increasing expertise as leverage to sell them-

selves into a better deal, a bigger challenge. "It's just like any other business," Ed Etchells says, "there's got to be a future for you in it."

As the superintendent's traditional loyalty gives way to personal goals, his mobility increases. Etchells is one example. In October he made his fourth move, to Jack Nicklaus' new Muirfield development north of Columbus. He now is a superintendent-administrator responsible for the construction and future maintenance of three 18-hole courses. He has an entirely different set of challenges to face and he likes it that way.

Contrasting with the growing numbers of superintendents who build their expertise on different courses with different problems, a few, such as Richie Valentine, buck the trend. Valentine is 43, a second-generation superintendent with 21 years at Merion GC behind him. He has been superintendent for the last 11 of those years, succeeding his father, Joe Valentine, who maintained Merion's two 18-hole courses for 54 years before that. In its 65-year history, Merion has never had anyone but a Valentine managing its classic turf.

Valentine's problems are almost unique. Merion has had a full membership for years. Valentine says, "We've never been held back for any equipment or materials. Right now I don't see any need for extensive roadwork, so the biggest need for the golf course now is an irrigation system." He reads off a list of irrigation-system points he and his green chairman are working on for the next board meeting, ranging from "Why do we need it?" to "Discuss the approximate costs and advantages or disadvantages of the companies you are aware of."

The subtleties of selling Richie Valentine knows as well as anyone. "These board members are really going to have to be sold, because we're talking about an expenditure of \$150,000. We can't just say, 'Well, we need it because Joe down the pike has got one—it's the going thing.' The easiest way to sell it to them would be for me to say, 'Okay, we're going to be able to save \$6,000 on labor.' But that's just a bunch of baloney. No way

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you're going to do that. More water is going to bring on more pythium disease in the summer, is going to leach out more of the nutrients, which means we will have to fertilize more, which means we'll probably grow grass faster, which means we'll have to mow more. You're going to have to do some research to sell a program like this."

Valentine attended Penn State and has kept up with turf developments through short courses at Rutgers and the University of Maryland. Merion's management recognizes him as an expert in his field and trusts his sense of priority. "I have my golf courses to maintain and that is first with me, beyond any other maintenance or construction work we have scheduled. When a member brings guests out here, he wants to show them a course he can be proud of, not just another golf course. There's a tradition at Merion and I think my men feel a certain pride in it."

But Valentine, like Columbus' Don Clemans, has found that actually doing his job is easier than explaining to the membership how and why he is doing it. "To be a successful superintendent, you have to deal with people, a lot more so than the average person thinks. There is a lot of public relations in our job today, and there's going to be more in the future. In fact, I find myself already at the point where growing grass is probably secondary to me."

Public relations—selling expertise—is often a gradual process, which can be frustrating to a man who moves faster than the people around him. One veteran superintendent complains, "Little things really bother me. My boss said to me the other day, 'Hey, I need a report for Tuesday night's meeting.' I said, 'I put it in your folder.' 'What folder?' 'The folder you have up in your office.' Good God, he has a folder there and stuff lies in there for five months. He never looks in it."

Other superintendents with the same problem take ignorance more philosophically. "It's a basic part of selling," says one administrative superintendent. "If we make up a program, I'll send an exact copy to my boss. Whether he



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reads it or not, I don't care. He doesn't know bent from bluegrass or anything else, but at least he's got it. He knows I'm thinking about him and that I'm getting organized in my work."

Dave Harmon is superintendent of the Golden Horseshoe and Spotswood golf courses in Williamsburg, Va. He is also director of recreational activities for Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., which owns the golf courses. That makes him boss of not just an assistant superintendent and his grounds crew, but also the golf professional, the tennis professional, the clubhouse manager, the swimming pool manager and the lawn bowling professional. Much more than a gardener, he has become a manager of men. But his problems are the same as Don Clemans' or Ed Etchells' or Richie Valentine's.

"People are on your back all the time, whether it's a private club, a city course or whatever, and they never really sympathize with you too much. They think that you ought to grow good grass under any conditions. You've got golfers out there chopping it up, not replacing divots or fixing ball marks. Some days it just drives you nuts."

Harmon, 32, is a painstakingly professional turf manager with a strong sense of the golf superintendent's need to work on his image. "It used to be that the golf course was built on a farm somewhere and a lot of people still picture the farmer in bib overalls out-mowing on a tractor with steel wheels. Too many superintendents today still want to stay in their own little corners, they don't even want to go to the clubhouse. The way they dress and handle themselves, they still look like farmers."

Of the 55 recreational activities employees Harmon supervises, 17 maintain Williamsburg's two courses year-around. Ten years ago, when they were built, the work crew was much smaller, but, explains Harmon, maintenance standards were lower then.

He suspects standards now may be artificially high, making golf courses too expensive to keep up. This seems due to a peculiarly American aesthetic. "American golfers are used to having every

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blade of grass clipped to x inches high all over. The English don't expect that."

Harmon thinks about things like this, because, like almost everyone else, he has labor problems. Thanks to Colonial Williamsburg's corporate umbrella, he is lucky enough to be able to offer good wages and excellent fringe benefits, but there is virtually no source of labor. In the town of Williamsburg, the unemployment rate is 0.3 per cent; in Newport News, the nearest city, it is only 3 per cent. Harmon's solution is to mechanize as much as he can and keep alert for new labor-saving product ideas.

Other superintendents have different and ingenious ideas for solving their labor problems, which, typically, are a function of money, of supply or both. Don Clemans finds retired people, who are happy to have a steady part-time job and are responsible enough to make good workers. Other superintendents have put housewives on their teams. For smaller courses, the solution might lie in hiring a free-lance grounds crew that would bring in its own tractors and lawnmowers.

Turf students from nearby universities add depth to many superintendents' work forces. Like most of his colleagues, Ed Etchells will go out of his way to give his workers a break. "I'm not too old to forget when I was trying to get somebody to give me a job to learn."

One big labor problem now confronting golf courses from California to Maine is unionization. In most cases, this trend seems to be justified on labor's part.

One club superintendent with a dozen employees, says angrily, "If the boards of directors and the whole country club philosophy continue as they have in past years, they are going to be forced to accept unions. There is not a member in our club who owns or runs a business who pays any of his help as little as they pay mine. Or gives fewer fringe benefits. A man can come in here who might be a little underprivileged or not have the opportunity to go to college, but is a diligent worker and a very trusting soul and he might work here for 45

years at a tedious job. The day he walks out the door, he won't have one red cent. This has got to change."

To change it, superintendents have tried exerting pressure on club management, with varying degrees of success. At Williamsburg, Dave Harmon is in the unusual position of providing such valuable benefits to his work force that they turned down a chance to unionize. As part of Colonial Williamsburg's 3,000-plus employee group, the grounds crew is offered paid vacations and holidays, free doctor's care on or off the job, liberal health insurance, life insurance, sick pay, retirement income, disability benefits, home finance plans and special discounts and passes in Williamsburg.

Harmon's extended responsibilities give him plenty of opportunities to sell. In asking for money, he's fighting against requests from the historical area of Williamsburg and in management's eyes, Williamsburg's priority is its restored area, not its recreational facilities. "The biggest problem that all of us have," Harmon admits, "is selling out ideas and programs to the people who control the money."

Is it that much easier at a public course? Ray Ellinger thinks so. Ellinger, at 62, is in his second career. Formerly an International Harvester equipment salesman, he retired on doctor's orders and decided to build a nine-hole public course on some farmland he owned, just to keep busy. He now operates, almost singlehandedly, one of the most beautiful small courses in central Ohio, Broadview in Pataskala. And he is his own boss.

"Of course, he says, "a country club really wants the same thing as the superintendent. But somebody has to be able to say, 'This is the way it has to be done.' I would much rather be the one who controls that." Ellinger enjoys being free to do what he thinks is best for the course without worrying that his judgement or his expertise will be questioned.

But the price a public course superintendent-owner pays for his freedom is steep. Labor problems, for instance, may be much more se-

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vere than his country club colleagues, because he usually cannot afford to pay much above minimum wage. Ray Ellinger is thinking of hiring a full-time superintendent to take care of Broadview, but a nine-hole course can hardly afford the \$10,000 to \$12,000 that a university turf graduate demands, and Ray is too stubborn to settle for anything less than the quality he has made standard.

Second, a public course means just that—a course open to the general public. On a good Sunday, Broadview can handle 350 rounds, some of them with gifted amateurs, many determined duffers and an increasing number of novices. In his more exasperated moments, Ellinger complains, "You get awfully tired of the public, you know; they expect so doggone much for so little and their care of anybody's property is terrible. That is kind of discouraging and I think TV's got a lot to do with it. For heaven's sake, why doesn't somebody tell them that a professional's the only one who can walk away without replacing a divot."

And there, public course or private, superintendents are unanimous. Richie Valentine uses almost the same words to describe his biggest headache. "We know pretty well what the problems in growing grass are, we have the technical know-how and, hopefully, the funds to cope with them, but we can't cope with people's ignorance of the general care and maintenance and grooming of a golf course. What they demand from turf—they kick it, they ride on it, they beat the daylight out of it, they vandalize it—they expect more out of turf than they do their own driveways. And they even have to resurface their driveways once in a while."

It might be easier for members to understand, Don Clemans suggests, if superintendents try to associate their thinking to the dimensions of the turfgrass. "It may be 85 degrees up where they are, five or six feet high," he points out. "But tell them that it's 110 degrees down where the grass plant lives, and they begin to give you a little more of their attention. And use paral-

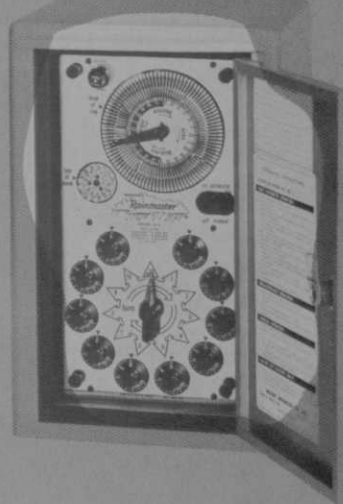
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lels. If you can get hold of a club member or a board member or a green committee member who's a doctor, you can learn to relate the phenomena of turf to the living processes within the human body. Once he understands you, he'll bring along five others who respect him because he's a doctor."

Communication can sometimes be amazingly simple. Last fall, when visiting Northerners wondered out loud if Golden Horseshoe was losing its fairways, Dave Harmon simply mimeographed and distributed a note explaining that bermudagrass, like deciduous trees, normally goes brown and dormant as soon as night temperatures drop near 30 degrees. Writing the note took only a few minutes, but often a few minutes of explanation can turn ignorance into understanding.

Sometimes there's no way to persuade, and a superintendent just has to fight. When a green chairman balks or club members grumble, today's superintendent is much less likely to back down from something he really believes in. "I'll put it in writing," says Muirfield's Ed Etchells. "That's my request as far as I'm concerned. Then I'll go ahead and do it. Of course, it could go wrong."

It could go wrong. The fairways could be scalped into shock. The tees could be overrun, overnight, with brownpatch. The water could stop up in the creek and the concentration of algacide would kill 2,000 fish in the lake. There are so many variables—soil, disease, insects, labor and weather—that's there's really no way to make plans, because each day is a new entry. There's no way to catch every loose end.

But somehow, a golf course superintendent has to. "You've got one chance out here," Etchells says matter-of-factly. "You kill it and you're done. Maybe you've got a club that's receptive to brown grass and will go along with you because you're a nice guy. But they're few and far between. If you lose that golf course, you've probably lost your job."

That's the other side of the coin, the reality that underlies the public relations. That's why salesmanship alone is not

enough to make a successful superintendent; the expertise has to be there first. And the dedication that makes somebody like Ray Ellinger, at 62, work 18-hour days seven days a week.

Why would a man want to make it in this kind of life? The challenge, of course. Tomorrow is always a fresh day, never a carbon of yesterday. To make it a success, a superintendent will probably be challenged to improvise, to take the initiative and to use his own judgement.

But there are other reasons, that are deceptively simple. Love. Pride. "When people come up and tell you how nice the course looks, it kind of makes it all worthwhile," says Dave Harmon. "You just have that desire to see it nice," says Ray Ellinger, "and the better it is the harder you are going to work to keep it that way."

Richie Valentine: "We're working with a living, growing thing that can die on us at moment's notice."

Don Clemans "We see wildlife here that people of Columbus wouldn't believe we see. I know the flowers, the weeds, the trees. I know the bugs. I know the grass. I know what is under the grass. I don't see it as a job so much as a life. It is a way to spend a life. And it is interesting enough that they don't have to ask if I'm here; they know it."

There are no walls, either. As much as today's superintendent is a businessman, he is also a lover of sky and grass and earth. "You know," says Ed Etchells, "I used to work in a store selling shoes. I just couldn't stand it. Here, you get pressures—my God, there are times when you want to pull your hair out and go sit in a corner someplace—but instead you can go outside, out on the course. And that makes all the difference."

In that respect, they aren't such a different breed from superintendents of 10 and 20 years ago. But the average golfer doesn't know that; he only knows the superintendent by his shadow, never having met the man.

"Somehow we have got to educate the people," Don Clemans says earnestly. "Not to the point where they can run a golf course. But to the point that they begin to have faith in the people who do run it." □