



He Loves L.A.

Lifelong Chicagoan Bruce Williams

is now enjoying life on the Left Coast

BY DON DALE

Bruce Williams felt like a pro athlete. It's not every day that a superintendent gets to negotiate a contract and request a signing bonus.

But that's what Williams did before joining Los Angeles CC as its superintendent more than two years ago. Williams knew that the Los Angeles CC wanted him badly, so he played hard to get. "I was in the catbird seat."

Williams was the superintendent at Highland Park, Ill.'s Bob O'Link GC when the LACC came calling. It was a good gig that Williams held for 21 years. But when the LACC agreed to offer him a five-year contract and a signing bonus, Williams couldn't say no.

The LACC is only Williams' second career stop, which is unusual in the job-juggling world of superintendents. The 49-year-old CGCS has lived a golf-

saturated life that parallels that of his father, Bob. They were consecutive superintendents at Bob O'Link and both served terms as GCSAA president, the only father and son to do so.

Growing up on golf

Williams says that moving his family 2,000 miles across the country was one of the most difficult challenges he has ever faced. But he adds that superintendents must be willing to embrace change because their profession often presents it.

"Change is inevitable in the life of every golf course superintendent, but it's never easy," Williams adds.

Furthermore, change should be as good for the golf courses as it is for the people who come and go from them, Williams says. "It's difficult to admit sometimes, but both the course you leave and course you go to should benefit from the fresh perspectives of new superintendents."

Williams' career developed naturally from living near golf courses and associating with superintendents. His father took the job at Bob O'Link when Williams was in the fifth grade. As a boy, Williams worked as a caddy, clubhouse helper and general landscape laborer. One of his early role models was Hubby Habjan, the golf pro at Onwentsia GC in Lake Forest, Ill. Later, Williams' mentor was Ken Payne, Ph.D., a turf professor at Michigan State University.

"They had tremendous work ethics," Williams says of the two men. "They communicated and worked well with other people."

Though he grew up on golf, Williams was more interested in the liberal arts as a young man. His first degree was in English and speech pathology from Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio, and Williams says the training has come in handy.

"Good people skills make even an agronomist's job easier, especially when dealing with committees and governing boards," he says.

But after graduating from Baldwin-Wallace, Williams realized that his love for landscaping was more fervent than his love for the liberal arts. He enrolled in a two-year course in turfgrass science at Michigan State and received a certificate from its Institute of Agricultural Technology.

Alan Fierst, superintendent at the Oak Park CC in Rivergrove, Ill., met Williams at MSU and recalls that his friend was very focused.

"He kind of has his own set of requirements," Fierst says of Williams, who is known for his diligence.

Williams didn't have to look far for employment as a superintendent. He joined his father in 1977 as assistant superintendent at Bob O'Link. Working with

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your father or any other family member is a challenge, Williams admits, but he says the two worked well together.

Williams says his father taught him to apply attention to detail and calls his dad "the ultimate manager of people, property and projects."

Williams was promoted to superintendent at Bob O'Link when Bob retired in 1979. He became only the fourth superintendent in the club's history.

Bob, aware that his son is a perfectionist, says Bruce is a chip off the old block. "It's a birthright," Bob says, adding that Bruce's grandfather is the same way.

Movin' on

Bob O'Link was one of *Golf Digest's* top 100 courses in the nation under Williams, who was a fixture at the 18-hole club. But Williams admits that he and the governing board at Bob O'Link were taking one another for granted after 21 years together, and Williams felt stale.

And then LACC general manager Jim

Brewer called Williams with a job offer and a challenge. Brewer said the club was undertaking a massive greens renovation, and he wanted Williams to be a part of it. Williams was intrigued because he had never been involved in a construction project.

Williams realized that LACC was a rising star. If he took the job, Williams knew he would have to learn about new turf varieties, water quality issues, soil conditions and pests. But he viewed that as a positive.

Williams also liked the fact that the LACC has five times more membership and 18 more holes than Bob O'Link. Of course, the Southern California climate was appealing.

Williams wanted the job, but he wanted a contract. Although the LACC didn't offer contracts, it made an exception for Williams. "I told them that I didn't want to move my family 2,000 miles, buy a \$750,000 house and find out six months later they didn't like me," he says.

Williams made the stressful move to Los Angeles at the end of his demanding GCSAA presidency. But it was perfect timing, Williams

says, because he was operating at a high energy level and there was no time for a psychological letdown.

"All I could think about was getting the job done," Williams says, noting the greens construction, in addition to work on more than 60 bunkers and several tees. "I can't tell you why, but I like work at a high stress level."

Williams admits that he may "drive people nuts," but he says he gets along well with co-workers because he strives to be fair.

Williams says he's enjoying his job. He's receiving the backing and funding from management to get the job done his way.

And even the tenacious Williams enjoys the laid-back lifestyle of Southern California. But he's not ruling out another change, which is always possible in the turbulent industry golf course industry. "If change is imminent, I'll be ready for it." ■

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Keeping It Green

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Faubel, Steve Cadenelli, and, most notably, the Capitol Hill-savvy Bill Roberts. Thanks to their thoughtful and open approach, the agency began to understand that superintendents were among the best-educated and most responsible pesticide users.

By the early '90s, things were beginning to stabilize. We weren't losing ground anymore and a few brave souls in the media and at EPA were starting to talk about golf and the environment in positive terms.

It was then — just as we thought we might have dodged the environmental bullet — that we pulled out the big gun and shot ourselves squarely in the foot.

Mortally wounded

The now infamous 1994 GCSAA/University of Iowa Mortality Study was, in hindsight, a naive attempt to prove that if superintendents didn't suffer ill effects from regular pesticide exposure, golfers and the public should have nothing to worry about. (For the full saga of the study, visit golfdom.com.) It was a perfect example of "canary in the coal mine" logic.

That logic, of course, backfired when the results seemed to indicate that the canaries had died at higher rates of "pesticide-linked" cancers than the general public. Despite the disclaimers about what conclusions could be drawn from this type of epidemiological study, the press had a field day and the worst round of golf-bashing yet descended on the industry. Paul Harvey, *The Wall Street Journal*, CBS — even Ranger Rick — they all piled on.

But from disaster came action. GCSAA, under the new and dynamic leadership style of Steve Mona, ended the longstanding "arm's length" relationship with the chemical manufacturers and actually joined RISE. GCSAA also began to take an active leadership role on the issue among the Allied Associations in Golf. An informal committee of golf industry leaders began to communicate regularly about the issues. The industry came together to develop the "Environmental Principles."

In short, because of the Iowa Study, the industry galvanized to protect its image and its financial health. A shot in the foot turned out to be the shot in the arm that unified the golf community.

The green revolution

As the golfing public became more environmentally aware, developers sensed a new market. Today, it's hard to find a new facility that doesn't bill itself as "eco-friendly."

Superintendents, as we note in our cover story, discovered that environmentally responsible management was not only personally fulfilling, it was a great career move. All those eco-friendly courses need eco-superintendents, right?

Manufacturers discovered that superintendents were often willing to pay more for environmentally friendly products. Whole new markets for bio-controls and low-impact plant protectants emerged.

Don't get me wrong. It's not a perfect world and we still have a long way to go. But, looking back, when the green revolution hit golf, we rolled with the punch — and today, we are better off for it.

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