



Missing in Action:

Mechanics

Golf course equipment technicians are highly trained, highly educated and make a good buck. So how come they're scarce as honest politicians?

BY CURT HARLER

Calling all mechanics, calling all mechanics — calling ANY mechanics.

That call is being heard time and again in golf course maintenance shops as good mechanics become increasingly hard to find. While the shortage has driven up salaries and benefits for these positions, few students are venturing into the profession.

Mechanics suffer from perceptual problems among college students today. Prevailing images of Goober and Gomer from *The Andy Griffith Show* often leave students with the impression that mechanics are either uneducated or undereducated people who couldn't find jobs doing anything else.

Perception, of course, is not reality. Shazam! — golf course equipment mechanics today are highly trained, highly educated professionals who work with expensive, complicated equipment. They're not grease monkeys.

There are 10 to 15 job openings for each trained person, and golf course mechanics can make \$35,000 to \$40,000 a year on a flat-rate job, according to Tinker Clift, department chairman of the golf course and turfgrass management technology program at Texas State Technical College in Waco.

Graduates of Lake City Community College in Lake City, Fla., also won't find themselves out of work. Jon Piersol, chairman of the department of golf/landscape/forestry at the college, says his program receives 150 job offers for its 25 graduates each year. "There's a bidding war for good technicians," Piersol adds.

The shortage is dire enough that GCSAA has set up course outlines to help schools and local organizations start training programs for two- and four-year programs.

"Given the full-employment economy and the fact so many young people are going for computers, there is a crunch for this or any other trade," says Jeff Bollig, director of communications for GCSAA.

"Turf equipment managers in the golf industry are as scarce as hen's teeth," Clift says.

Dominic Morales, chairman of the golf/plant sciences department at Delhi College in Delhi, N.Y., says the biggest demand for mechanics is on golf courses where equipment must be maintained on the spot. Most golf courses have a large inventory of equipment and little outsourcing.

Recruiting employees

To combat the grease-monkey image, it's time for golf course superintendents, owners and general managers to take to the high schools to tell students what being a mechanic is *really* about, Piersol says.

"If you say the word 'mechanic,' the kids run in fear," Piersol says. "They have no real knowledge of the opportunity that's there."

Bollig agrees that the place to talk up the opportunity is in high schools. Bollig says GCSAA produced a curriculum that has been well-received by the schools that have implemented it. Right now, more than a dozen schools use GCSAA's outline as the basis for their mechanics programs.

But Bollig notes that golf courses compete with sports turf operations and lawn care companies for mechanics. Then there's the issue of pirating workers. While this merry-go-round is great for a mechanic's income, it's not good if you're a superintendent in search of a steady, reliable mechanic who's going to stick around for a few years.

Morales says many of Delhi's students come from the automotive industry, as well as the tractor and agricultural markets. They have solid skills but need training in specialty areas.

Delhi and Lake City Community College offer similar programs to students. Delhi's program, which turns three years old in the fall, will soon offer the Outdoor Power Equipment technician certification offered by the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute.

At Lake City, Piersol wishes he had more students to fill the 15,000-square foot facility. He suggests hiring high school students to work on golf courses and then offering them paid internships while they complete their technical programs. He says auto courses are a good place to look for workers, but the best way to get to a student interested in equipment maintenance is to talk to the teachers and guidance people at the high school — and to parents whenever possible.

A golf course that brings a couple of students in as part of a co-op program will have first pick of the better mechanics upon graduation. "In essence, you're handpicking your future," Piersol adds.

The Equipment and Engine Training Council Web site, located at www.eetc.org, is a good place to start reviewing qualifications. Virgil Russell, executive director of the EETC in Austin, Texas, also suggests getting involved with a local vocational/technical school. EETC has accredited 14 schools in its program and has 80 more pending.

John Kane, executive director of the Engine Service Association in Exton, Pa., says his group, which certifies mechanics, may start to post a list of qualified regional mechanics on its Web site (www.engineservice.com) to bring trained people and employers together. "We're just starting to see golf courses begin to go for certified workers," he adds.

What they should know

"In a small shop, the mechanic is a jack-of-all-trades," Morales says. "The larger the shop, the more likely the mechanic will be specialized."

"A technician should be trained in 2-stroke, 4-stroke and diesel engine systems," Russell notes.

A good golf course technician should also know electronics, another key area for equipment maintenance. Many

Continued on page 46

LOOKING FOR A PROFITABLE CAREER?

If your golf course is in the market for a good mechanic, be prepared to shell out some big dollars.

Even for recent graduates with a good school record, pay is high. "These jobs pay \$25,000 to \$40,000 to start," says Jon R. Piersol, chairman of the department of golf/landscape/forestry at Lake City Community College in Florida. "They have the potential to go to \$50,000 or \$70,000."

Other costs — like maintaining a parts inventory and the cost of space for the shop — need to be added to the mechanic's salary and benefits package.



TORO CO.

In the past, most certified technicians came from servicing dealers. Today, that group is filled with golf course workers and a smattering of landscapers, says John Kane of the Engine Service Association.

As mechanics become more expensive, high-end golf courses are in better shape to pay what the market will bear. For the smaller operation, sticking with the mechanics your dealer employs may be the best option available.

Continued from page 45

reel mowers are driven by computers, which adjust their speed for uphill, downhill and sidehill configuration. "You need a technician who can understand that technology and make it work in an environment that demands one-eighth inch cutting tolerances," Clift says.

Because equipment is more sophisticated, more mechanics are seeking additional training, says Mark Nelson, manager of product training at Textron Turf Care And Specialty Products in Racine, Wisc.

Textron offers a course in the fundamentals. While there are one-day schools offered at dealer sites, Nelson maintains it's best to go to the factory headquarters for the best hands-on learning experience. "Some equipment, like our hydraulic trainers, can't be transported," he notes.

The Toro Co. also began offering a training course to golf course mechanics last spring. The company recently brought its third group to its Bloomington, Minn., headquarters for the three-day course. Like most other dealer programs, Toro focuses on its own brand, but delves into general principles as well.

The advantage of going to dealer classes is in-depth education on a particular brand. Since most turf equipment works about the same, this information can be used on other machines. Cross-engine training is coming, too.

Managing skills

In today's market, technical expertise doesn't guarantee a good mechanic. For Piersol's money, the person should also train in management skills.

"Some people think all a mechanic needs to do is turn a wrench and fix stuff," he says. "But if your shop is a mess, it costs you money."

Piersol lists the ability to organize a shop, to stock the right spare parts, to do preventive maintenance, to read engine manuals and to perform other management functions as being just as valuable as mechanical ability.

"We tell students when they start that

Continued on page 48

"BIG BLUE BOOK"

is now updated daily on the Web.

Display and Print Full – Text Labels and MSDSs

FREE

24 Hours a Day — 7 Days a Week!

Annual Premium Service

Become an Annual Subscriber to our Premium Service for Only \$50/Year and Have Access to Our Complete Database:

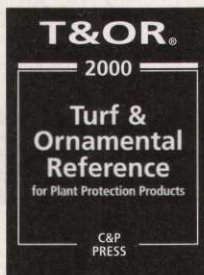
- Labels
- MSDSs
- DOT
- Mode of Action
- Supplemental Labels
- Worker Protection
- SARA Title III
- Multi-Search Index
- Label Tank Mixes



www.bluebooktor.com



Your official plant protection information source.



For Customer Service or Technical Support Call 1-800-544-7377.

Life

Enhancement by
PHOTOSYN™ and PROTESYN™

ORGANIC PHOTOSYNTHESIS SYNERGIZERS

- Complete Amino Acids
- Proteins
- Carbohydrates
- Metabolites
- Gram Positive Microbial Spores
- Catalytic Enzymes
- Vitamins
- Natural Surfactants

Immediate & Extended Plant Use

- ENERGY
- MATURE PROTEINS
- O₂ & CO₂ EVOLUTION
- AMINO ACID-PROTEIN SYNTHESIS
- NUTRIENT CYCLING
- PATHOGEN COMPETITION
- MOISTURE AVAILABILITY

FLORATINE

*Creative Solutions for
Turfgrass Management™*

144 Mid South Cove • Collierville, TN 38017
Phone 901-853-2898 • Fax 901-853-3101
email: techinfo@floratine.com



Mechanics

Insourcing or Outsourcing?

Virgil Russell, executive director of the Equipment and Engine Training Council in Austin, Texas, says there's no hard-and-fast economic rule when changing from a dealer to in-house service.

"If you're using a dealer and getting good service, stay with the dealer," he says. "If service is lousy, then look into going with your own technician." In either case, he says, it is a good idea to make sure the worker has an Outdoor Power Equipment technician certification.

When figuring the cost of repair service, be sure to include equipment downtime, says Jon Piersol, chairman of the department of golf/landscape/forestry of Lake City Community College in Lake City, Fla. If a course is keeping an extra greens mower around just to use when others are in the shop, that's a cost.

Dominic Morales, chairman of the golf/plant sciences department at Delhi College in Delhi, N.Y., notes that leasing equipment — doing preventive maintenance in-house, but sending equipment back for major work — is another option.

Continued from page 46

wrench-turners go for \$7.50 or \$8.50 an hour. Students who have good management skills make \$12 to \$16 an hour," Piersol says.

Perhaps the most valuable certification is the OPE, the industry's equivalent of the Automotive Service Association certification for car mechanics.

Specialty accreditation will become more common as companies like Kohler make certification a requirement for working on its engines. Some equipment companies offer training as part of their sales package. Much of the impetus for OPE came from manufacturers concerned that there would be no trained mechanics to do warranty work on their equipment.

The bottom line: It's vital for mechanics to continually upgrade their skills: "Otherwise, you'll be left in the dust, Clift notes. ■

Curt Harler is a freelance writer from Cleveland.