Inherited Assistants and Lessons Learned

I was a cocky, young superintendent and newly minted with my first course — Hacienda GC in Southern California. The course, built in 1923, had seen its economic ups and downs. Changes were made over the years — not all for the better — and some of the greens were still original.

My inherited assistant, Paul, had been on the course for more than 20 years and had worked for a number of superintendents. He watched the course decline over the years and had seen greens die, some more than once.

While my predecessor had initiated some needed improvements with the green committee's support, and I talked to the crew about doing more upgrades, Paul remained politely skeptical that anything permanent would result.

I took the job in the winter, and I felt fairly confident by the summer that some needed changes in the way the crew did things had been accomplished, even to the extent of getting Paul onboard. We interseeded the old poa greens with bentgrass at 1/4 a pound per thousand per week, and I saw positive results. We aerified and topdressed four times (which really impressed Paul), had trained the crew in how to hand water correctly and were on a solid preventive fungicide program. In short, things were going great.

Members were telling us the greens hadn't been this good in years. It was the usual, inevitably temporary euphoria and good feelings experienced by old-time members when a new superintendent arrives and makes visible changes of which they approve.

As was my preference, Paul and I alternated weekends on a 12-on/two-off schedule. My kids were young at the time, and I valued spending quality time with them every other weekend. One Monday in mid-August, I came in before starting time after my weekend off. It hadn't been too hot, and I had stayed in the office to process some invoices. About 7:30 a.m., Paul came in and said, "Well, I guess you'd better order some redtop." I looked up from the invoices, irritated at both the interruption and the suggestion that redtop (*Agrostis alba* for you youngsters) was something we might want to use for some reason, and asked, "Why on earth would we want to order redtop?"

"Because No. 12 is gone," Paul said.

"What do you mean No. 12 is gone?" I answered. "It was fine on Friday night."

"It's dead now."

"How could it die?"

"Well, go look at it."

"I will. But if it's dead, what the hell did you do to it? Forget to water?"

"No, I watered it. It looked a little bad Saturday, so I gave it some extra, and then it looked a little worse yesterday, so I gave it some more."

"And now it's dead?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"It was your weekend off, and anyway that green dies every year."

Paul was right. The green was dead. He knew it would die, and he didn't believe I could save it. The green died every year, no matter who was superintendent.

This is the problem with inherited assistants. They may pay you lip service, but they "know" inside how things turn out — like they usually do in the past. Because Paul had embraced my changes, I was surprised to discover he "knew" I couldn't save that green. But he was right. I couldn't have saved that green in those days, knowing what I knew then. Still, I wish he'd given me the chance.

It was many years after that and at a different club before I took an entire weekend off during the summer. Paul and I continued to work 12/2 as long as I was at Hacienda, but I always came in on my weekend off, during the hot months from May through September, just to check. I never trusted him again.

Editor's Note: Mike Heacock, former vice president of agronomy and maintenance for American Golf Corp., fields your questions in his bi-monthly column. You can reach Heacock at: mike.heacock@verizon.net or 310-849-5011.

October In *Turfgrass Trends:*

BRING ON THE BACTERIA: Researchers from the University of Florida's Fort Lauderdale Research & Education Center, Auburn University and Clemson University evaluated the microbial diversity of creeping bentgrass greens. The project examined the significance of nitrogen rate and root-zone mix on root weight and selected rhizosphere bacterial populations from bentgrass.

SPRAY DRIFT: Erdal Ozkan of The Ohio State University discusses spray drift retardants — what works, what rates work best and which are cost-effective.

ACCIDENT PREVENTION: Editor Curt Harler discusses how good training programs help your employees deal with accidents. He describes an example he experienced this summer.

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