

What's the Future Hold?

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR., MANAGING EDITOR

Jan Toth has worked at the Lakeview course at the Scanticon Golf Resort in Morgantown, W.Va., for 17 years. The 43-year-old is entering his fifth season as an assistant to superintendent Don Dodson, who Toth says has taught him plenty. In his time away from the course, however, Toth dreams of doing something more ambitious.

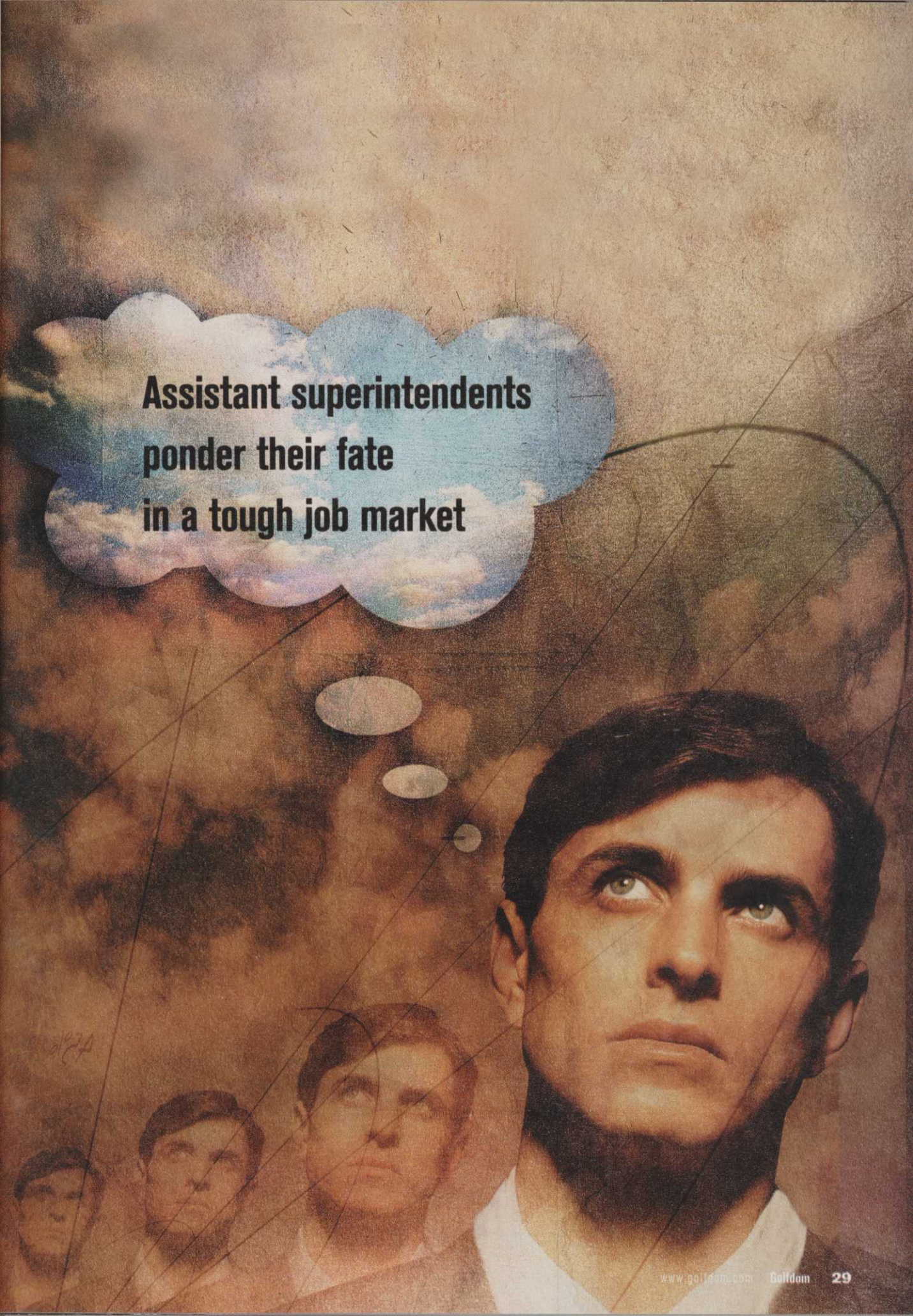
"Someday, I'd like to [be the superintendent of] my own course," Toth says. "I'm in no hurry. I've been turned down for some opportunities over the past couple of years, so I'm a little frustrated. Fortunately, I'm patient."

Toth's declaration echoes the refrain from assistants who feel they're ready to take charge of their own courses. Their confidence in their own abilities, however, isn't enough to propel them to superintendent posts. They must carefully prepare themselves by showing patience, networking with their peers, taking calculated risks and studying the job market. That way, when opportunity knocks, they'll be ready to answer the door.

Forgo false time frames

Assistant superintendents often set themselves up for disappointment by creating a false urgency about ascending to their

Continued on page 30



**Assistant superintendents
ponder their fate
in a tough job market**

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MONTY DAVIS

Jaron Gerber, an assistant at Rolling Hills CC in Wichita, Kan., warns his colleagues against setting arbitrary deadlines about landing superintendent jobs.

Definitely Not *Stuck* As An Assistant

Donny Liston, 54, never bemoans the fact that he's been an assistant superintendent at the Lakeview course at the Scanticon Golf Resort in Morgantown, W. Va., for 10 years. In fact, he revels in the stability he has experienced in an industry where switching jobs frequently is the rule rather than the exception.

"I'm a hard-working guy who likes working with my hands," Liston says. "There's a lot of pressure on the superintendent on a daily basis, dealing with the corporate people and stuff. I don't want to do that."

Liston has worked at Lakeview since 1971, when he started as a mechanic. He's worked for three superintendents during his 31-year stint. He says he's learned from all of them, including current superintendent Don Dodson.

Continued from page 28

first superintendent jobs. Ron Furlong, superintendent at Avalon GC in Burlington, Wash., understands the frustration a specific time frame can bring. He joined Everett Golf & CC in Mukilteo, Wash., with a plan to work there three years before earning a top spot at a private club. Instead, he ended up working there for four years before landing a head job earlier this year.

During those four years, Furlong estimates he sent out 40 to 50 résumés with no results. He usually received either no response or a "Dear Ron" letter rejecting his application.

"It got to the point where my wife, Nikki, started opening those letters for me because it was so depressing," Furlong says. "She would play Peter Gabriel's song, *Don't Give Up*, to buoy my spirits."

Furlong says his most important advice for assistants is not to let despair overwhelm them. "If you keep working hard, your chance will eventually come," he says.

The waiting is easier if you haven't set a time limit, says Jaron Gerber, a three-year assistant at Rolling Hills CC in Wichita, Kan. Gerber says he'd like to run his own course someday, but he's willing to pay his dues.

"It's a competitive market, so when a job opens that you really want, you have to go after it aggressively," Gerber says. "In the meantime,

Continued on page 32

"If you pay attention, you can learn how to do almost anything on the golf course, without the hassles of having to deal with golfer expectations directly," Liston says. "It's perfectly fine with me to have others have to deal with those headaches."

His favorite part of being an assistant is taking the crew out and doing whatever Dodson asks of them. He loves the feeling of accomplishment when a job is done, as well as the pleasant exhaustion that comes with physical labor.

"I imagine I'll retire from this business as an assistant, but I'll have no regrets," Liston says. "This industry has been good to me for a long time, and I'm happy with the job I'm doing right now. This is where I plan to end my career."

— Frank H. Andorka Jr., Managing Editor

Continued from page 30

you have to work hard and absorb as much knowledge in your current job as possible.”

Gerber says he enjoys what he's doing now.

“I haven't set a definite schedule about when I expect to become a superintendent,” he says. “I'm planning to stay here for a while. I'm not going to set myself up for failure by putting pressure on myself to leave by a certain date. When the right job comes along, I'll know it.”

Work on building bridges

“The first question I ask when assistants call me for career advice is, ‘How is your relationship with your superintendent?’” says Kim Heck, the GCSAA's director of career development. “More often than not, the response is, ‘It's not as good as I'd like it to be.’”

Heck says your superintendent should be your biggest booster because most superintendents want to see their assistants succeed.

Continued on page 34



“If you keep working hard, your chance will eventually come.”

RON FURLONG, SUPERINTENDENT
AVALON GC, BURLINGTON, WASH.

The Making of a Mentor

While it's incumbent on assistants to build good relationships with their superintendents, it helps if the boss is open to the idea of mentoring his protégés to prepare them for their first superintendent's positions.

Doug Petersan, superintendent at Austin GC in Spicewood, Texas, knows a fair bit about mentoring assistants. Though he's lost track of the number of assistants who've moved on to be successful superintendents (see related story in “Off the Fringe,” pg. 16), he's worked on his mentoring skills for a long time.

“One of the first people I mentored is now retired,” Petersan says, chuckling. “I've either been at this a long time [38 years, to be exact] or I'm just old.”

Petersan says he learned the overarching philosophy of mentoring from his mother, who was a schoolteacher. While Petersan wants to teach the assistants everything he knows, he also wants them to learn how to solve problems on their own. Otherwise, they'll never be able to adapt, and adaptability is a necessary attribute in the profession, he adds.

Jeff Hill, superintendent at Pinehurst No. 8 in Pinehurst, N.C., knows a little about mentoring as well. In fact, the Turfgrass Council of North Carolina recently presented Hill its Eagle Award, which goes each year to a person who displays remarkable mentoring abilities. One of his former assistants nominated him.

“The key to being a good mentor is to give assistants the ability to learn and turn them loose,” Hill says. “They come out of school with a lot of knowledge, but not a lot of experience with things like weather.

“As a superintendent, it's important that you give them as much experience as possible,” he adds. “You should also teach them how to listen by paying close attention to their ideas. Don't be quick to dismiss their management concepts. My assistants often come up with great ideas to manage the course even better.”

Hill also urges his assistants to interact with golfers as much as possible. Good communication skills will help them in future jobs, but they don't necessarily learn them in school, he says. “If they can't communicate the problems they're having on the course to golfers, how will golfers know what they're going through?” Hill says.

Petersan and Hill both agree their success as mentors has much to do with the people who work for them. After all, superintendents can't teach people who refuse to learn, Petersan says.

“You have to be selective about the people you hire,” Petersan says. “The assistants I've had the pleasure of working with have all wanted to educate themselves as much as possible about the job.”

Finally, Petersan says superintendents must communicate their enthusiasm for the job to their assistants, since it's hard for many young people to consider being a superintendent as a lifetime profession.

“If you can't let them know why you love your job, it'll be hard for them to be enthusiastic about it,” Petersan says. “I still enjoy getting up every morning and coming into work, and I believe my assistants can sense that. I hope it's infectious.”

—F.H.A. Jr.



“Remember, you don’t know everything. Treat every day as a learning experience.”

KEVIN TEMPLIN, ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT
ANNBRIAR GC, WATERLOO, ILL.

Continued from page 32

Therefore, keeping the lines of communication open between the two of you is crucial, she adds.

“If you block out the advice superintendents are trying to give you, you’re asking for disaster,” says Kevin Templin, assistant superintendent at Annbriar GC in Waterloo,

Ill. “They can teach you all you want in the books, but there’s a whole set of skills you can’t learn in school. That’s what you pick up from your boss.”

Templin urges his fellow assistants to have an open mind about their superintendent’s management strategies.

“Remember, you don’t know it all,” Templin says. “Treat everything like a learning experience.”

Heck says assistants should involve themselves in local associations to network with other superintendents and assistants. National shows are the perfect place to make the contacts that will help them find future positions, she says.

“You have to create a network outside of your facility and region,” Heck says. “You never know where your ideal job will turn up.”

Gerber says he regularly attends local association meetings and talks to other superintendents about the skills they expect in an ideal candidate for a top job. That’s the most effective way of making an accurate self-assessment about where you stand in your career, he adds.

“It allows me to see how I’m progressing,” Gerber says. “It also lets me know what other courses are looking for in a superintendent.”

Live on the edge

Gerber says it’s important for assistants to handle pressure-packed situations like presenting reports to green committees. Nothing, however, could have prepared Gerber for *his* first committee presentation.

The Skills You Need to Get Ahead

Jerry Faubel, certified superintendent of Saginaw CC in Saginaw, Mich., and co-founder of Executive Golf Search, a golf course maintenance employment firm, says you must acquire the following skills as an assistant if you want to manage your own course someday:

- Put yourself in a position to manage people.

Courses in the market for superintendents are going to want proof that you can lead a team.

- Ask your current superintendent to include you in the budgeting process. Accounting skills will make you more attractive, especially in these tight economic times.

- Stay up on the latest agronomic issues. Attend educational seminars at every opportunity so you can demonstrate the most up-to-date knowledge of your chosen profession.

- Demonstrate an ability to adapt to a rapidly changing situation. Be a leader when conditions change at your course and be flexible.

- Develop a positive attitude about your profession. Your demeanor on the course can either get you labeled as a can-do operator or a listless slacker. That information will always make its way to a prospective employer.

— F.H.A. Jr.

Web Resources for Job Hunters

The following Web sites will help in your search for a superintendent's position (all sites start with <http://www>):

- Golfcoursejob.com
- Getajob.com
- Turfnet.com
- Greenindustryjobs.com
- Golfsurfin.com
- Greenmatchmaker.com
- Golffutures.com

Gerber expected to make a joint presentation to the green committee with superintendent Wayne Van Arendonk on the importance of improving hourly wages at the course. Urgent business called Van Arendonk away shortly after the meeting started, however, so Gerber had to convince the board of the proposal's merits on his own.

"My first thought was, 'Oh, great,'" Gerber says. "Since Wayne had allowed me to help him prepare the report, however, I knew the information almost as well as he did. Thanks to his confidence in my abilities, I made the presentation without much trouble."

Gerber must have done something right because the committee accepted his and Van Arendonk's recommendations. Gerber also learned a valuable lesson: Don't be afraid to take on new challenges.

Jerry Faubel, longtime certified superintendent at Saginaw CC in Saginaw, Mich., and co-founder of Executive Golf Search, a golf course management employment agency, says assistants must take "calculated risks." Otherwise, future employers may consider them too cautious to manage entire courses.

"You're not always going to succeed when you try something new, but you'll always learn valuable lessons, even in failure," Faubel says. "If you're going to succeed over the long haul in this industry, you must always try to be innovative."

Consider the market

Even if you feel you have the skills to tend your own course, there's one factor you can't control. No matter how prepared you are, the market may not have jobs waiting for you.

"We're not seeing the amount of job postings that we've seen in previous years," GCSSA's Heck says. "With the

economy in a downturn, there aren't as many top jobs, particularly in certain areas of the country."

That means assistants who want to be superintendents may have to consider jobs from across the country instead of the regions in which they're most comfortable. Al Turgeon, professor of turf-

Continued on page 36

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What's the Future Hold?

Continued from page 35

grass management at Penn State University and member of GCSAA's faculty resource group, says assistants often focus too closely on particular regions.

"The job market is going to go up and down, and there's no predicting where it will be when you're looking for that perfect job," Turgeon says. "You have to be flexible about where you want to work."

Regardless of the job market, however, Gerber says patience is probably the most important virtue an assistant can possess.

"Don't be in such a rush to get that head job," Gerber says. "In the meantime, learn as much as you can, be innovative and have fun. Those are the keys to landing superintendent jobs." ■

You can reach Frank Andorka, the author of this story, at fandorka@advanstar.com

GCSAA Resources

Kim Heck, GCSAA director of career development, says the association offers the following resources for assistants looking to move up:

- **Career counseling.** Heck says that she and her two assistants, John Wake and Lyne Tumlinson, split phone calls and are willing to answer any questions assistants might have. They can be reached at 800-472-7878.
- **Employment Referral Service.** This job-listing section on the GCSAA's Web site (www.gcsaa.org) allows assistants to view job postings. Heck recommends that assistants check the site often to see what qualifications are necessary for the latest job postings so they can update their skills. The subscription cost for the service is \$15 per year.
- **Résumé critiques.** If you send your résumé to the GCSAA, staff experts will examine it and give you helpful hints about how to make it stronger.
- **Tips booklets.** The subject of these pamphlets range from how to get your foot in the door at a course to how to be an effective interviewer.
- **Salary guides.** Check out where you stand financially with this handy online report.

— F.H.A. Jr.



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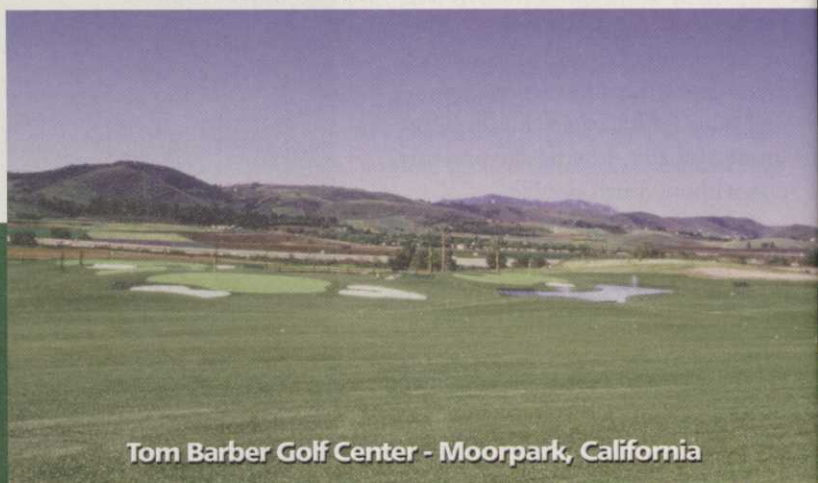
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