

Over the



Roger Smith felt comfortable in his job at Ridgefields CC in Kingsport, Tenn. The 52-year-old certified superintendent worked there for 30 years and kept his club in what he thought was excellent condition. Smith had established a good rapport with the owners and thought he'd retire from the course.

In retrospect, Smith says he should have recognized the signs of his impending departure, which occurred in March when he was fired. His friends on the original board of directors left the club or retired, and younger members with unreasonable expectations (in no small part thanks to TV and the Stimp-meter, Smith says) joined the board.

"It started to wear on me mentally about three years ago," Smith says. "I could feel the sense of loyalty waning, and I found myself scrambling more and more to meet the demands of the new board. My biggest mistake was trying to please everyone all the time.

When they decided to let me go, it was almost a relief."

Smith's story is not unusual for superintendents over 50 in a profession that increasingly values youth over experience. After working at the same club for decades, superintendents often fall victim to many of the "old superintendent" myths. Club personnel may perceive their experience as arrogance. Their salaries may rankle some board members, who feel they can hire a newly minted turf graduate at half the price and half the age. Their opposition to green chairmen's whims may strike some as sheer stubbornness.



Old. Overpaid. Arrogant. Stubborn.

Over-50 superintendents say it's time to bust these myths and prove they can still contribute to the profession

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR., MANAGING EDITOR

All these perceptions may doom over-50 superintendents.

The reality facing older superintendents is far more complex than the myths. Sure, some superintendents fall victim to complacency, but far more work hard to stay on top of industry developments to remain competitive in today's tight job market. In fact, such work is a necessity, given how hard it is to find a new job after 50.

There's no doubt the profession can take a toll. Some older superintendents tire of the hours, workload and political headaches, and they change careers. Those who stick it out until they retire say it's important to map out their futures so they're not left wondering what their lives will be like once they stop being superintendents.

But it's clear that the 50-year milestone doesn't necessarily spell the end of superin-

tendents' careers. Older superintendents still have a lot to offer their younger colleagues before they move on, especially if they approach their changing roles with enthusiasm. Fortunately for the future of the profession, most are willing to accept their evolving roles as mentors and look forward to giving back to the industry they love.

Younger all the time

There's no denying that superintendents, as a group, are young. Figures from the GCSAA's 2000 Compensation and Benefits Report show that only 2,612 out of 16,713 active members are over 50, around 15 percent. Only 2 percent are over 60. That means 85 percent of superintendents are age 49 and younger, while the median age of active members is 41. Though there's no research on why superin-

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FENWAY GC
SCARSDALE, N.Y.

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tendents choose to leave the profession as they get older, the numbers prove the profession takes its toll as superintendents age.

Abe Hughes, superintendent at Coronado GC in Chandler, Ariz., says he's noticed a trend for golf courses in his area to hire younger superintendents rather than experienced hands. The outspoken 65-year-old Hughes has been disgusted by the attitudes of the younger superintendents he has encountered at recent association chapter meetings, where he sees only eight to 10 colleagues remaining from his generation. It's almost like they're invisible to the younger guys, he says.

“You're sitting in a room with guys half your age, and you're completely ignored,” Hughes says. “They act like they know everything, and you don't know anything. Who do they think trained a lot of them?”

Hughes says he blames the GCSAA for part of the problem because it emphasizes four-year degrees instead of experience.

“I recently received my 25-year membership

pin from the association,” Hughes says. “You need a magnifying glass to see it. That's an indication to me that older superintendents aren't much on the mind of GCSAA's leadership.”

Though Hughes' strong opinions don't necessarily reflect all superintendents over 50, he does represent a number of superintendents who feel the association abandons them as they approach retirement. It may seem that way to someone who only scans the educational program list because the GCSAA doesn't mold its educational programs based on age, focusing instead on superintendent classifications, says Kim Heck, GCSAA's director of career development.

The GCSAA doesn't ignore its elder statesmen, however, Heck says. The association offers some educational programs at every annual conference specifically for superintendents over 50. At each of the last three conferences, for example, at least one seminar was dedicated to career-path planning, whether the superintendent wants to stay in the profession or move into other green industry careers, Heck

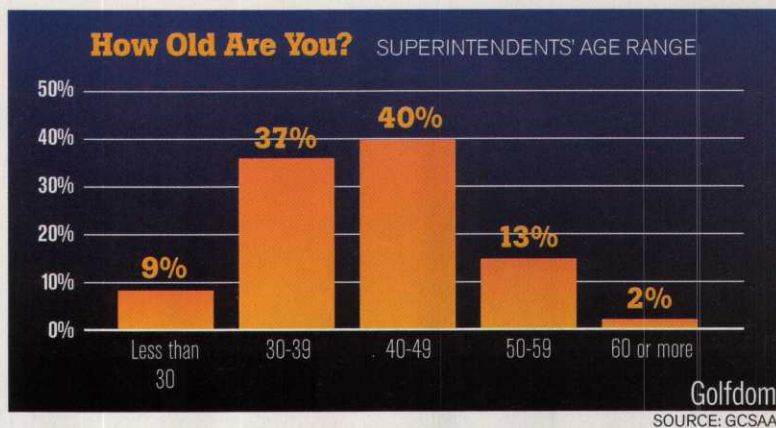
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says. GCSAA also offers seminars on financial planning and retirement. "We view ourselves largely as a clearinghouse for information for older superintendents, whatever their interests may be," Heck says.

Warding off complacency

If they want to stay in the business, the worst thing older superintendents can do is succumb to complacency, say Bob and Joe Alonzi, 50-something brothers who care for courses in New York. It's easy to do, particularly when a superintendent has worked at the same club for several decades. Superintendents can become stuck in their ways and resist change.

But the 59-year-old Bob says older superintendents must remember they're competing against kids right out of college, fresh with the latest theories and technologies to care for courses. If older superintendents can't show their owners that their knowledge is current and comparable, they may find themselves being shown the door. Once that door slams shut on older superintendents, it's hard to



pry it back open to get other jobs.

"You have to stay abreast of the latest developments to prevent yourself from becoming outdated," says Bob, certified superintendent of Fenway GC in Scarsdale, N.Y., and a 35-year industry veteran. "It's a more competitive industry than when I first got involved, and you have to stay current if you're going to survive."

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HEY LOOK, A PERFECT WORLD.

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Bob (left) and Joe Alonzi say they've survived as superintendents into their 50s in part because they've been able to support each other through the rough times that come with older age in the profession.

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Fifty-three-year-old Joe, certified superintendent of Westchester CC in Rye, N.Y., says older superintendents must recognize when they tire of learning about new developments or engaging in political battles at their clubs. When the job ceases to be fun, it's time to leave, he adds. It's always better to leave a job on your own terms rather than be forced out.

"I've talked to a lot of older superintendents who feel they've learned everything about the industry and aren't willing to change with the times," Joe Alonzi says. "It's those guys who eventually find themselves out of jobs."

Five Alternative Professions After 50

Several GCSAA committees looked at a list of careers superintendents could consider if they decide to leave the profession. The top five are:

- general management;
- design and construction of golf courses;
- golf course ownership;
- sales/consulting in the green industry; and
- research or teaching in the field of turfgrass management.

SOURCE: GCSAA
Golfdom

Changing careers

If superintendents grow weary of daily battles with Mother Nature, golfers and boards of directors, maybe it's time to consider moving into other professions (*see sidebar left*). Heck says she doesn't field many calls from older superintendents asking for advice about how to stay in the profession. On the contrary, most of her calls come from superintendents looking to get out.

"The majority of calls I get are about career counseling as older superintendents look to get out of the business," Heck says. "As they get older, superintendents start thinking about their futures, and they have to make a choice about whether they want to stay in golf course maintenance. Many do not."

Smith and Hughes both say they're ready to leave the profession, although they'd like to stay in the green industry. Hughes already has a consulting firm. Smith is still considering his options, which may include starting his own landscaping business.

"My wife has begged me not to go back to being a superintendent," Smith says. "[Since I left the profession], my blood pressure is down, my weight's down and I'm more relaxed than

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I've been in a long time. She says I'm like a different person. I'm looking at what I can do other than be a superintendent. In the long run, I think it will be better for me."

Not all superintendents are looking to leave the profession, however. Fifty-one-year-old Walt Owsiany, superintendent at The Vineyards in Naples, Fla., says he plans to stay active in golf course maintenance and can't imagine doing anything else.

"I still love getting up in the morning and coming to work," Owsiany says. "There aren't many other careers where you can see the fruits of your labor as soon as you're finished. I feel blessed to be in this business, and I plan to stick with it."

Retirement? What's that?

Eventually, however, even superintendents who love their work reach a point where they can't do it anymore. When they reach that stage in their careers, they often face uncertainty about how they will support themselves when they retire.

Owsiany says he started his own individual retirement account in 1978 so he could retire modestly, but interest rates fell precipitously. What little money he did manage to squirrel away hasn't grown as he'd hoped it would. He hasn't even saved \$200,000.

"Most people in this business try not to think about the inevitable time when they'll have to stop working, but they should,"

Owsiany says. "I'd love to see more clubs offer retirement plans for their superintendents, the way they do for the professionals."

Jim Fitzroy, certified superintendent at President GC in North Quincy, Mass., realizes how lucky he is. As a 54-year-old county employee, he has a pension plan that will allow him to retire in eight years at 80 percent of his salary.

"I was recently considered for another job that would have paid me a higher salary," Fitzroy says. "I turned it down because my accountant and I determined the retirement benefits here were so much better. I have such a wonderful employer that I know I will retire secure."

For nongovernmental courses, however, security isn't always available. Only 42 percent of clubs offer pension or retirement plans to superintendents, according to the GCSAA. Fitzroy says he hears the complaint often from older superintendents that their clubs don't help them with retirement.

Coronado's Hughes says he believes the GCSAA should be involved more in creating retirement plans for superintendents.

"We're paying a huge amount of dues," Hughes says. "You'd think [the GCSAA] would be able to come up with something better to help us with retirement in the last 25 years [since he's been a member], but it hasn't."

The GCSAA insists it has tried. The association created a cooperative program with the PGA and Club Managers Association of America, called Golf Retirement Plus, in 1999 (*see sidebar left*). But the program, which allows clubs and superintendents to create cooperative retirement accounts, hasn't captured the imaginations of superintendents, according to Chuck Borman, GCSAA's chief operating officer.

"We currently have 56 members in the plan," Borman says. "We've tried marketing it every way we can, but our members don't seem interested."

Borman says the plan is currently being re-evaluated because of a lack of participation.

"At some point, you have to ask yourself whether the program is serving the needs of your members," Borman says. "It's obvious we're not doing that, so we're reassessing what we're doing."

In his experience, superintendents don't rec-

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Reaching Retirement

The GCSAA, the PGA and the Club Managers Association of America teamed in 1999 to create Golf Retirement Plus, a program designed to help clubs offer pros, managers and superintendents retirement plans.

Under the program, employees and employers make contributions to an individual account through a Golf Retirement Plus representative, who manages it based on assessments of individual needs. The accounts are managed by Topeka, Kan.-based Security Benefit Life Insurance Co.

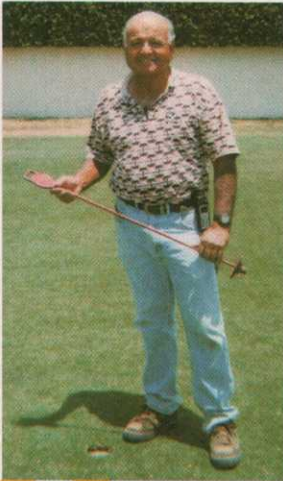
The advantages provided by the plan include:

- deferred tax payments;
- portability (meaning that you won't lose your benefits if you change jobs);
- ease of transfer of money into the program from other funds;
- guaranteed death benefits; and
- guaranteed income options upon retirement.

SOURCE: GCSAA

Golfdom

Over the Hill



“WE DON'T WANT TO GIVE UP THE INDEPENDENCE OF WORK UNTIL WE'RE FORCED OUT!”

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ognize the reality of retirement until they're over 50, Borman says. Then it's almost too late to start saving.

“We do our best to talk to them about the challenges they're going to face if they don't plan for their retirement,” Borman says. “I don't think superintendents are anymore unprepared than other segments of society, however. The United States is not a nation of savers.”

Borman says superintendents should start saving as early as possible, whether they use the GCSAA plan or start their own investment accounts. The one thing they shouldn't do is wait until the last minute.

That's not an easy thing for superintendents to learn, particularly since they're often active people who feel they'll never slow down, Hughes says.

“We don't want to give up the independence of work until we're forced out,” Hughes says. “I've personally known six or seven superintendents who were so afraid of retirement they actually stayed on the job until they died of heart attacks or suffered some other major health setback. It's tragic, but it happens.”

Happy ending depends on attitude

It doesn't have to end that way, however, if older superintendents accept their changing roles when they reach 50 and older. Owsiany, for one, relishes giving back to younger superin-

tendents through his local chapter.

“We do what we do out of love, and we can communicate that sense of devotion to the younger guys,” Owsiany says. “It's my job now, as my career winds down, to teach the younger kids all the stuff I learned over my career. It's my way of giving back to the industry that's given so much to me.”

Owsiany says he spends more time behind a desk than he'd like, but he appreciates the lighter schedule as he's grown older.

“I admit there are times you want to jump in and help with the heavy lifting part of the job because you're convinced no one can do it as fast or as well as you can,” Owsiany says. “That's when you have to step back and remind yourself you're not a kid anymore. It's your job to nurture the new guys.”

Some superintendents feel that sitting behind desks and supervising their crews makes them less important, Fitzroy says. That's foolish.

“If the superintendent is doing his job properly, I'm not sure he should be doing manual labor after 50,” Fitzroy says. “There's plenty to do in planning, supervision, paperwork and training the next generation. If a superintendent is over 50 and is still riding a mower, there's something wrong.”

Besides, getting older affords over-50 superintendents opportunities to change some attitudes they don't like in younger superintendents, Bob Alonzi says.

“Younger guys don't have as much exposure to the rigors of golf course maintenance,” Alonzi says. “We can teach them things about life as a superintendent that they'll never get in school — like how to deal with the politics and the importance of communication. We're not over the hill at all. We're valuable resources that can perpetuate the best this profession has to offer.

“I've had as great a career as I could have expected,” Alonzi continues. “It was because I met and listened to older superintendents when I first entered the industry. That's the role I want to play now, as a tribute to the people who mentored me.” ■

The 50-Year Milestone

Since you receive your first American Association of Retired People (AARP) mailing at 50, here are some statistics the organization has compiled about the worldwide population of older adults:

- By 2050, one in five people worldwide will be over 60.
- In every region except sub-Saharan Africa, the rate of population increase among the over-65s is higher than that for the under-14s. Even in sub-Saharan Africa, the number of older people is growing faster than the number of children.
- About 3.7 million older Americans were in the labor force (working or actively seeking work) in 1998, including 2.2 million men and 1.6 million women. They constituted 2.8 percent of the U.S. labor force.
- Limitations on activity because of chronic health conditions increase with age. In 1996, more than one-third (36.3 percent) of older persons reported they were limited by chronic conditions. Among all elderly, 10.5 percent were unable to carry on a major activity, such as working or exercise.

Golfdom

**Have you ever considered changing to a career in the lawn care industry?
See page 37.**