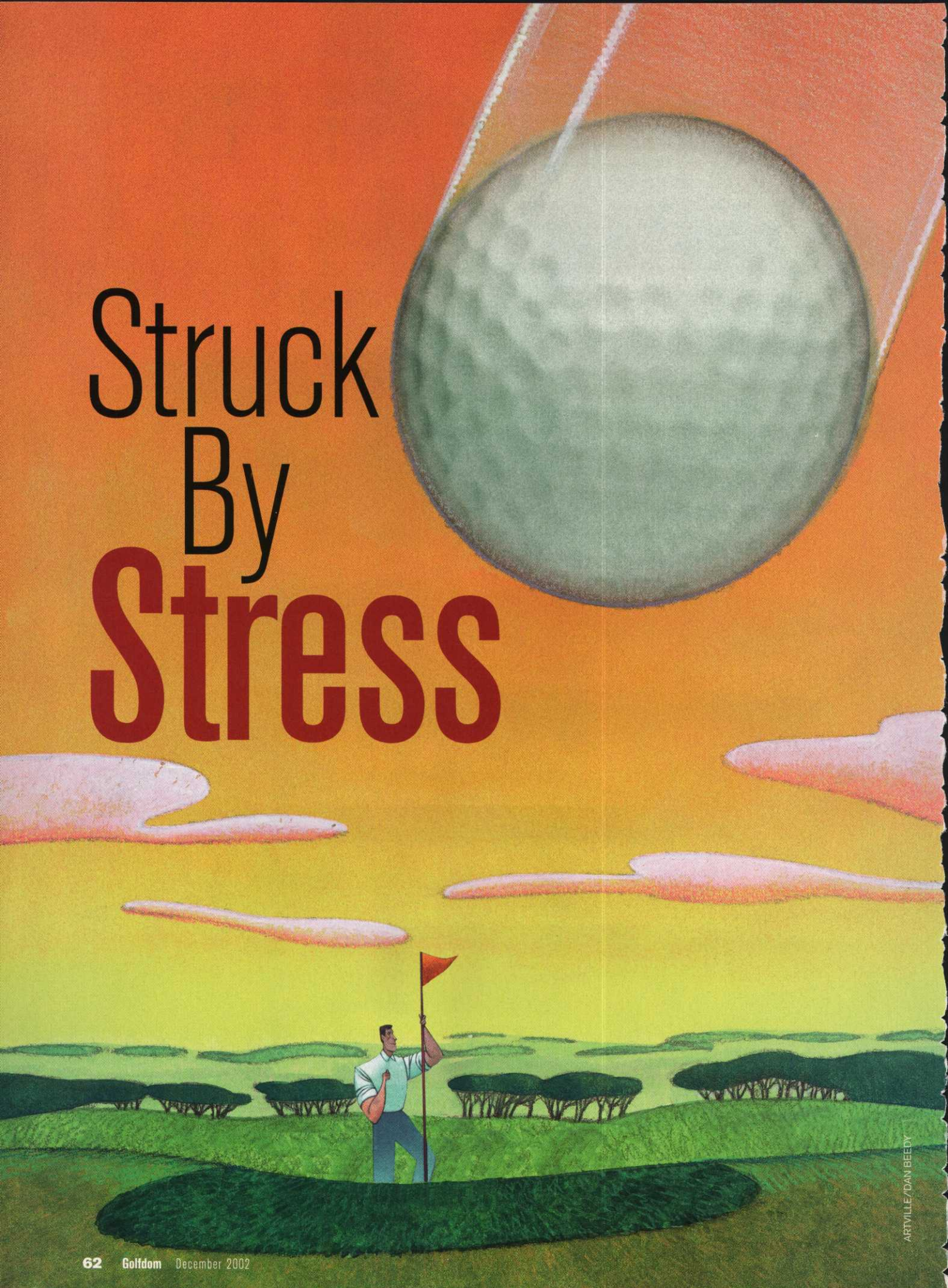


Struck By Stress



Here are some gems of wisdom to help you deal with the tension and angst that come with the territory of tending turf

BY RON FURLONG

You know you're suffering from a high level of stress when you're asked to write an article on stress and you can't seem to get going because you're too stressed. It's kind of a Catch-22 of physiological proportions. But stress, for superintendents, comes with the territory. It's as accepted as a strain of brown patch on the greens. The problem is, there is no fungicide (as of yet) labeled for stress.

Stress, more often than not, is thought of more as a mild inconvenience than anything else. Hardly ever, until it's too late, is stress taken seriously. But the fact is stress can be as serious as any disease that attacks the body.

The American Institute of Stress (there is an American Institute for just about everything) says:

"Stress is an avoidable consequence of life. As ('The Stress Doctor') Hans Selye noted, 'Without stress there would be no life.' However, just as distress can cause disease, it seems plausible that there are good stresses that promote wellness. Stress is not always necessarily harmful. Winning a race can be just as stressful as losing (or more so), but may never trigger biological responses. Increased stress results in increased productivity — up to a point. However, this level differs for each of us. We all need to find the proper level of stress that allows us to perform optimally as we go through life."

What exactly is stress? That's the \$64,000 question. To your body, stress is synonymous with change. Anything that causes a change in your life causes stress. It doesn't matter if it is a good change or a bad change, they are both stress. Even imagined stress is stress. (For instance, hoping you'll get a job promotion is stress, even though it hasn't happened yet and may not happen.)

For superintendents, as with most managers, the greater the stress, the greater the likelihood that he or she will choose a risky al-

ternative. Decision-making under stress can be tricky. The greater the stress, the greater the tendency to make a premature choice of alternatives for a correct response. In addition, under increasing stress, there is a decrease in productive thoughts and an increase in distracting thoughts.

Stress can lead to a range of physical ailments, such as heart disease, mental problems, lack of sleep, loss of resistance to illness and even allergies.

It doesn't seem to matter if you're in charge of a private club with a \$2 million annual budget or overseeing a municipal course with a budget similar to the price a new SUV. The fact is stress comes with the job. Learning how to deal with stress is the tricky part. Hans Selye also said, "It's not stress that kills us. It's our reaction to it."

Recently, my own reaction to it was anything but heroic. A new job, move to a new city, first home purchase and a fairly new baby hit me all at the same time. Shortly after the move and the start of the new job, I began to wonder what it was like to sleep through the night. At first, seven hours of sleep seemed good. Then six, then finally I began hoping for five. Lying in bed staring at the ceiling and thinking about drainage on the ninth fairway is not exactly relaxing. The sleeplessness was accompanied by headaches during the day, as well as irritability and impatience.

Feeling stress is one thing, but having your wife tell you that your stress is becoming a problem is another. When you no longer have to tell someone how stressed you are but instead they begin to tell *you* how stressed you are, that is usually a telltale sign that something has to change.

Job burnout is one of the greatest risks for any superintendent. Many of the characteristics that put you at high risk for burnout are often normal traits of any good superintendent. They include:

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The key is to have the mindset to deal with issues and head off stressful situations before they escalate.

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- having very high ideals;
- feeling only your ideas are right;
- blaming yourself;
- feeling like you have to do every job yourself;
- feeling equally upset with minor hassles as with more serious problems; and
- feeling you have more and more to do and less and less time to do it in.

The three stages of burnout include:

- 1 — early stress arousal;
- 2 — struggle and resistance; and
- 3 — exhaustion and breakdown.

One of the keys to dealing with any degree of stress is having the ability (often learned) to look upon problems as opportunities to overcome adversity and to gain new experience. A crisis can be a challenge or an opportunity for a change to something better. Sounds so easy, doesn't it? I know it looks really good on paper. But actually having the ability to follow through with such noble thoughts is a challenge as great as climbing any mountain. Chal-

lenges of the body can pale in comparison to those our minds present us with.

So what can you do? What words of wisdom can I impart upon you to ease all of your troubles? Well, it's a good news and bad news situation. First the bad news. I have, myself, little to offer. I tend to just grin and bear it, which is one of the reasons I still, to a degree, let myself get a little overstressed from time to time. The good news, though, is that I do have some gems of wisdom from others far wiser than I that just might help.

At the Web site www.psychwww.com, there are some terrific suggestions (you'll be in awe of the resources available online by just putting in the word "stress" into a search engine). Here's what they suggest for what they call "Short-Term Stress Control":

Anticipation and avoidance — By analyzing the likely causes of stress, you'll be able to plan your responses. These might be actions to alleviate the situation or may be stress-management techniques that you will use. Where a situation is likely to be unpleasant and will not yield any



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benefit to you, it may be one you can just avoid. You should be certain in your own mind, however, that this is the case.

Reducing the importance of an event — A number of factors can make an event take on a high level of significance and cause stress as a result. If stress is a problem under these circumstances, think carefully about the event and take every opportunity to reduce its importance.

Reducing uncertainty — The most effective way of countering this is to ask for the information you need. This might be information on your organization's performance. It may involve asking what your employer wants from you in the future, so that you can set the appropriate career-development goals.

Using imagery — Imagery is a potent method of stress reduction, especially when combined with physical relaxation methods such as deep breathing. One common use of imagery is to imagine a scene, place or event that you remember as peaceful, restful, beautiful and happy. Use the imagined place as a retreat.

Other methods — Other recommended meth-

ods include positive thinking and meditation, and of course the physical techniques, which include exercise, muscle relaxation and breathing control. I've always remembered what my ninth-grade golf coach taught me to do before every shot: Take a deep breath, hold it and let it out slowly. It's amazing how that action clears the mind and puts the body at ease.

Admitting to one's self that stress has become a problem is the first step in trying to combat the situation. Stress is something that is with all of us, on one level or another, and usually on a daily basis. The key is to have the mindset to deal with issues and head off stressful situations before they escalate.

Former Egyptian President and peace leader Anwar Sadat once said, "He who cannot change the very fabric of his thought will never be able to change reality."

After all, when you think about it, stress is all in your head. ■

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