



## What does time spent behind a school desk have to do with being a capable superintendent?

BY RON FURLONG

**I** stand before you — my esteemed colleagues — to announce that I'm coming out of the closet. I'm opening the door and stepping into the light — shedding my dead, mottled skin. I'm ready to make a confession. But let me shout it — not whisper it — because we're all adults and my declaration must be proclaimed. So here I go:

I HAVE A TWO-YEAR DEGREE!

I said it! Gosh, I feel better. What a weight off my shoulders. Let me say it again.

I HAVE A TWO-YEAR DEGREE!

I feel so unburdened that I could walk on water (or at least a shallow wetland). For too long, I've let this fester inside me, eating away at me like an incipient patch disease.

To be honest, I've never been ashamed or embarrassed of the degree. I'm just being a lit-

tle dramatic for shock effect. I have, however, encountered others who have tried to diminish it, and that bothers me.

My degree bears the symbol of Anoka-Hennepin Technical College (quite a mouthful when someone tells me they're from Penn State or Lake City and then asks where I went to school), which is near Minneapolis. It's not hidden away in a box in the closet or in the bottom drawer of the desk. (You know the drawer I'm talking about — that big sucker that's stuffed with items you'll never need again but can't bring yourself to throw out.) No, my degree hangs proudly above my desk and receives a good bimonthly dusting and even a quarterly Windexing.

At this point you may ask: If I'm so proud of my two-year degree, and everything is hunky-dory, then why even mention it? Good question. My answer has something to do with the mindset of several industry people who put as much emphasis on four-year degrees for superintendents as they do on health care for their children.

Anoka-Hennepin Technical College offers a good, no-frills "Two-Year Golf Course Management Program" that consists of a lot of meat and potatoes, but not much veggies and bread. (Unfortunately, I didn't learn at school which





side of the plate to place my salad fork. Thank God my Mom told me this.) Anoka-Hennepin offers useful — dare I even say comprehensive — hands-on teaching by quality instructors. It offers all you ever wanted to know about turf but were afraid to ask, and it has served me well. Is it Penn State? No. Is it Michigan State? No. Does it claim to be? No.

I've been in this business more than 13 years. My degree came somewhere in the middle of that time when I decided to get off my lazy butt and make something of myself. Without listing my résumé, let me say I've been at five clubs, three exclusive private clubs and one upscale high-end grow-in near Minneapolis. I also have a couple of years under my belt as superintendent at a public course. The last four years have been spent as first assistant under certified superintendent Randy White at Everett Golf and CC, just north of Seattle. It's an old private club with a history of excellence in the area. I like to think I've paid my dues and even excelled in my field. I've been involved in some cutting-edge management techniques, especially in the last few years at the club.

I know golf course management, and I like to think I know it well. I don't know corporate business or what it takes to make a dot-com work. I have no knowledge of managing a thriving restaurant or running a lumberyard. But I feel compelled to state that I'm fairly certain that golf course management is as unique a field that you can find in respect to gaining hands-on experience and learning from a mentor.

I'm not trying to diminish school or what I learned or didn't learn. But perhaps — just perhaps — golf course management is that one industry where a two-year degree may serve an individual as well as a four-year degree. It's all in getting on at the right course under the right superintendent and learning as much as you can. I'm the only person that can limit my knowledge and my managerial abilities. I've been fortunate to work under some great superintendents, including White, and the experience has been invaluable.

I realize I'm treading a thin and delicate line here. I don't wish to denigrate the importance of a four-year education. Truth told, I nearly did take the plunge myself a few years ago to finish my last two years, but I decided against it. Besides, I go to school every day: A green 100-acre fir-lined classroom with some great views of the

Cascade Mountains. Class starts at 5:30 a.m. every morning.

Of course, there are other ways to continue one's education without sitting in a classroom. I consider this pivotal today because you're apt to get passed by without so much as a second glance if you don't keep learning. This can be done through many venues, including attending GCSAA seminars, chapter meetings of your local associations, turf shows and conferences (both local and national). Even the annual course visit from your regional USGA agronomist can be educational. In addition, you can take courses through GCSAA's Environmental Management Program, as well as correspondence courses from various turf schools.

OK, so what's my real beef? Well, let's address this group of individuals I mentioned earlier — this growing faction that insists on having four-year degreed superintendents. The growing number of green chairmen, general managers, owners and directors of golf requiring four-year degrees for new superintendents amazes me. (Although this is not as amazing to me as the ones that require — yes, *require* — a certified superintendent for their positions.)

I know a director of golf that's been quoted as stating he'll never hire a superintendent on any of his courses who doesn't hold a four-year degree — no exceptions. I guess it doesn't matter how good or experienced individuals are. Even if they're the most perfect people for the jobs, they don't have a chance for them.

Is it just me, or does this seem narrow-minded? Is this fellow not limiting himself on some truly wonderful individuals who are

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## To What Degree?

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going to make great superintendents? Isn't it possible that there may be an individual with a two-year degree who's more experienced and better suited for a particular job than an individual with a four-year degree? Isn't it possible?

I'd like to think that right now I'm better suited to run an 18-hole private club than a 22-year-old kid with a four-year degree who has interned on two golf courses for a total of nine months. If you owned the golf course, whom would you trust? Yet, according to some people's logic, I wouldn't even be considered.

I know from experience that I've not been interviewed for certain positions I've applied for because my 8 x 11 certificate above my desk says two-year degree — not four. It gets a bit frustrating, you know?

On the other hand, I know I have come close to landing positions with clubs who had no problem at all with the length of time I

spent behind a classroom desk. They actually concentrated on the candidates' experience and what they could bring to their clubs. Imagine that. My hat is off to these brave folks.

Let me throw out this analogy to end this rant. Some may think it's farfetched, but then again, maybe not. I consider Kevin Garnett the best all-around player in the NBA, and Kobe Bryant is a distant second. I would hate to think we'd be cheated the enjoyment of watching these two great stars play because neither one attended college. The fact is, they were ready for the NBA and, as it turned out, the NBA was ready for them. I know the analogy from NBA player to superintendent may seem a stretch, but why not give us a chance? May the best man (or woman) win.

OK, I'm out of the closet. It's bright out here — and cold. Better get myself some sunglasses and a jacket. ■

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# it's here

The #1 industry  
magazine unveils  
the most valuable  
industry web site  
for golf course  
superintendents

The screenshot shows the Netscape browser window displaying the Golfdom website. The address bar shows 'http://www.golfdom.com/golfdom/'. The page has a green header with the 'Golfdom' logo and a banner for 'John Deere 1400 Series Mowers'. Below the header is a navigation menu with links like 'Home', 'The Latest', 'Solutions', etc. The main content area is divided into sections: 'THE LATEST' with news items like 'CHECK YOUR LABELS', 'DEERE CUTS COSTS', and 'HORO TENTHENS BELT'; 'THIS MONTH IN GOLFDOM' and 'LAST MONTH IN GOLFDOM' with magazine covers; and 'COMING SOON' for a newsletter. A mouse cursor is pointing at the 'COMING SOON' section.

# www.golfdom.com

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