

I often hear that being a superintendent is like being the head football coach of an NFL team. You're glorified when your course is in top shape or your team is in first place in early December. But you're vilified if your course is in lousy shape or your football team is in the basement come playoff time. The bottom line: Your job is never safe and you're prone to being fired more than in other professions.

Nobody knows that more than Fenn Clarke, former superintendent of Statesville CC in Statesville, N.C. He was fired *twice* from the same course in less than two years.

In November 2000, Clarke was fired near the end of his 10th year as superintendent of the track. "I was told they wanted to bring in someone who could take the course to the next level," the soft-spoken Clarke said of the reasoning for his firing.

"To the next level," of course, is the standard and murky cliché a person uses today to explain the reason for firing someone. Of course, the one doing the firing rarely defines "the next level." Clarke said that occurred in his case.

Fortunately for Clarke, the members of Statesville CC rallied around him. More than 250 people, about half the club's members, signed a petition to reinstate him. Clarke, inspired by the support, fought for his job. Three days before Christmas, he won it back. Clarke felt redeemed and vindicated. It was a wonderful life, indeed.

But two months ago, it all came crashing down again. Clarke was fired for a second time and for a different reason. This time Clarke said he was told that the course looked fine, but he was being released for not completing other projects on time. This time, Clarke decided not to fight to save his job. He knew it was time to move on.

Clarke didn't rip the people who fired him. For the most part, he humbly accepted his termination.

Clarke was fired on a Friday. I reached him at home the following Tuesday. He was down, but not out. He said the weekend after his firing was good. His stress level decreased, and he was happy to be away from the course. But

Down But Not Out After Being Fired

BY LARRY AYLWARD



"MY CONFIDENCE IS HIGHER THAN IT HAS EVER BEEN," SUPERINTENDENT SAYS

Monday morning came hard. A working person is supposed to have a place to go then. Clarke didn't, and it hurt.

"Oh man," he said faintly, followed by a deep sigh. "I have that unemployment feeling."

That "unemployment feeling" is fearful and lonely. The "unemployment feeling" is dangerous and can drag you down. It can make you bitter and feel like a failure. It's painful and can depress you.

Clarke is aware of the damage the "unemployment feeling" can cause. He's careful not to let his myriad emotions get the best of him.

It's strange, but it's comforting to Clarke to know he's in a business where superintendents are often fired even though they're capable employees and individuals. Even though Clarke says he feels beaten, he doesn't doubt himself or his ability to grow grass.

"My confidence is higher than it has ever been," he says. "I was in a game I couldn't win."

Clarke chuckles when he repeats what he was told as the reason for his second dismissal: that the conditioning of the course had nothing to do with his firing.

"That makes me feel a lot better," he says. "I can leave on terms I can be proud of as far as the golf course goes. That's all I want to be evaluated on anyway."

Clarke describes himself as a no-frills superintendent who doesn't like to play politics. He wonders if that philosophy hindered him in his dealings with members. But he has no regrets about being forthright.

"You can get a superintendent that feeds you BS all day long or you can get one who grows grass," Clarke says. "I just grow grass." Amen.

Editor Larry Aylward can be reached at 440-891-2770 or laylward@advanstar.com.