

Welcome to 'Turfville'

Lewistown, Pa., is a breeding ground for superintendents — thanks to a top turf school and the influence of one man

BY KEN KRIZNER

Although Pennsylvania has two of the most renowned golf courses in the country — Oakmont GC and Merion GC — and one of the most famous golfers — Arnold Palmer — you probably wouldn't think of the Keystone State as a mecca of the sport, let alone for golf course maintenance. You might become a superintendent if you grow up in Florida or Arizona; you might grow up to be a quarterback or linebacker if you live in central Pennsylvania.

But Lewistown, Pa., situated in the Appalachian Mountain region of central Pennsylvania about halfway between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, has boasted an unusual number of superintendents and aspiring superintendents the past 30 years. Most started their careers at Lewistown CC and have gone on to run their own courses in Delaware, Arizona, South Carolina, other parts of Pennsylvania and elsewhere throughout the country. Among the younger alums, Lewistown has earned the nicknames "Turf Mecca" and "Turfville."

Perhaps it was the environment they were born into that led almost 30 young men to become superintendents. Lewistown is a haven for

outdoor enthusiasts. Tourists visit the area to camp, hunt and fish in the numerous state parks.

"You grow up outdoors when you live in this area," says Jason Bell, a Lewistown native who is assistant superintendent of Bent Creek CC in Lancaster, Pa. "You hunt and fish. There aren't many office jobs. You're combining your recreation and your work."

Bell and others point to two reasons why Lewistown has become such a breeding ground for superintendents: Penn State University in nearby State College; and Jay Kline, superintendent of Lewistown CC since 1973. According to Kline, more than 20 of his former employees have gone on to become superintendents and assistant superintendents, and most of them attended Penn State.

The Penn State connection

On average, about 40 percent of applicants to the two-year program at Penn State's Golf Course Turf Management Program come from Pennsylvania, says George Hamilton, PSU's assistant professor of turfgrass science. Thirty years ago, that might have seemed like a high number of applicants to come from a cold-weather state. But times and the industry have changed.



GREG SPANCAKE

"It was unusual 30 years ago when a superintendent's responsibilities ended with the conclusion of the golf season," Hamilton says. "But the industry has changed so much, there is no longer an off-season. [Northern] superintendents use December, January and February to evaluate the course, undertake minor reconstruction projects and continue their education through conferences and seminars."

The school's influence can't be overstated when discussing the plethora of superintendents to come out of central Pennsylvania.

"Penn State taught me the basic information that prepared me for my career," says certified superintendent Bill Shirk, a nephew of Kline and president of Atlantic Golf in Maryland. Shirk, who graduated from Penn State in 1972, manages three golf facilities and 81 holes. "Penn State taught me how to use my experience and how to find answers to my questions. It taught me how to grow grass."

Tom Regan, certified superintendent of the Karsten GC at Arizona State University in Tempe, Ariz., says Penn State's location is a major factor why so many superintendents come from Central Pennsylvania.

"Most of us didn't know what we wanted to do with our lives," says Regan, who grew up in

Lewistown. "We tried [working on golf courses] and found we liked it. Penn State gave us direction. I have a lot of friends from Pennsylvania who are still superintendents after 25 years."

Shirk says the trickle-down effect from Penn State is another reason why Central Pennsylvania is home to so many superintendents. "There are so many high-quality superintendents that have gone on to great careers, and they have trained so many people themselves and sent them to Penn State," he says.

Lewistown's 'godfather'

If there's one person that stands at the heart of the numerous men who have come out of central Pennsylvania to become superintendents, it's Jay Kline. Bell describes Kline as "the godfather" of golf in Lewistown. Regan, who grew up on the Lewistown course and worked there for two summers after a stint in the Coast Guard, says nobody does more with what he has to work with than Kline.

"Jay is in a unique situation," Regan says. "The course doesn't have a lot of money, but Jay is a hard worker who does a good job with limited funds. I learned how to maintain a golf course while working for Jay."

Continued on page 40

Jay Kline, long-time superintendent of Lewistown CC, is called the "godfather of golf" in the town.

Welcome to 'Turfville'



GREG SPANCAKE

Jay Kline (center) has had a lasting impact on many people who have worked for him, including his sons Danny (left) and Eric.

Continued from page 39

During high school, the now 55-year-old Kline was planning to become a draftsman. But his high school guidance counselor, Park Middlesworth, recommended that Kline consider a career as a superintendent after seeing the results of his aptitude test. Following graduation from Kishacoquillas High School in nearby Reedsville, Pa., in 1965, Kline went to work at Seaview CC in Atlantic City, N.J., where the guidance counselor's brother-in-law was an assistant superintendent. It didn't take long for Kline to realize his calling.

"I was going down [to Atlantic City] to earn money to go to drafting school," he says. "I was on the course for two weeks, and I knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

"I worked with a great bunch of guys, some of whom had been at the course for 40 years," Kline says. "They talked about how much they enjoyed the work. It had a total effect on me. I never touched a golf club or set foot on a golf course until I took that job."

He was hooked.

Graduating from the two-year program at Penn State in 1967, Kline went to work as head superintendent of Lost Creek GC in Mifflin County, Pa., where he spent the next two years. For the three years after that, he worked at a nine-hole course in Delaware, but the country and mountains of home were never far from

Kline's heart. Returning in 1972, he worked for six months as grounds superintendent for the Mifflin County School District before taking the job as superintendent at Lewistown CC in January 1973.

All in the family

In the 35 years since graduating from Penn State, Kline has had a lasting impact on the lives of many men who have worked for him.

"I try to instill a good work ethic in my employees," Kline says. "None have had a bad work ethic. I just helped to improve it. I also try to instill the idea that we are stewards of the land. We're taking care of it to the best of our ability so we can pass it on in better shape to the next generation."

It starts in his family. Kline's sons, Danny and Eric, have followed their father into the superintendent business. Eric is superintendent at Nittany CC in Bellefonte, Pa., about 50 miles from Lewistown. Danny is working for his father at Lewistown as the assistant superintendent. The plan is for him to become superintendent when his father retires.

After working in the Lewistown pro shop and in a factory, Danny started working for his dad in September 1993. Eric also began in the pro shop before going to work for his father in 1995. He became superintendent at Nittany three years later.

Both say their father expected more out of them than other employees. Eric was his night waterman. Danny says he'll go "above and beyond the call of duty" because Jay is his father.

"He expects more out of me because I'm his son," Danny says. "He wants me to learn things the hard way. He doesn't like automation; I love it. As he teaches me things the hard way, I try to teach him how to do his work the easy way [by using computers]."

Eric says the most important trait he learned from working with his father was temperament. "I learned how to treat people, both above and below me," he notes. "He is a straight shooter who rarely gets angry. I developed that [trait] by watching him."

Jason Bell worked for Jay Kline during the summers from 1993 to 1998. While he always knew that he wanted to work outdoors, he didn't find his calling until those days at Lewistown. Today, Bell uses the experience he learned from Kline as the assistant superintendent at

Bent Creek, where 30 crew members work under him. He says he has complete authority over the crew, while the superintendent deals with club management and members. He says the Kline influence permeates his dealings with the crew.

"Jay is blue-collar," Bell says. "He works hard and wouldn't tell someone to do something he couldn't do himself. I'm the same way. He makes you learn every part of the course — every sprinkler and bunker. He would tell me that it's my livelihood, so I need to know about everything."

Veteran superintendent Dave Downing, a former Lewistown employee, describes Kline as a teacher and explainer, two traits he has applied to his own career. He was at Lewistown at the time the course was expanding by nine holes. "I was mowing and laying sod for Jay," Downing says.

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JASON BELL
ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT
BENT CREEK CC

"I worked for Jay at a time when he had a lot of kids. We were a handful, but Jay was never a tyrant."

Bell, who plans on eventually becoming a superintendent, wants one day to be in Kline's position — being a mentor to newcomers under him. Bell's brother, his girlfriend's brother and friends have all followed him into the superintendent field. He jokes that when he gets married next year, all of his groomsmen will be "turfers."

"I think I've started influencing the next generation," Bell says. "I want to

lead by example. I want them to ask questions. Jay is patient in answering questions, and I soak in those answers like a sponge. Teaching people also helps me learn."

For his part, Kline chooses to deflect the credit away from himself and on to his former employees.

"I'm very proud when the men who

worked for me become superintendents," he says. "But they are their own men. I'm a starter, and they're finishers. They come back for vacations, play golf at the club and we talk. The nicest part is that we still have ongoing relationships." ■

Krizner is a free-lance writer from Cleveland.



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