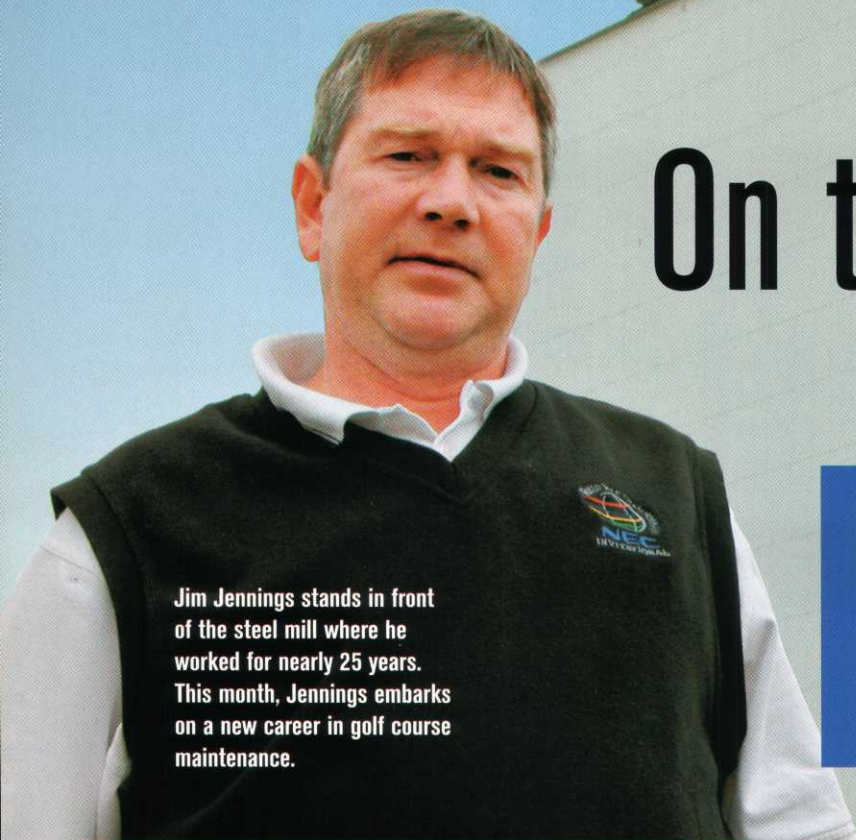


Are there enough jobs for the fledgling turf professionals who enter the industry every year? And how long will it take them to climb the career ladder?



Jim Jennings stands in front of the steel mill where he worked for nearly 25 years. This month, Jennings embarks on a new career in golf course maintenance.

On the Job Front

BY LARRY AYLWARD,
EDITOR

It's desolate now. The steel mill in Massillon, Ohio, where Jim Jennings toiled for nearly 25 years, is hollow of machinery and vacant of humanity.

Jennings leans on the rusty chain-link fence that surrounds the vast structure formerly named Massillon Stainless Inc. He gazes up at the colossal 13-story, bland-looking building that houses the steel-making furnace he once operated. There's joyless silence in the air, but Jennings can still hear the ferocious and blissful sound of the once-mighty furnace in his mind.

It's distressing for the 46-year-old Jennings to be here on this autumn day. It's the first time Jennings has returned to the mill — the place that provided the paycheck that helped him feed and clothe his family since 1978 — since he and about 60 others were laid off about 14 months ago.

Jennings had been laid off before from the

mill, but he was always recalled. But when the mill announced it was closing for good in October 2002 and moving its machinery to China, Jennings knew he was never going back.

But Jennings, mindful of the volatile industry he was employed, considered another livelihood back in the early 1990s. He enrolled at The Ohio State University's Agricultural Technical Institute (ATI) in Wooster, Ohio, to study turfgrass management in 1992. This month, 11 years later, Jennings will receive a two-year degree and embark on a new career.

He's excited but understandably apprehensive about his future. Jennings wants to be a superintendent, but he knows his new field is a competitive one.

"Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and wonder if there are any jobs out

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On the Job Front

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there," Jennings says. "That's the scary part."

Jennings isn't the only one waking up worried at four in the morning. Every year a horde of fledgling turf professionals, armed with two- and four-year degrees, enters the industry with the will to flourish. But they're also leery of the job market they will find.

They have many questions about the health of their profession. Is it a crowded market place? Are there enough jobs for capable graduates? Will finding a job require relocating? And how long will it take to become a head superintendent?

The pragmatic Jennings says he's not looking for a dream job. He just wants to work with capable people, learn the business and gain experience. And he'd like to do all those things close to home for a few years while his 14-year-old son Jordan, his only child, finishes high school.

Time will tell if Jennings and other graduates will find what they're looking for. But one thing is for certain — they will find an industry that has suffered from the dismal economy the past few years. However, that shouldn't intimidate them, says Tom Watschke, long-time professor of turfgrass science at Penn State University.

"The sky isn't falling on the golf course industry," Watschke says. "Are times a little tougher? There's no denying that. Is this a permanent state? I don't think so."

Starting out

Though people study golf course maintenance for myriad reasons, a common one is their desire to work outdoors.

Jennings worked several odd jobs after he was laid off from the steel mill in 1989. A few years later, he learned he was eligible for a government job-training program set up for displaced steel employees.

As part of the program, Jennings took a personality test, which revealed his love of golf (something he already knew) and his interest in working outdoors. A job



"Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and wonder if there are any jobs out there."

— Jim Jennings

counselor suggested he attend Ohio State's ATI, which was funded through the job-training program.

In the spring of 1992, Jennings began going to school part-time at ATI and worked as a starter at a nearby country club. He also tended bar. But when he was called back to work at the mill in 1995, he ditched school because he needed a steady paycheck to support his family, and the mill provided it.

Jennings was laid off again in 1999. He went back to school in 2000 and was recalled to the mill again a short time later. But he was let go for good last fall.

Even though it took Jennings more than a decade to get his degree, he says he loved learning about entomology, turf species and other subjects. "I'm passionate about this industry," he says.

Jennings, who sports a 10 handicap, hopes his passion helps land him a job as an assistant superintendent. He might like his chances.

Kim Heck, GCSAA's director of career development, says her conversations with established superintendents reveal that golf courses in some regions of the country need assistant superintendents now. A reason for this is that many golf courses have been hiring more assistants — first and second positions — the past few years.

"The average superintendent has 20 people reporting to him, compared to 17 people in 2000," Heck says.

GCSAA relies on anecdotal information to monitor the job market. It doesn't conduct scientific studies to determine how many people join and leave the industry annually.

Heck says she and other GCSAA representatives meet with students every year and talk to them about employment. Heck says students in the past three years have told her they're confident about getting jobs after graduation. "The students paint a fairly bright picture."

That said, Heck notes that not all students will be able to secure the jobs they most desire. They may have to settle on taking positions as equipment technicians or spray technicians if they can't get jobs as first or second assistants.

Bruce Clarke, director of the Center for Turf Science at Rutgers University/Cook College, realizes that golf course construction is down, but he still says the school has not had any problems placing its graduates. About 12 students graduate from the school's four-year turf program annually.

Clarke says the school has experienced a dip in applications for its two-year certificate program. While he admits the troubled economy might have something to do with the decrease, he is certain that the GCSAA's push to enhance the profession from a credibility standpoint — a four-year degree is better than a two-year degree — has something to do with it.

Penn State has two programs — a two-year program that's specific to golf turf and a four-year turfgrass science program. The former program gradu-

ates about 25 people annually. The latter program graduates about 40 people each year. Not all of them go into golf course maintenance. In fact, Watschke says the percentage of graduates going into golf course maintenance has been decreasing because of career growth in other areas of the turf industry such as sports turf.

Watschke says Penn State hasn't had a problem placing its students in jobs for several years. No, they're not landing big-cheese positions. But, as Watschke points out, most graduating students do not land jobs as top superintendents directly out of school, no matter what the job market is like. "Less than 1 percent of our students get those jobs."

The industry has grown substantially in the last 30 years, and jobs now often require a college education, Watschke notes.

"As we approached the 1980s, the notion of having a college-trained assistant became popular and a necessity," Watschke says. "Fast-forward another 10 years, and it's not uncommon for a superintendent on an 18-hole property to have a first and second assistant. Fast-forward to 2000, and it's not uncommon for a course to have a college-trained person as a spray technician/pest scout. There are even college-trained irrigation technicians on courses."

Watschke's point is there are plenty of jobs for graduates, even if new-course constructions have dropped from about 400 in 2000 to roughly 235 this year. He says second assistants in the Mid-Atlantic region are paid between \$28,000 and \$32,000. A first assistant makes a few thousand more.

Bruce Williams, certified superintendent of the Los Angeles Country Club and an industry veteran, advises people looking for work to monitor the golf industry from an economic standpoint. They might not want to consider work in areas where courses have shut down and laid off employees. "It's all about supply and demand," he says.

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Are You Happy in Your Current Position?



Based on 301 responses

Golfdom

One Man Who Got Out of the Profession

Hocutt was tired of the pressure and politics that come with being a superintendent

Sam Hocutt had enough. Worn out from the long hours and work-filled weekends, not to mention the pressure and the politics that often come with the territory, the 43-year-old Hocutt quit his job earlier this year as certified superintendent of Pawleys Plantation in Pawleys Island, S.C. Hocutt opted for a job as a sales manager for a Myrtle Beach, S.C., communications company.

A few months later, he says he doesn't feel even a tinge of regret about leaving Pawleys Plantation, where he was superintendent for almost 10 years. And Hocutt says he's sure he'll never miss the profession, even though he spent 20 years as a superintendent.

"I will not go back into the business," he says. "I don't care if I'm offered \$200,000. It's just not worth it"

Kim Heck, director of career development for the GCSAA, says the association doesn't know the main reasons why superintendents ditch the profession for other careers. But she notes that many superintendents who do leave the profession have many career alternatives.

"Our members have discussed and identified about 30 careers that a superintendent is prepared for," Heck says.

It can be assumed, however, that many superintendents leave the profession for the same reasons as Hocutt did. In addition to being on call to his course like a doctor on call to his patients, Hocutt says he was tired of trying to please *everyone* at the course, which proved futile.

"I spent more time doing public

relations than growing grass," he says.

Hocutt says turf schools would be wise to teach courses on the politics that often intertwine with growing grass. He says up-and-coming superintendents need to learn people-management and employee-management skills, as well as how to deal with difficult situations with golfers and members.

"Politics is not trained. It's learned," Hocutt says. "I would hate to see a new guy come in to his first job where there are 400 members. He screws up one time, and all the members jump on him. Then he loses his job because he didn't know how to react to the politics. It takes a lot to get over that."

Hocutt says he knows other superintendents who've lost their jobs in the crossfire of turf politics. "When it comes to politics, I've seen too many people let go."

Hocutt predicts more superintendents will get out of the business as the politics and pressures of tending turf continue to mount. He says he's made sales calls to about 100 courses, and about 20 percent of the superintendents from those courses say they would get out of the profession if they had other jobs to go to.

Hocutt admits he misses the good pay that many established superintendents earn. But he quickly notes that he works nine to five and has weekends free.

"I took a huge pay cut," Hocutt says. "But I definitely enjoy life more now, and I sleep better."

— Larry Aylward, Editor

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As in other industries (and maybe a tad more), one has to go where the jobs are. So a big part about employment in the golf course maintenance industry has to do with a person's flexibility to pick up and move, Williams says. For Jennings, it's a good bet there's better opportunity for employment in Scottsdale, Ariz., than around Massillon.

"If he has a ball and chain on him geographically, his opportunities are going to be limited," Williams says.

Even if people like Jennings find jobs close to home, the courses they've joined might not be the best places for them to learn, Williams points out. For instance, someone new to the business isn't going to learn much from a superintendent who's turf nutrition philosophy is to apply fertilizer to the course whether it needs it or not.

"You want to hone your skills with someone who has a good reputation in the industry," Williams says.

That means going to work for someone who knows agronomy like Merrill Lynch knows finance. "Some guys are more in tune agronomically than others," Williams adds.

A person who's new to the industry may also want to jump at the chance to work for a seasoned superintendent who's 60 years old.

"Guess who might get a crack at his job if he retires at 65?" Williams asks rhetorically. "That person shouldn't expect to get the [retiring superintendent's] job. But if he works his tail off, how is he not going to get a chance to prove himself?"

The bottleneck

Mitch Tankersley worked in sales and marketing for a Silicon Valley software company for about 10 years before burnout set in and he quit his job. Tankersley then enrolled at a nearby community college and sought a two-year degree in horticulture.

While going to school, the 35-year-old landed a job on the crew at San Jose (Calif.) Country Club in March 2002.

Salaries: Up, Up, Up

The good news is that average salaries for superintendents have soared in the past 10 years, according to GCSAA.

1993 — \$44,500

1995 — \$49,269

1998 — \$53,205

2000 — \$57,057

2003 — \$63,065

"It was a lot of work, but it was the best move I ever made," he says.

It only took Tankersley a little more than a year to be promoted to second assistant at San Jose. He's hoping to become a first assistant even sooner and plans to be a superintendent within five years.

But becoming a superintendent in five years may be difficult if the job market for the top posts doesn't improve. Heck says there's an infusion of experienced assistants but not enough top jobs for all of them.

"It's taking assistants longer to become head superintendents," Heck says. "That's where there's a bottleneck."

That's no surprise to Williams, who says the decline in the number of new course openings explains why there aren't as many superintendent jobs now as there were three years ago.

Watschke says the logjam is more the result of demographics.

"It has to do with what the average age of superintendents is," he says. "The industry went through a period in the 1970s and 1980s when a lot of superintendents retired. Now the average age of superintendents is much less. Because there's a younger general population of superintendents, the turnover rate at the top is slower."

While that may be true, some industry insiders theorize that an oversupply of assistant superintendents could cause many golf course financial decision makers to replace veteran superintendents and their hefty salaries with

hungry rookies at half the cost, especially in a period of economic distress.

Heck doesn't deny that such a scenario could unfold, but she doubts it would become a trend. Heck says employers realize it's vital to employ seasoned superintendents to oversee their golf courses.

"So they're willing to pay them what the market will bear," she adds. "That's good news for the profession."

Yes, superintendents with loads of experience and hefty salaries have been let go for frugality's sake. But that happens in a lot of industries, Williams notes. "Too many people think that things like that are unique to the golf industry."

The general rule of thumb is that 55 percent of a golf course's maintenance budget is devoted to payroll, Williams says. So if the budget gets slashed, it usually starts where most of the money is being spent. And if a quality superintendent is let go for financial reasons, the course will suffer in the long run, Williams says. "It's shortsighted thinking."

Speaking of pay, Heck says the average superintendent's salary has increased from \$44,500 in 1993 to \$63,065 in 2003. She expects the upward trend to continue.

The pay range can vary, though. It depends on type of course, region, a person's experience and other factors. But Watschke notes that superintendents' pay range is comparable to that of the general labor in the United States, where 12 percent to 14 percent of people make \$60,000 or more, and up to 6 percent make \$100,000 or more.

The right stuff

Despite the golf boom the past 10 years, Heck doesn't believe that people are going into the profession for all the wrong reasons — because it's glamorous and they get to play golf three days a week. She says the GCSAA has spent a lot of time and effort to market the profession to potential students for what

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it is — a splendid and rewarding profession, but not necessarily as glamorous as they might think.

“I believe that the people getting into this profession are coming in with their eyes open fully,” Heck says.

Some insiders are also concerned that the industry has too many schools offering turf management programs. Heck says she gets several calls from college representatives who want to implement turf programs in their curriculums. She tells them like it is — that in order to compete with other schools, the turf school wannabes must hire top instructors and be heavily committed to their programs.

If an interested school happens to be 20 miles down the road from a turf university powerhouse like Penn State, Heck says she'll discourage the school from implementing a program.

“We're very frank with them,” Heck says. “The association is cognizant of the potential proliferation of programs.”

While Williams is also concerned about the growth of schools, he says they've done a better job of presenting the profession for it what it really is. The schools have done that by letting experienced superintendents speak to classes about what their jobs entail.

“I used to hear students say — and they're probably still saying it — that they didn't want to get stuck behind desks,” Williams says. “But the reality is, unless you have an office manager, you're going to spend a lot of time behind a desk as a superintendent — perhaps as much as half your time.”

In the end, finding a job in the field or taking the next step in the profession to become a superintendent is about a lot of things, including timing and contacts. But most everyone agrees that enthusiasm plays a huge part in defining a career.

Clarke says job prospects will continue to be good for students who are eager to make an impact.

“There are jobs out there for well-qualified students,” he adds. “Students

How to Climb the Career Ladder

Use your contacts, among other things, Williams says

One might not find a more passionate superintendent than Bruce Williams, certified superintendent of Los Angeles Country Club. Williams isn't just known for tending turf. He can talk turf, too.



Bruce Williams

He's a regular speaker at various conferences and seminars. Williams recently appeared at the Assistant Superintendent Boot Camp in Pacific Grove, Calif., sponsored by Northern California Golf Association, where he gave presentations on “Distinguishing Yourself From Other Job Applicants” and “Tips for Getting Your Next Job.”

During the presentations, Williams stressed the importance of using contacts to help locate jobs.

“A lot of us can't get jobs on our own,” Williams says. “We get them through other people and connections that we've made.”

It's vital to keep your name in front of your contacts and let them know you're looking for work. Williams says it's also OK to drop names — if you're being legit. Williams warns never to embellish a relationship just to make yourself look good.

If you've landed a job interview, Williams suggests you practice how you'll answer questions in a mock inter-

view before the real deal. The dress rehearsal can help immensely.

And during the interview, know how to answer the tough questions. For instance, if you're asked where you want to be in three years, don't answer “as superintendent of Riviera Country Club.”

“That may be unrealistic,” Williams says. “But you have to have some idea of where you want to be.”

If you're talking money, make sure to know your salary expectations and the ability of the employer to pay what you have in mind. “Be careful not to lowball yourself,” Williams says.

Also make sure that a potential employer gets the message that you're a team player who strives to get along with everyone. Williams stresses the importance of having strong interpersonal skills, which has nothing to do with growing grass but everything to do with growing relationships.

If you're not working and you're looking for work, make your search a full-time job, Williams says. Have a plan for your search — and get up every morning to pursue that plan.

“There's a tremendous amount of opportunity that goes by everyone of us in this business,” Williams says. “The successful people recognize the opportunities and take advantage of them.”

— L.A., Editor

who aren't really into it will have a more difficult time finding jobs.”

Heck says employers want people who desire to learn, among other things. “They want quick learners and people who can assume more responsibility and add value immediately.”

And employers want people, no matter their age, who want to make a difference, Williams says. The industry won't turn its back on a 46-year-old newcomer like Jennings if he's hungry to make an impact.

“There's always plenty of room at the top,” Williams says. “If you've got the

right attitude, the right work ethic and you really care, there's a place for you in the industry.”

Jennings hopes he gets his chance. He pauses when asked how he plans to market himself to get a job. He has the tanned look of a golfer, but retains the rugged appearance of a former steel worker.

“I just need a chance to prove myself,” he says softly. “And I need someone that doesn't mind me looking over his shoulder to find out why he's doing this and that.

“I'm hoping I'm in the right place at the right time.” ■