

One of the consequences of being old as dirt (as my 8-year-old likes to remind me) is that I increasingly long for the “good old days.” For me, the good old days were before he discovered both the Nintendo Gameboy and Dad’s inability to keep up with him in a foot race.

From the industry perspective, I’m beginning to think of the good old days as the era when there weren’t 450 résumés submitted for every superintendent’s job that opens up. I hear way too many horror stories about facilities that hold employment “beauty contests” seemingly designed to entice as many applicants as possible.

These also seem to be the same facilities that never even bother to so much as acknowledge receipt of the application or send “regrets” letters to unsuccessful candidates. Frankly, that’s just plain rude behavior from those supposedly gentlemanly club presidents and owners who engage in such practices.

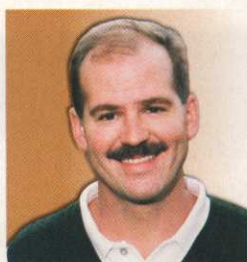
But that’s the reality of the job market these days for the vast majority of superintendents who are forced to seek work. It ain’t pretty out there. For those who leave jobs involuntarily, the old rule of “one month of unemployment for each \$10,000 you need in salary” seems to more than hold true right now. I know too many good folks who’ve faced this nasty situation. It’s a desperate and depressing position to be in.

There are several causes for the current imbalance in the job market. First, there’s the downturn in new construction. Instead of 400 desirable new jobs at new facilities each year, there are only about 150. Second, thanks to the sour economy and general skittishness, superintendents seem to be staying put longer. In our 2001 *Golfdom Report* study, the average tenure in our respondents’ current position was 7.1 years. By 2003, the average jumped to 8.7 years. Job hopping is clearly on the decline.

But the biggest cause of the current dilemma is, ironically, the industry’s success at promoting and marketing the profession. We’ve actually helped to create this monster through decades of public relations, outreach to schools and broader awareness among young golfers about

These Aren’t the Good Old Days

BY PAT JONES



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the role of the superintendent. Over the past two decades, young people who would have otherwise ended up in agriculture, horticulture or another discipline have flowed into golf/turf programs.

Universities, community colleges and vocational schools aren’t dumb. They’re in the business of generating tuition revenue and, noticing this upswing of interest, started or expanded turf-degree programs. No one seems to really track this, but I’m guessing that the number of institutions offering two- or four-year degrees has at least doubled in the past 15 years. There are now nearly 100 programs listed on the GCSAA Web site — and you know there are many more out there.

And the number of students enrolled in those programs has increased as well. Every professor I’ve talked with says his or her turf program has grown steadily. Bigger schools are graduating 20 to 30 kids per year, and smaller ones are cranking out at least five or six. So let’s conservatively assume that each of those 100 schools is graduating 10 students per year. That projects to at least 1,000 new entrants into the market annually with high hopes for big jobs and six-figure salaries within a few quick years. Yikes!

The cup has runneth over. It’s time we start managing expectations and stemming the flow. Word needs to go out to students — particularly those at some of the smaller programs where some of the inflated ideas about salaries and jobs seem to start — that the good old days in the golf course job market are over, and it might be time to rethink their career plans. Better they hear it now than face the bleak prospects of an oversupplied market four years down the road.

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