

# WELCOME TO **Boot Camp**

Training program helps northern California assistants march forward in their careers

**STORY & PHOTOS  
BY LARRY AYLWARD**

**T**he Asilomar Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove, Calif., is not exactly Parris Island, S.C., the well-known site for U.S. Marine Corps boot camps. There are no marching troops chanting “hup, two, three, four.” And there are no barking drill sergeants dressing down crewcut-wearing privates. That said, Asilomar is the perfect place for the Northern California Golf Association (NCGA) to hold

its Assistant Superintendent Boot Camp, a three-day conference that gives assistants the opportunity to meet, to learn and to bond, among other things.

The NCGA held its third annual boot camp at Asilomar in September. Located on the Monterey Peninsula, Asilomar is comprised of 107 acres of flora and fauna fascination. Henry David Thoreau would adore this place.

The great thing about Asilomar is that it's quiet — *really* quiet. The lodges feature rooms without televisions and phones. From a room's balcony, one can hear the tranquilizing sound of the rippling Pacific surf surging to the shore.

“This is a refreshing removal from society,” says Mike McCullough, director of turfgrass services for the Northern California Golf Association and creator of the boot camp.

And that's just the way McCullough wants it. He began the boot camp three years ago because there was a need for an assistant superintendents educational conference in northern California. He developed the boot camp with input from several area assistants.

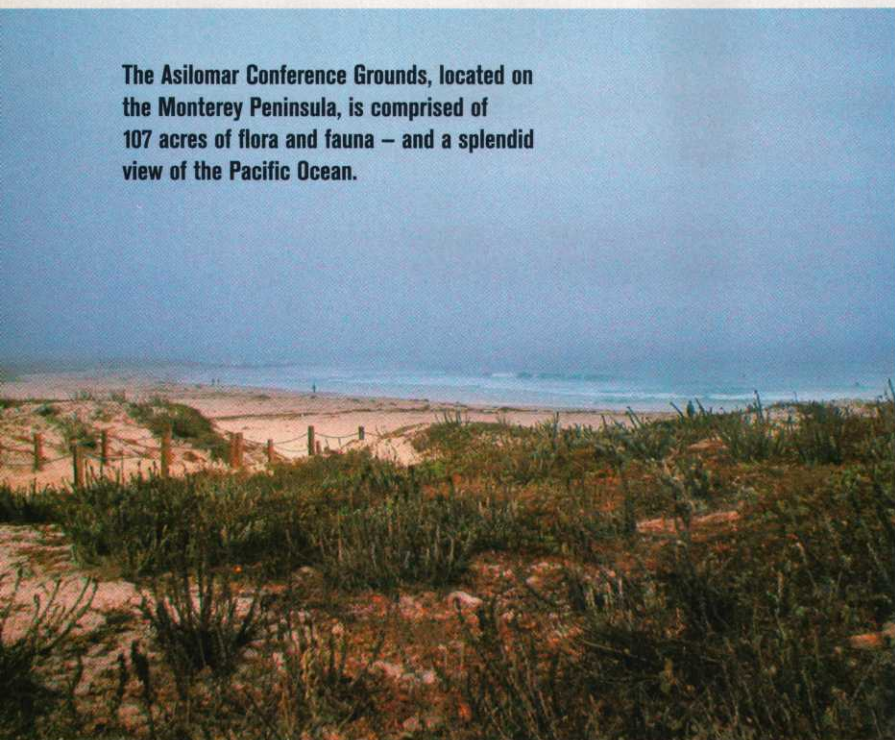
Often, it's assistants who oversee the agronomics of golf courses, McCullough says, but they often get overlooked when it comes to attending conferences or meetings. It's not intentional — that's just the way it is.

“Assistants are an integral part of the management team,” McCullough says. “But they never get the training to take the next step.”

Says Lonnie Stevens, assistant superintendent of Poppy Ridge Golf Course in Livermore, Calif., and one of the assistants who helped McCullough create the program: “Most superin-

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The Asilomar Conference Grounds, located on the Monterey Peninsula, is comprised of 107 acres of flora and fauna — and a splendid view of the Pacific Ocean.





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tendents meetings are geared toward superintendents, and assistants generally get left behind to manage the store. A lot of assistants don't get a chance to go to the national conference, so this is kind of the next best thing."

While not really a boot camp, McCullough's program borrows from one. The whole idea of the event is get attendees to focus intently on why they're there — to learn and interact.

### THE SERGEANT

**Name:** Mike McCullough

**Rank:** Director of Turfgrass Services for the Northern California Golf Association

**What He Has to Say:** "Assistants are an integral part of the management team. But they never get the training to take the next step."



### THE ENLISTED

**Name:** Sheila McGrew

**Rank:** NCGA intern at the Meadow Club in Fairfax, Calif. The only woman attending boot camp.

**What She Has to Say:** "I'm a late bloomer, but I'm really enjoying my career so far."



### THE ENLISTED

**Name:** Brian Thomas

**Rank:** Assistant superintendent of King's River Golf and Country Club in Kingsburg, Calif.

**What He Has to Say:** "I didn't even know there was anything like this for assistants. I think it's great."



McCullough doesn't want attendees who are only interested in getting away from their courses for a few days so they can party. Two attendees are assigned to a room, and all attendees dine together in a nearby cafeteria.

McCullough limits the boot camp to about 40 participants to keep it intimate.

Jeff Steen, who joined Pebble Beach Golf Links as an assistant in the spring, says he came to Asilomar to learn.

"You've really got to put something into this to get something out of it," Steen says. "You just can't look at it as just a few days off from work."

**I**t's shortly after 8 a.m. on a cool and foggy Monday morning. McCullough stands in front of the nondescript conference room and takes roll call for boot camp attendees.

"Griffing," McCullough barks.

"Here," Griffing answers.

"Thomas," McCullough bellows.

"Here," Thomas returns.

This will be a long day, packed full of field trips and educational sessions that will last until nearly 9 p.m. McCullough instructs attendees to be polite during the presentations — and turn off the cell phones, he warns.

Attendees heed McCullough's words. They realize, in a sense, that he's the sergeant of this boot camp.

Attendees range from throughout northern California and come in all shapes and sizes. The tallest and biggest attendee is the muscular and chiseled Greg Amsler, who looks more like a football player than an assistant superintendent. Well, that's because the 35-year-old was a football player — Amsler played running back for the University of Tennessee in the late 1980s and then spent two years in the National Football League. After retiring from football, Amsler, a former caddy at Baltusrol Golf Club in New Jersey where he grew up, decided to pursue golf course maintenance as a career. He's been the assistant superintendent at Cypress Point Club in Pebble Beach for almost two years.

Brad Griffing, 28, is the assistant superintendent at Ruby Hill Golf Club in Pleasanton, Calif. This is the second boot camp he's attended. A few years ago, Griffing told himself he wanted to be a superintendent by the

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time he was 30. He's attending this boot camp to sharpen his skills so he can ready himself to take the next step.

Sheila McGrew, who's interning on behalf of the NCGA at the Meadow Club in Fairfax, Calif., is the only woman and one of the few nonassistant superintendents attending the boot camp. The 38-year-old spent four years in the Navy in the 1980s, and she didn't decide to pursue turf maintenance as a profession until 1999. She hopes to attain an assistant's position when she finishes her internship in June.

"I'm a late bloomer, but I'm really enjoying my career so far," she says.

The boot camp's serene environment is a topic of conversation. No television means there's no watching ESPN. But most agree that the bonus of such an environment is that it screams interaction, especially when two assistants share one room.

"It forces the attendees to get together and talk turf," says Rob Whitham, assistant at Napa Golf Course at Kennedy Park in

Yountville, Calif., and a first-time attendee.

"The no-TV thing surprised me," says Brian Thomas, assistant superintendent of King's River Golf and Country Club in Kingsburg, Calif. "But I've adjusted to it."

The night before, Thomas says he and his roommate talked shop until midnight before going to sleep.

"You can go back to your room after the day and reflect on the notes you've taken," Stevens says. "There are no distractions here."

This is the third boot camp that Stevens has attended.

"And it's my last," he says with a chuckle. "I hope I'll be unqualified to be a boot camp participant at this time next year."

The 39-year-old Stevens has been the assistant at Poppy Ridge for eight years and is itching to become a head superintendent. Stevens is attending his third boot camp because he realizes he still has plenty to learn. He also knows that boot camp gives him an opportunity to make new relationships that could help him land a superintendent's job.

Most everyone loves that aspect of the boot camp. It provides them the opportunity to assemble and network with their colleagues so they can discuss their needs and goals.

Thomas says he didn't know there was a program of such for assistants until his superintendent, Mike Kroeze, told him about it and asked him if he wanted to attend. "This is great," the 35-year-old says, stressing the need for such events for him and his peers.

Amsler says it's important to gain face time with your peers. "A lot of the learning isn't just taking place in the classroom, but it's through conversation with others," he says.

### THE ENLISTED

**Name:** Jeff Steen

**Rank:** Assistant golf course superintendent of Pebble Beach (Calif.) Golf Links.

**What He Has to Say:** "You've really got to put something into this to get something out of it. You just can't look at it as just a few days off from work."



### THE ENLISTED

**Name:** Greg Amsler

**Rank:** Assistant superintendent of Cypress Point Club in Pebble Beach, Calif.

**What He Has to Say:** "This is an opportunity for me to do a little networking. It's really important to stay active with other superintendents."



**B**ruce Williams, certified superintendent of the Los Angeles Country Club and a past president of the GCSAA, is one of the boot camp's top speakers. The straightforward Williams, who has helped train more than 100 people to become superintendents, is glad to be speaking at boot camp.

"I've always had a strong place in my heart for assistant superintendent programs and training," Williams says. "Unfortunately, I don't think we've done justice over the years to developing formalized programs to train

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the next generation. We do a tremendous job of training superintendents, but we don't do a good job of training assistants."

During his two seminars that focused on climbing the career ladder, Williams emphasized the importance of trying to get along with others. When you're a superintendent, you need to be a team player, Williams stressed. "There are a lot of superintendents out there that grow grass real well, but [aren't good] when it comes to getting along with their pros and general managers."

Throughout the boot camp, the assistants heard presentations focusing on a mixture of subjects — from maintaining turf equipment to using growth regulators and biostimulants for improved summer turf performance, and from taking a tour of the Pebble Beach Golf Links maintenance facility (see sidebar below) to gaining tips for getting their next jobs.

Regarding the latter, the assistants heard stories from former assistants who had recently gained first head superintendents jobs. One was Mat Dunmyer, superintendent of Sonoma (Calif.) Golf Club. Dunmyer, a Buffalo native, told assistants that sometimes you have to move around to get what you want — and be patient. Dunmyer attended school at Lake City Community College in Florida before moving to California and taking a job as a spray technician at Lahontan Golf Club in Truckee, Calif. Soon, Dunmyer moved up to second assistant at the course. Two years later, he took an assistant's job — but a superintendent-in-training position — at Stone Tree Golf Club in Novato, Calif. He was there for 14 months before getting his first superintendent job at Moraga (Calif.) Country Club.

Dunmyer advised the assistants not to rush in their quests to become superintendents.

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### Dream Maintenance Facility

One of the field trips offered during boot camp was a trip to Pebble Beach Golf Links to tour the course's highly touted maintenance facility. The segment was titled, "Maintenance Facility to Die For."

Indeed, Pebble Beach's building, which recently celebrated its first birthday, is the Taj Mahal of maintenance facilities, as it has been described. It fits in well among the million-dollar mansions that dot the course.

It was sorely needed, too. Pebble Beach had badly outgrown its previous maintenance facility, like a 10-year-old in a 6-year-old's clothes.

Tom Huesgen, superintendent at Pebble Beach, says the course's former tiny maintenance facility, which featured a 65-square-foot office for the superintendent, was functional. But there's no comparing the two buildings. Check out the numbers detailing the new facility (right).

"It worked for a number of years, and it hosted a number of successful events," Huesgen says. "A lot of great people from the industry came through it."

— Larry Aylward, Editor



#### PEBBLE MAHAL:

**Cost** — \$2.3 million

**Site size** — 1.4 acres

**Building size** — 17,500 square feet

**Length** — 287 feet

**Employee areas** — 2,870 square feet

**Indoor equipment storage** — 9,000 square feet

**Preparation of site** — excavation of 30,000 cubic yards of material

**Permitting process** — 1.5 years

**Architectural versions** — Four.



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**"Word is out that we're trying to provide a first-class operation. Maybe this could be a national event."**

MIKE MCCULLOUGH

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"I wanted to know how to do everybody's job before I sat on the other side of the desk," he said. "I wanted to learn all that I could."

Dunmyer said it's important for assistants to set goals for themselves and recognize what they need to work on — personally and professionally — to get to the next level.

**T**he boot camp ended with an assistant superintendent golf tournament at Del Monte Golf Course on Tuesday afternoon. Then it was back to work.

Speaking of work, all of the assistants were thankful to their bosses for letting them attend the boot camp and miss a few days of work. And that brings to mind an interesting point. How many bosses in other professions would allow the people they manage to attend an event that could ultimately lead them to leave their current jobs?

Amsler, who says he feels privileged to work

at Cypress Point Club, says his boss, certified superintendent Jeff Markow, understands he has to do what's best for his career and wanted him to attend the boot camp.

"A good superintendent is not going to hold you back from something he sees as a good opportunity for you," Amsler says. "I've heard [Markow] say that to a number of guys who've gone through here."

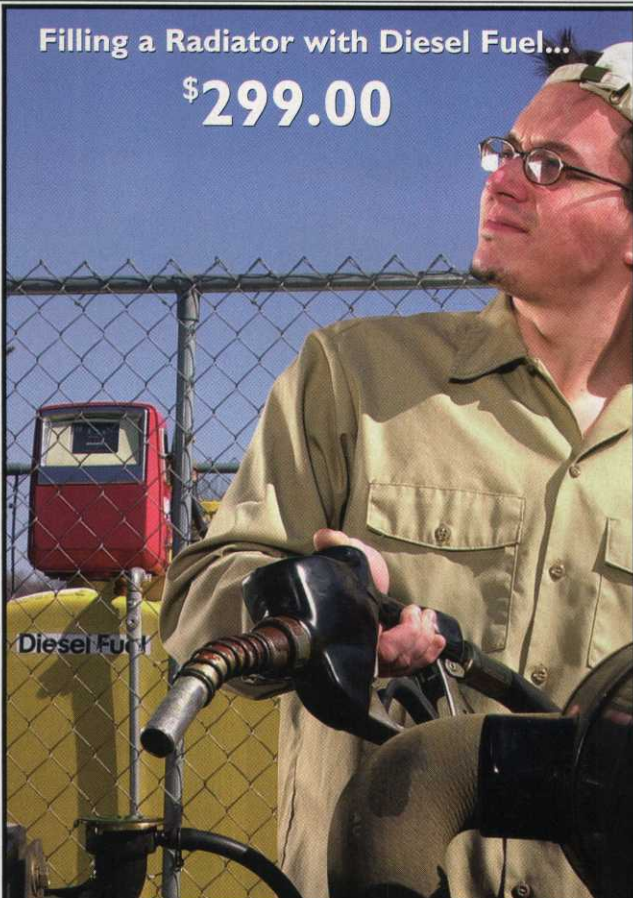
"Sergeant" McCullough, who has been with the NCGA for about four years and has a master's degree in horticulture from Oklahoma State University, is satisfied with the direction his boot camp has taken, but he plans to improve it. McCullough, who says he doesn't know of any other national turf organizations that offer formal programs for assistants, says the boot camp is gaining a name for itself.

"Word is out that we're trying to provide a first-class operation," he says. "Maybe this could be a national event. We're a ways from that, but if we keep it going. ..."

Ten-hut! ■

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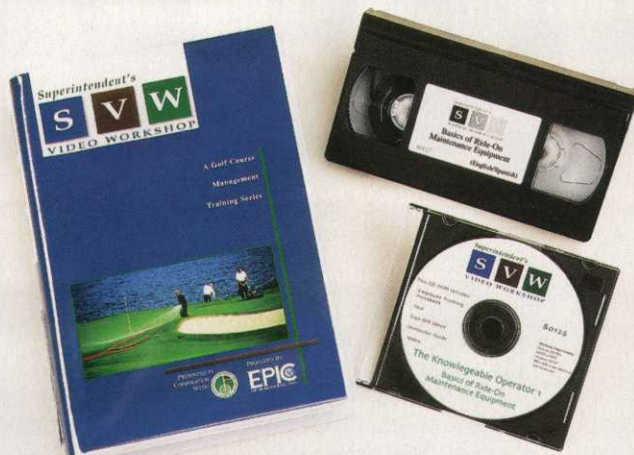
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