

HEAT STRESS

WINTER KILL

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LAZY CREW MEMBERS

LONG HOURS

SHORT FUSES

KEEP YOUR COOL



Here's how some superintendents overcome the burdens of their often-onerous jobs and remain creative in the face of difficult daily maintenance obligations

BY BRUCE ALLAR

Chuck DeCerce had an entire winter to prepare for what he feared would hit him last spring, but that didn't make things any less stressful for the superintendent at Mechanicville (N.Y.) Country Club. As the 2003 golfing season — DeCerce's first at the club located near Albany — wound down last fall, he had plans to fertilize the greens and build temporaries for the late-autumn players.

However, pressure from the club's members to play an extra few weeks on the regular greens forced him to delay his plans, and he got caught: A significant early snow, followed by an early onset to winter, froze over his unfertilized putting surfaces. Then, like a plague, snow mold left its mark on the greens at the beginning of this year.

And DeCerce took the heat. "It all comes back on me," he says, of the criticism leveled this spring when the greens looked awful. Not until mid-June, when the grass

finally returned to form, did the complaints completely end. And DeCerce, who already knew from past experiences at other courses the potential perils of delaying fertilization, had to endure a tough stretch while his crew members learned the lesson for the first time. "I had to go through it again so they could see it," he says.

DeCerce calls that experience the most stressful of his career. But when things spiral beyond your control, he observes, you still have to go out and do the rest of your job. "You have to put it aside," he says of the problems.

The superintendent is able to persevere because he carries with him the attitude that no goals for his course should remain unaccomplished — that every day is a march toward perfection. But he and other superintendents also employ specific strategies for overcoming the burdens of their often-onerous jobs and for remaining creative in the face of tremendous day-to-day maintenance obligations.

Comparing notes

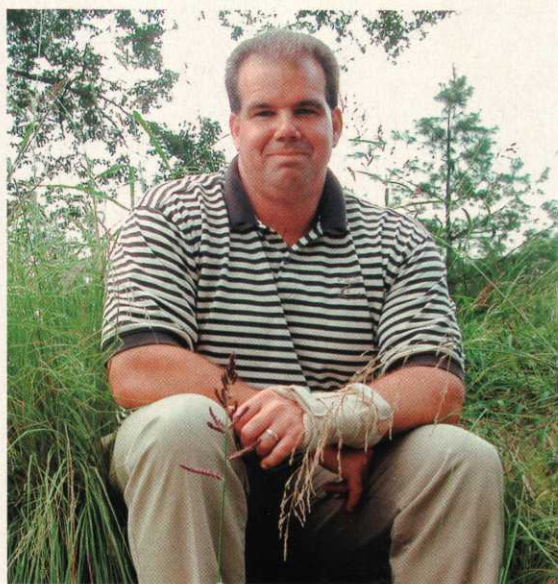
During the long March-through-October grind, DeCerce tries to decompress by fitting in a couple of long weekends with his wife and two daughters. To keep his creative juices flowing, he makes it a point to visit other golf courses — particularly those designed by Devereaux Emmet, who laid out Mechanicville — and compare notes and share inspirations with their superintendents.

In addition, he'll play his own course from every tee, from the ladies' to the tips ("which I have no business doing") to see it from every golfer's perspective.

"I come back with a 4-inch notebook filled with things that have to be changed," DeCerce says. "My crew hates it when I play our course. They try to get me passes to other places."

DeCerce also makes a point to have lunch once or twice a month in the clubhouse, so he can pick up the buzz about issues affecting the golfers. At one such session, he overheard a group of women complaining about poor access to one of their tee boxes, which was cut off by a small fence. DeCerce went out with a chainsaw the next day, cut a hole in the fence board, put up two

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Superintendent Paul Dotti stays stimulated in his job at Edgewood Country Club by taking on major projects. "It's very relaxing for me to be out there on a bulldozer," he says.

Keep Your Cool

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stakes to border the gap, and made the course's female players a happier group.

Paul Dotti, now in his ninth year at Edgewood Country Club in River Vale, N.J., also likes to play other courses. "We're all in the same boat," he says.

His favorite way to rethink the possibilities for his own track, however, is to leave work early on some days, then come back near sunset for a ride around the grounds.

"The members aren't bothering you," he says. "There are no cell phone calls. Things start to jump out at you."

Dotti's creative flashes have led to big-impact projects at Edgewood, a private course with three nines. His par-4 No. 6 on the White nine lacked excitement until the superintendent spotted an unused hillside behind the tee — it actually had become a dump area — and thought it would make a great vista for a par 5. To make others share his vision, he cleaned up the spot, took some dirt up the hill,

Most Stressful Jobs

High demands plus little control equals serious stress at work. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the top 10 most stressful occupations are:

1. Office clerk
2. Lawyer
3. Restaurant or hotel manager
4. Ticket agent
5. Secretary
6. Claims investigator
7. Messenger
8. Bookkeeper
9. Truck driver
10. Cashier

(List is based on the average number of days workers spent away from their jobs recovering from neurotic reactions to job stress.)

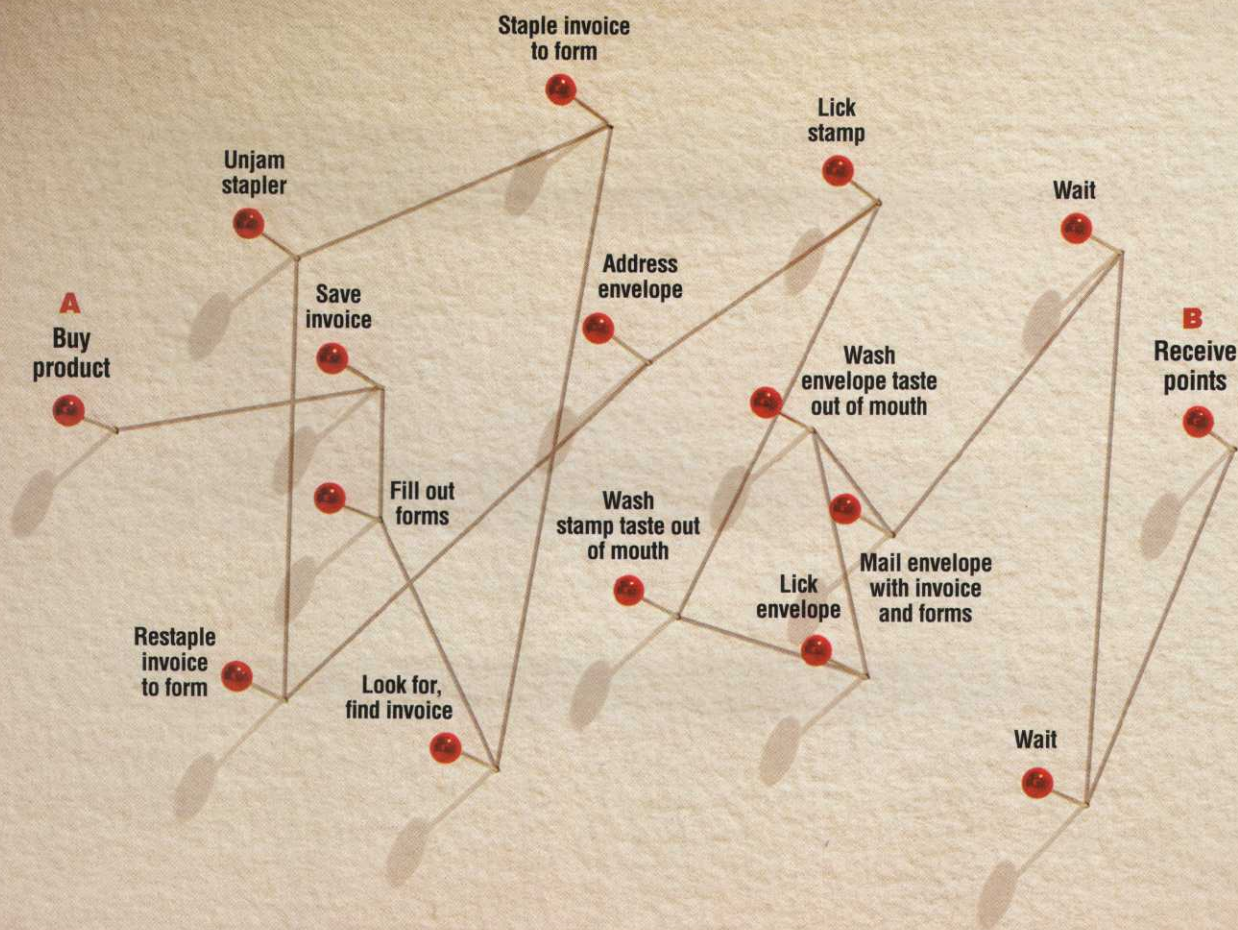
flattened out several square feet and then brought Edgewood members and pros up to stand on the elevated potential tee. "I got it approved," he says. And now it's become a signature hole at Edgewood.

Rallying the troops

Projects like this one relieve the maintenance grind for both Dotti and his crew, who do most of their major renovations themselves, including waterfalls, stone bridges, new greens and irrigation improvements. The big jobs provide a morale boost to the staff.

"If they know they're going to rake bunkers and mow greens every day, there's not a lot of incentive," Dotti says. But at Edgewood, "they don't know what to expect when they come into work each week."

Dotti tries to stay in project mode as much as possible from September through May, realizing the summer months will always be maintenance-intensive. The big projects save Edgewood money — Dotti says he can sometimes do them for 25 percent of what outsiders bid for the contracts — but they also keep the superintendent stimulated. "It's very relaxing for me to be out there on a bulldozer shaping stuff," he says.



Having a five-year plan for his course gives Joe Boe, a nine-year veteran at Coral Oaks Golf Course in Cape Coral, Fla., a way to see beyond the day-to-day stresses. Each year, he lays out all of the things he hopes to accomplish and assigns them dates on a calendar.

When he's feeling worn down, Boe says, "I try to look forward to the next project." The fun stuff — driving skid steer loaders and other equipment — gives him needed breaks from growing grass.

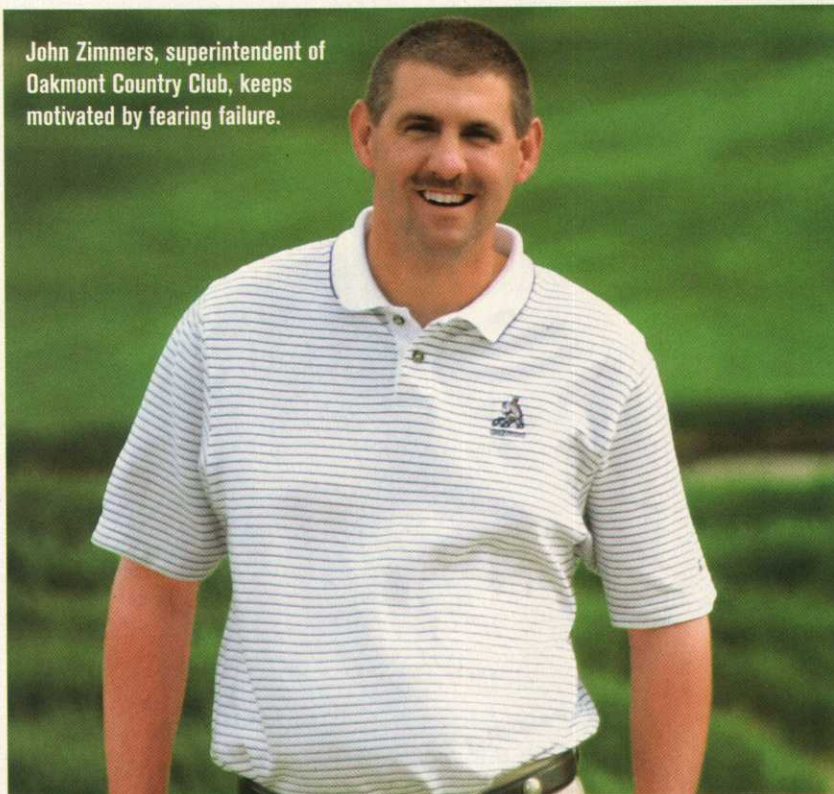
"When I find that I want to snap back at stuff, little stuff that doesn't normally bug me, I know it's time to take a break," Boe says.

Boe says many of his best solutions occur to him when he's driving his car and able to turn things over in his mind. Others come when he's driving his bike.

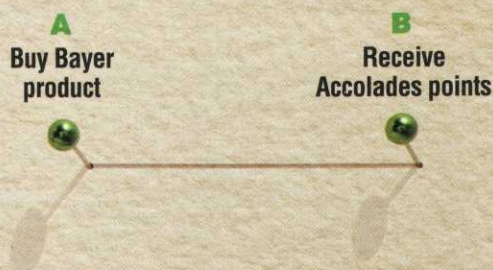
Boe cycles regularly with his wife, often through areas of great natural beauty. There are obvious destressing benefits from the

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John Zimmers, superintendent of Oakmont Country Club, keeps motivated by fearing failure.



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Keep Your Cool

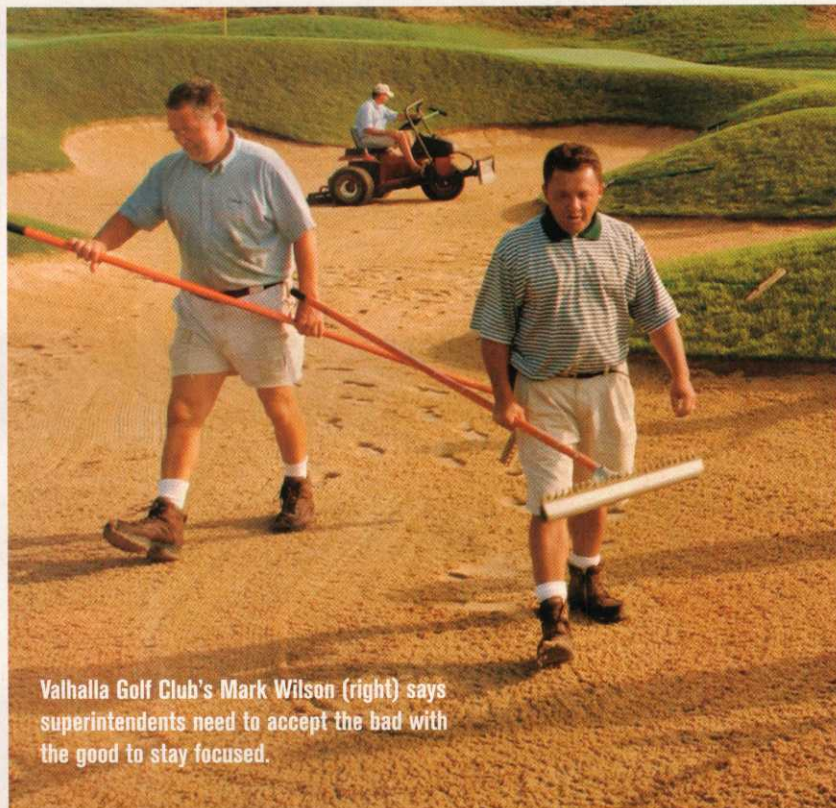
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exercise, and he'll notice how homeowners landscape their properties in ways he had not observed previously. Or he'll see a new example of nature at her best in a noncultivated area. Says Boe, "I'll think, 'Hmm, I could do that at the course.'"

Boe is given enough license at the Arthur Hills-designed Coral Oaks to keep his creative juices flowing. He keeps up with the best ideas in his area by attending local superintendent meetings, which are moved from course to course. Participants play a round of golf, swap "horror stories" and listen to a speaker offering expert advice.

Maintaining composure

Oakmont Country Club's John Zimmers derives much of his incentive from fear of failure. The fifth-year superintendent at the championship course near Pittsburgh realizes there will be some difficult stretches no matter how good you are



Valhalla Golf Club's Mark Wilson (right) says superintendents need to accept the bad with the good to stay focused.

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or how hard you work. He also tries to remember who's watching him.

"When you have a young staff or a lot of interns, they keep you motivated because you think you owe those guys," Zimmers says. "You have such an impact on what they'll do with their futures."

Sometimes it can be a good thing to let your staff know when you're down, he says, because they'll rally to help you out. But that's only if the stress lasts for a brief period. If the boss withdraws for the better part of a week, or longer, it's a problem for everyone.

While Zimmers admits that he doesn't have enough hobbies (he does find time in the fall to attend Pittsburgh Steelers and Penn State football games), he's found ways through experience to stay on an even keel, often by getting out with his staff and immersing himself in a variety of tasks. "The longer you do this," he says, "the more you try to balance things because you never want to take things out on the staff."

Mark Wilson, in his 15th year at Valhalla Golf Club, the Louisville, Ky., course that hosted this May's Senior PGA Cham-

Stress Hurts

■ Workplace stresses can double the rate of death from heart disease, according to a 2002 study of 812 healthy employees. High demands, low control, low job security and few career opportunities contributed to the overall stress measured in the study.

■ One study found that workers who had little control over their jobs were up to 50 percent more likely to die during a period of five to 10 years than workers who had high-stress jobs but more decision-making responsibilities.

■ Stress can thwart the heart-healthy aspects of a physically active job, according to a study of utility workers. Thicker arteries (a sign of atherosclerosis) were found among physically active but stressed workers. Those who were physically active but not stressed had thinner arteries.

■ Work-related stress (including job insecurity) and fatigue may increase the risk of cold, flu and stomach inflammation. In one study, employees in demanding jobs developed colds 20 percent more often than those in less demanding positions.

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pionship through a series of lightning storms, wind bursts and downpours that repeatedly delayed play, will tell you that his most stressful on-the-job experience came many years ago. Working nearly 24-hour days keeping Valhalla playable this spring did not get to Wilson as much as losing his fairways early in his career as a young superintendent at another Louisville course, Audubon Country Club. "I had to call up my greens chairman at that time and say, 'I've got to take some time off,'" Wilson recalls.

He credits his ability to manage the horrible weather at this year's Senior PGA to experience.

"If you understand weather and the averages, you have to understand it's going to get better," Wilson says. "I'm always surprised at how often it evens out."

Most superintendents are hard on themselves, he says, so it's important to develop an acceptance that the bad comes with the good.

"I do know that today's problems are not going to be tomorrow's problems," Wilson says, noting that one day you're worried about drought and the next day you're worried about fungus.

Wilson keeps another sport's analogy in mind when times get tough.

"You're running a marathon," he says. You're not running a short race."

Keep that in mind next time the pressure starts getting to you. ■

Allar is a freelance writer from Floyds Knobs, Ind.

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