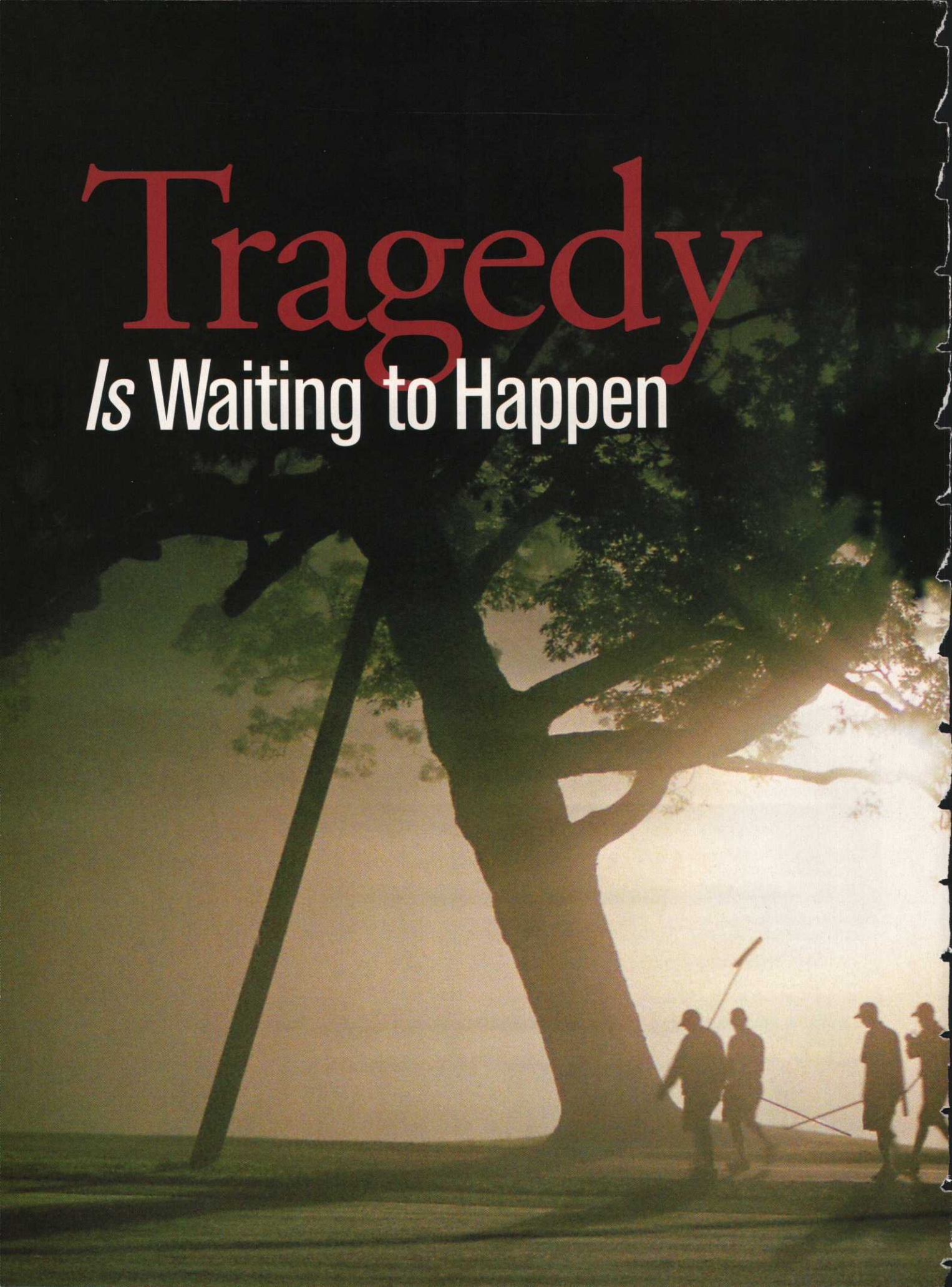


# Tragedy

Is Waiting to Happen







## When it comes to protecting employees, the right time to implement a safety program is now. Tomorrow could be too late

BY BARBARA MULHERN

**T**he death of a 48-year-old Mexican worker, crushed by a mower at a golf club in California, is a stark reminder to all superintendents of the critical importance of safety.

Francisco Rios, an employee of the Stone Tree Golf Club in Novato, was transporting a rotary mower with a blower attachment to the other side of the 13<sup>th</sup> green when he unexpectedly hit a dip in the nonirrigated portion of the steep slope. He lost control and the mower flipped over on top of him. Golfers came to his aid, but it was too late. Five weeks later, with his wife and family members from Mexico at his side, Rios died at a nearby hospital.

"It happened so quick. I guess that's the worst part," Kevin Pryseski, the certified superintendent at the private club, says. "The equipment had rollover protection (ROPS), but he was not wearing the seat belt. It's a tragedy. In my 23 years as a superintendent, nothing like this has ever happened to me."

Rios, who died in March of 2001, was not the only golf course employee seriously injured or killed at courses around the country the past three years. Among the recent fatalities:

- A long-time Mexican worker in his 50s, who was operating a large turf sweeper on a 15- to 29-degree slope at a private course in the western part of the country. The sweeper overturned near the No. 6 fairway sand trap and the worker was crushed to death. The equipment did not have ROPS, and the manufacturer's recommendations were that it not be operated on slopes greater than 20 degrees, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) investigators say.

- A 61-year-old employee, who was operating a fertilizer

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MARY CORCORAN



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spreader on a steep hill at a course in the Southeast. He was found dead under the equipment, which had flipped over on top of him. The man had done maintenance work at courses for more than 20 years.

■ A 26-year-old groundskeeper, who was pinned under a small tractor after it toppled over an embankment into a shallow lake at a course in the Southwest. A co-worker who was mowing the 18<sup>th</sup> green rushed to his aid, but it was too late.

These incidents — as well as many other nonfatal worker injuries that occur at courses

around the country — are nearly always preventable, says Mike Blankenship, the safety director at the Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation.

"I wouldn't think that any accidents on golf courses aren't preventable," he says, noting that the equipment used on golf courses is just as dangerous as farm equipment.

Superintendents, Blankenship adds, "ought to have weekly safety meetings with employees," stressing such issues as using eye protection and hearing protection, wearing the seat belt if the equipment they operate has ROPS, staying off steep slopes, not removing safety guards or shields, keeping away from rotating PTO (power takeoff) shafts, and not carrying passengers on mowers or other equipment.

### A Safety Checklist for Superintendents

- ✓ Hold regularly scheduled safety-training sessions in a language and manner your workers can understand.
- ✓ Document in writing attendance at all safety meetings and safety training sessions.
- ✓ Have written safety rules, and make sure they are fairly and consistently enforced. This includes making it mandatory that employees use personal protective equipment such as hard hats, safety glasses or goggles, and hearing protection when warranted.
- ✓ Train your workers to always wear their seat belts if their equipment has rollover protection and it is in the upright position.
- ✓ Train your employees not to operate equipment on steep slopes. Make sure they follow the manufacturer's recommendations on how steep is too steep.
- ✓ Be sure all equipment operators review and understand the manufacturer's operating manuals and safety instructions. Do not assume that all of your workers can read, even in their own native language.
- ✓ Make sure your workers know how to appropriately dress (long sleeves, long pants, sturdy shoes with nonslip soles) when operating equipment. If the equipment has a PTO (power takeoff unit), train them to keep their distance and not to wear jewelry or loose clothing that could get caught in the rapidly rotating PTO shaft.
- ✓ Train your employees to recognize the signs of heat stress during the hot times of the year, and show them how to protect themselves from the sun.
- ✓ Make sure your safety training includes the other "basics" such as carefully checking the mowing path for obstacles each time workers mow; operating equipment a safe distance away from lakes, ponds, and sudden drop-offs; being extra careful on wet terrain (especially slopes); never removing or bypassing safety guards or shields; and never carrying extra riders.

— Barb Mulhern

### Wake-up call

Rios, whose son still works at the course, was "on a steep slope he shouldn't have been on," Pryseski says. "It was just poor judgment." But Pryseski also blames himself for not spending as much time as he could have stressing safety to his 20 employees.

"This obviously woke us up. Our training definitely didn't adhere to California/OSHA standards. We paid \$23,000 total in fines," he says. "You think nothing like this is going to happen. Until it does, I would think most guys are pretty lax in their safety training. This doesn't ever cross your mind, and you're always in a hurry. So you go through the basics, then get the job done."

Since the incident, Pryseski has assigned a bilingual (Spanish/English) assistant as safety officer to better communicate safety to the course's all-Hispanic work force. He also significantly strengthened his employee safety program to include:

- a written safety manual that spells out the responsibilities of both management and employees and includes all other components of the course's safety program;
- a file for each employee that includes forms and sign-off sheets to document when training on various pieces of equipment or other safety issues takes place;
- additional training for each piece of equipment (using manufacturers' Spanish/English videotapes) — emphasizing that seat belts must

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MIKE KLEMM

Superintendents and their crews can run, but they can't hide from potential danger when it comes to tending 18 or more holes.

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be worn if the equipment has ROPS;

- monthly safety meetings (held in Spanish) that include the viewing of safety videotapes, followed by a short true/false quiz; and

- a safety incentive program — employees' quiz scores are posted and bonuses are given for the best scores.

At Woodland Hills (Calif.) Country Club, certified superintendent Steve Sinclair has what he considers a strong safety program — but even then, employee injuries have occurred.

"The most serious one was when a worker was struck in the eye with a golf ball when going from one location to another on a utility vehicle. He lost most of his eyesight in one eye," he says.

In another incident, an employee was crossing the street with a walk-behind aerifier. "We have three street crossings, and at every one we have a stop sign I made up for workers that warns them of traffic," Sinclair says. In this particular case, the worker did stop and waited before crossing the street. A Jeep appeared to be stopped but suddenly started moving. The worker was struck and wound up with a chipped bone in his ankle.

"One thing that's important on a golf course is to make sure the workers

understand the game of golf," Sinclair says. "We're on a 97-acre property with 18 holes and there is no place to hide sometimes, so we really need to emphasize that here. No matter where you are on the property, you need to be aware of where they're (the golfers) hitting and in which direction they're trying to hit."

Employee safety training at Woodland Hills includes weekly safety meetings every Friday afternoon. "We cover everything from safe lifting procedures to anything we see on the golf course when someone notices something wrong," Sinclair says. "We combine these with a safety lesson, and have workers sign off on both."

"We also go through a worksheet that lists all of the safety concerns in the (maintenance) yard and on the golf course. We give them safety glasses, hard hats, earplugs and show them where everything else is that they'll need. If the person doesn't speak English, we'll bring in a translator," he says.

Providing safety equipment is also a key part of the safety program at the Fountaingrove Golf & Athletic Club in Santa Rosa, Calif., according to superintendent and safety coordinator Andrew Trinkino.

"I have a separate line item in my budget for safety equipment and safety supplies. We are running about \$8,000 per year on that," he says. "I always say that one-eyed greenskeepers don't get very far in the profession."

Trinkino, who has 18 employees, says his course has held monthly safety meetings since the late '90s. "We've purchased the Superintendent's Video Workshop (see accompanying *Safety Resources* article) and have had good participation. We've had no turnover in about three years, so we can see these guys progress."

Trinkino, who has received some good safety ideas from colleagues, also has a sign-off sheet to document attendance at each safety session. In addition, a posted 3 by 4-foot sheet includes all employee names and a spot to fill in the date and subject of safety sessions.

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"We put red dots on it," Trinkino says. "If a person was sick or didn't attend the safety session, he or she gets a red dot. That enables us to go back, determine why the person wasn't there, then train the person."

### Language and other barriers

A recent investigation by *The Associated Press* showed that one Mexican worker per day is dying on the job in the United States across all industries. Mexican workers, the study noted, are 80 percent more likely to die on the job in the United States than native-born workers.

With the high proportion of Mexican and other Spanish-speaking workers at courses around the country, it's critical that any employee safety program take into account potential language and cultural barriers, Blankenship says.

**"Older employees have been doing the same thing forever and, right or wrong, they don't even think about potential hazards."**

Mike Blankenship  
Safety Director  
Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation

If you're training Spanish-speaking workers from other countries, don't assume that they received the same amount of schooling as most workers from the United States. Present your safety training orally — and in their native language (or have a bilingual employee verbally translate the session from English into Spanish).

Also, be aware of potential cultural barriers — for example, in many Hispanic cultures it is not appropriate to question persons in "authority," so your

Hispanic workers may not ask questions of their supervisors, even when there is something they don't understand. In addition, direct eye contact with a person in authority is considered disrespectful in many Hispanic cultures.

Another potential barrier to effective safety training with any worker is that longtime employees who have done

things a certain way for many years are often reluctant to change their habits.

"If employees have never been around equipment, they are more likely to think about safety than those who can't see the forest through the trees," Blankenship says. "Older employees have been doing the same thing forever and, right or

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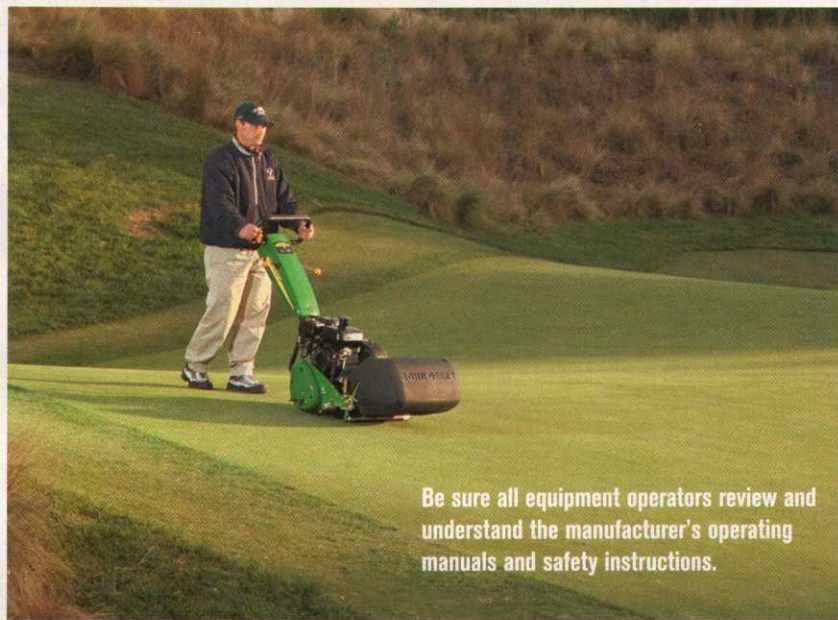
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## Tragedy Is Waiting to Happen



Be sure all equipment operators review and understand the manufacturer's operating manuals and safety instructions.

JOHN DEERE

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wrong, they don't even think about potential hazards."

Pryseski pleads with other superintendents not to wait until an employee is killed to start thinking about safety.

"You'd better wake up and realize that these things can happen," he says.

"There's the legal side — you have attorneys calling you and OSHA coming down on you. But you also have this

personal side. Someone comes to work on a golf course, then never goes back home. You liked this person — his son still works for you. You think, 'Maybe there's something more we could have done.' You can make 100 excuses not to start a safety program, but it's not that difficult once you do it." ■

*Mulhern is a freelance writer from Belleville, Wis.*

## Safety Resources

The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA), some private companies and other safety organizations offer many helpful resources. Among them are:

**GCSAA:** An information packet on employee safety; various self-study courses on such topics as responsible pesticide use and personal protective equipment for pesticide applicators; the Environmental Management Program (which includes a section on employee safety and the right to know); and a members-only online compliance section (that includes a category on worker safety and links to various articles). For more information, go to [www.gcsaa.org](http://www.gcsaa.org).

**Superintendent's Video Workshop:** This training, produced by EPIC of Wisconsin, includes safety videos, tests, sign-off sheets, and instruction guidelines. For more information, go to [www.swonline.com](http://www.swonline.com).

**Monthly Video Safety Training for the Golf Industry:** Produced by Risk Compliance (Hobe Sound, Fla.), this service provides monthly videos, quizzes and an instructor's guide. For more information, go to [www.golfsafety.com](http://www.golfsafety.com).

**National Ag Safety Database:** This database includes information you can download at no cost. Search by topic (such as Machinery Safety [mowers] or Personal Protective Equipment). For more information, go to [www.cdc.gov/nasd/](http://www.cdc.gov/nasd/).

**National Safety Council:** The NSC produces numerous safety videos and other safety-related materials. For more information, go to [www.nsc.org](http://www.nsc.org).