Are YOU Happy with Your PA

Fifteen years ago salaries didn't measure up. Today they aren't quite the bane of superintendents

BY THOMAS SKERNIVITZ, MANAGING EDITOR

WITH A BIGGER paycheck than ego, Matt Shaffer isn't worried about becoming the Bill Gates of superintendents. He's far more concerned about improving the financial standing of his lesser-paid peers.

"I think I'm top-10 percent now," Shaffer says of his monetary rank as the director of golf operations at Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, Pa. "But I always said that once I made it, I wasn't going to forget where I came from because there was a time I could barely eke out a living."

That time was 33 years and a few tax brackets ago. Now 53, Shaffer can smile while reminiscing about his entry-level salary of $9,000 and the one-bedroom floor of a two-story house that came with it. Better yet, he can sleep easier these days, knowing that superintendent paychecks are no longer stuck in the era of buffalo nickels.

In 2005 the average base salary for a superintendent rose to $68,914, according to the Golf Course Superintendents

Association of America (GCSAA). The figure represents a 9.3 percent jump from 2003 and a 29.5 percent jump over seven years.

"It's not at all unusual now for superintendents to be making six figures," GCSAA CEO Steve Mona says. "I saw a job posting the other day where the salary was between $145,000 and $165,000. Those used to be rarities 10 years or so ago. They're not now."

In turn, many superintendents seem content. A *Golfdom* survey indicates that 71 percent of superintendents are "OK" with their salaries. Another 17 percent claim they "make great money" while 11 percent believe "the pay stinks."

"In the role that I fit in," Mona says, "if 88 percent of our members are saying, 'Yeah, I think I'm OK to well compensated,' I'm happy with that."

Yet there is room for improvement. Many of the hardest-working superintendents are among the least compensated, Shaffer says. Given the choice, they're the modest individuals who would sooner spend $2,000 on fertilizer than on a road trip to the national conference. Meanwhile, to Shaffer's chagrin, other employees at the same courses are making notably more money despite playing less integral roles.

"Superintendents today are obviously better educated, and I think we are equal to or better than any other person on the property," he says. "I think we ought to be compensated accordingly, but I don't necessarily think that's the case."

Golfdom's readers reflect Shaffer's sentiment. Although not necessarily unhappy with what they earn, 32 percent claim that "more pay" would be the one thing about their job that they would change, ahead of catering to more knowledgeable golfers (30 percent), experiencing less pressure (18 percent) and shorter working hours (18 percent).

Turn the wage

Disdain over compensation used to be more intense. In 1993 superintendents earned an average of $45,000 per year. Humbling in itself, that figure was just a symptom of an overall image problem that was stunting the profession. While golf pros and club managers were basking in the sport's popularity, superintendents were facing sub-par compensation, fragile job security and fewer job opportunities.

The GCSAA, with Mona at the helm as of November 1993, started to focus on improving the reputation of its membership. Immediately, superintendents were told to mimic the best-dressed person on the property, whether it was a fellow employee or even a member. So be it if that meant donning a coat and tie.

"I think that's pretty much what's expected now," Mona says.

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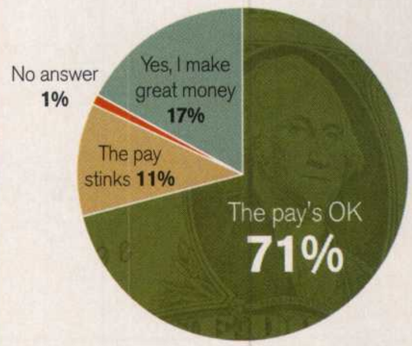
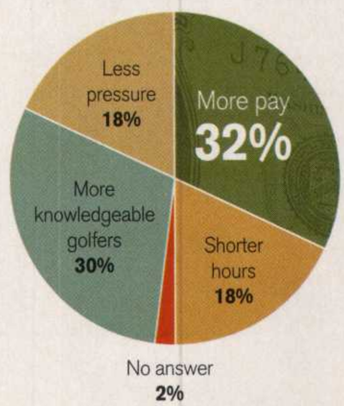
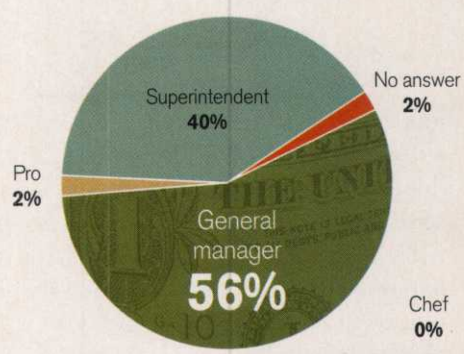
Do you think you're adequately paid for what you do?



If there's one thing you could change about your job, what would it be?



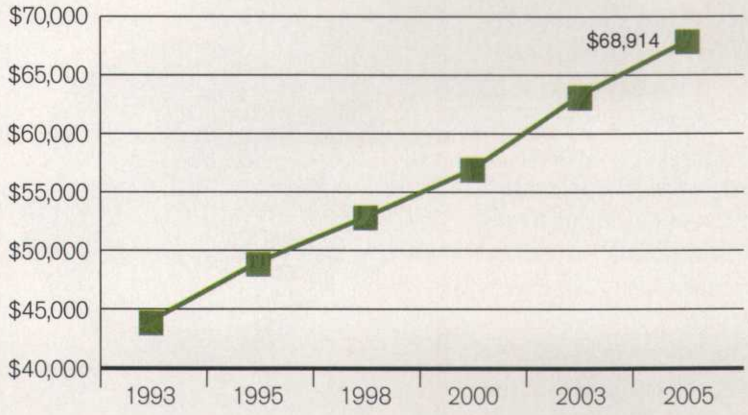
Who do you think should be the highest-paid employee at a golf course?



SOURCE: *GOLFDOM* SURVEY (379 RESPONDENTS)

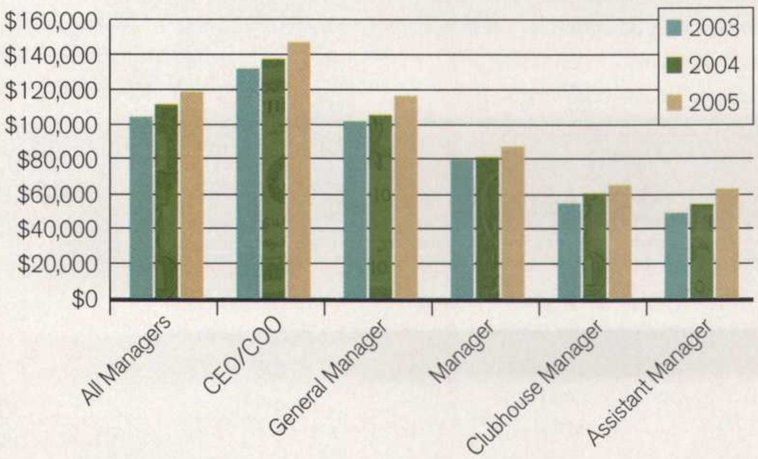
Happy With Your Pay?

Average Base Salary | All Superintendents



SOURCE: GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Club Manager Salaries By Title | 2003-2005



SOURCE: CLUB MANAGERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

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Of course, looking like a person of influence and actually being influential are two different matters. In addition to dressing the part, superintendents were asked by the GCSAA to start taking ownership of the entire facility instead of just the golf course. "Our members can't take that approach any more," Mona says. "And they don't."

Ironically, as the new millennium approached, superintendents finally began to dispel their flawed reputations because of a newfound emphasis on their bread and butter — the golf course. Between 1996 and 2002, the No. 1 determinant as to why golfers chose a particular course changed from cost to course conditioning, according to surveys conducted by the GCSAA and National Golf Federation. An ensuing *Golf Digest* poll of core golfers indicated that the top two drivers of satisfaction were greens/bunkers and tees/fairways, respectively.

"The golfers have put the role of the superintendent at a pretty high position," GCSAA Director of Communications Jeff Bollig says.

Employers, recognizing more than ever that the condition of the golf course is their "No. 1 weapon," Mona says, have reciprocated. The median salary for superintendents at 18-hole facilities with a budget of at least $1 million is $100,000, according to the GCSAA. At least 10 percent of all certified superintendents with a minimum education of a bachelor's degree are making $125,000 or more.

In effect, salary is no longer a major concern. Job security and unrealistic player expectations of the course have moved to the forefront of superintendent worries, Mona says. These days, GCSAA members are just as prone to complain about issues involving labor and environment as they are about compensation.

"For a lot of years, (salary) was Job One," Mona says. "It's still extremely important. I don't want you to get the idea we're coasting at all, because we're not. But those are not the kind of conversations we're having today."

Supers vs. pros and managers

How much salary is enough? At one time the rule of thumb was that the total amount should represent 10 percent of the annual budget. But there are fallacies to that thinking, Shaffer says. "I'm not sure a guy with a $3 million budget is making $300,000. And the guy who has a $500,000 budget, I'm not sure he's making $50,000," he says.

Less practical still is trying to determine one's worth based on actual hours worked. That's a no-win situation, according to Mona, in light of the long days and weeks that many superintendents record, especially during peak season.

"If you get into the game of trying to calculate your average hourly wage, you probably won't be too happy with that," Mona says. "But if you look at it in a broader sense — as a year rather than 365 eight-hour days — I think you can have a little different attitude. ... And all of us agree that people are working harder today, generally speaking, and longer than they were 10 years ago, 20 years ago. I think our members understand that."

Right or wrong, some superintendents inevitably feel the most preferable salary is one that compares with — or supercedes — that of fellow employees, specifically the club manager and club pro.

Again, Mona says, the disparity in pay among course employees used to be far more significant, which soured GCSAA members at the time. But in some cases today, superintendents, especially those employed by multi-course management and maintenance companies, are the highest-paid employees at the facilities, Mona says.

"We found out that the range of available salaries out there is really increasing, and the ceiling has exploded," Bollig says.

Rightfully so, according to Shaffer, who doesn't mince words when touting the credentials of superintendents. "I have to wear 25 hats," he says. "I see the (club pro) wearing three. I see the GM wearing six or eight."

Specific to golf professionals, "I think we're every bit as good or way better," Shaffer says. "Can I teach golf? No. Can he teach agronomy? No. Does he know about irrigation? Does he know about fertilizer? Just compare the apples to apples. He usually has a staff of four. I have a staff of 50. I have to go outside and deal with the elements. If I'm cold, I don't go over and turn up the thermostat. I'm not saying that he doesn't deserve what he gets. I'm just saying that I deserve every bit as much as he does."

In regard to general managers, superintendents again shouldn't have to take a backseat, Shaffer says, especially if the course is the facility's primary asset, as is the case at Merion.

"I know a tremendous amount of superintendents that I feel as though they could be equal to their managers," he says. "If you have a really qualified superintendent and a really qualified golf professional, I don't understand the need for a general manager."

That may be true, says James B. Singerling, executive vice president and CEO of the Club Managers Association of America (CMAA), but only if the facility features nothing more than a golf course. Throw in a restaurant, a clubhouse and employees not attached to the maintenance

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Start at the **Negotiating Table**

Need some more advice on how to improve your salary? Visit *www.golfdom.com/salary* to see what Patrick R. Finlen, the director of golf maintenance operations at The Olympic Club in San Francisco, advises assistant superintendents to do in their search for greener pastures.

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crew, and the task is far more daunting. It wouldn't be fair to a superintendent or golf pro, no matter how qualified, he says, if he or she was pitted with the complexities of regulatory and human resource issues that come with operating a club.

"To make an analogy, if I had an airplane with a great navigation guidance system and I had a flight attendant, why would I need a pilot?" Singerling says. "All I can tell you is that I wouldn't want to fly on that plane."

Bruce Williams, the certified superintendent at the Los Angeles Country Club, sees no problem with the general manager making more money. *Golfdom* readers support that stance, ranking general managers (56 percent) as the employees that should be paid the most, ahead of superintendents (40 percent) and club pros (2 percent).

"If he can get it, good for him," Williams says of the general manager. "I look at that as room for me to potentially grow. I don't want to make more than the person I work for."

In search of big(ger) money

Superintendents hoping to boost their income should start by adhering to four approaches recommended by Mona:

- **Become certified:** The average salary of a certified superintendent rose from $62,948 in 1998 to $80,489 in 2005.

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PHOTO BY: DANIEL HIXON/ISTOCK INTERNATIONAL

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"That's the ultimate chicken-and-egg argument, and I'm not going to get into that," Mona says, "but the facts are what they are, so you can probably draw a conclusion there."

■ **Go private:** The average salary of a superintendent employed at a private club in 2005 was more than $80,000 compared with the overall average of nearly $69,000.

■ **Move uptown:** Superintendents working with a budget of at least $750,000 made an average of $91,000 per year in 2005. "I hate to come across flippant, but those are statistical realities," Mona says of his first three tips.

■ **Take ownership:** Finally, the superintendent who shows concern for the overall success of the facility will be viewed differently, Mona says, and ultimately compensated more handsomely. And who better to take the reins than the person who is already adept at maintaining budgets, managing people and displaying ingenuity, he adds. "All of those things combined put the superintendent in pretty good stead as far as how he or she can increase their value to their facility's ownership," Mona says.

Williams couldn't agree more with Mona's final recommendation. A staunch believer that more responsibility equals more money, he ties bonuses into his salary based on self-imposed goals and performance reviews.

"It's not that I'm worth X amount of dollars; I've brought that value to the company, to the business," Williams says. "If you can go in and do a project and save $200,000, you might be worth $200,000. If you can go in and develop efficiencies, streamline operations and manage your payroll properly, you have greater value to your employer."

For those superintendents who have reached their salary cap, never fear, Williams says. There are many ways to supplement income, including consulting, speaking, teaching, writing and operating a home-based business, particularly during the off-season.

"I've heard of some people, in lieu of getting a raise, they've asked, 'Could I be allowed to do some consulting 10 days a year to assist my income?' " Williams says. "It costs the (employers) zero out of their pocket, so they say, 'OK.' The most important part is to make sure (the side work) has the blessing of the people you work for."

Paid time off is another option if an employer can't offer a raise. "Let's say that

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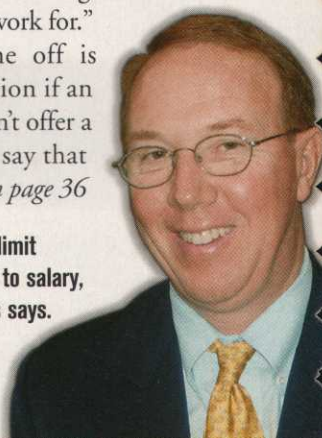

The sky is the limit when it comes to salary, Bruce Williams says.

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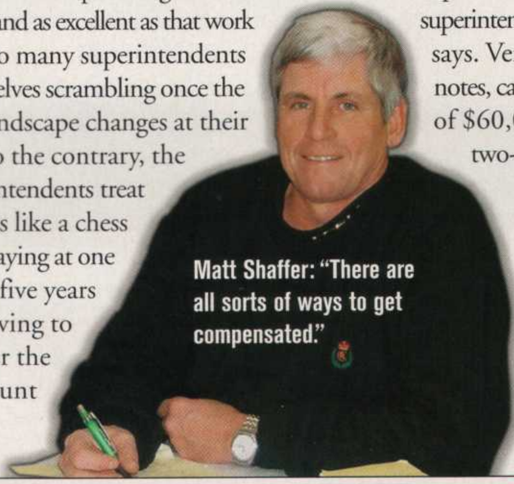
the club's maximum ceiling is $120,000, and you really want to stay there because your kids are in school," Shaffer says. "See if you can get $120,000 and six weeks off."

Shaffer touts other fringe benefits such as the use of a truck ("that's at least five grand a year," he notes), reimbursement for the truck's fuel and insurance ("tack on another $2,000"), a clothing allowance ("another two grand") and a quality retirement plan. "And if you have housing, holy heck, that saves you $25,000 or $26,000 a year after taxes," he says. "All of that is at least $30,000 in perks. There are all sorts of ways to get compensated."

Unlike many highly paid superintendents, Shaffer is not bound by a contract. Like Williams, he encourages his bosses to base his employment status on performance.

"I always have to negotiate a good deal initially because I'm not really big on asking for raises," Shaffer says. "I go in and tell them these are the three rules from my perspective: If I meet your expectations, I get to stay. If I exceed them, it's up to you to keep me. And if I fail them, I'll resign. I treat the job like I'm an independent contractor."

The problem with many superintendents, according to Williams, is that they're inefficient at career planning. As hard as they work, and as excellent as that work may be, too many superintendents find themselves scrambling once the political landscape changes at their courses. To the contrary, the best superintendents treat their moves like a chess game — staying at one course for five years before moving to another for the same amount of time.



Matt Shaffer: "There are all sorts of ways to get compensated."

"Sometimes working 12 or 20 years at a place isn't all that bad either," Williams says, "but I think it's rather unrealistic today to think you're going to work for 40 years at a club. There are a few that will, and from my experience quite a few of them will be underpaid when they leave the market."

Meanwhile, there's "plenty of room at the top" for those just entering the superintendent business, Williams says. Very few professions, he notes, can offer an annual salary of $60,000 to graduates of a two-year program.

"Believe me," he says, "if somebody wants to strive and work hard and develop a career path and a career plan, it's limitless where they can go in this industry." ■