

The Graduates



Chuck Green, director of golf operations at Sage Valley Country Club, briefs the future turf managers.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

Attendees of Jacobsen's Future Turf Managers Seminar look ahead to the start of their careers

Heeere's Johnny! We'd like to welcome John Micklas, a fresh-faced 22-year-old and new graduate of the University of Massachusetts, to the wonderful world of golf course maintenance. Here's a toast to you John — and all the recent turf graduates — in hopes of your success.

But, as you know, the turfgrass industry isn't exactly on easy street. Considering that golf course closings exceeded openings the past two years, there's not a bunch of jobs waiting for you.

This theme was a hot topic of discussion recently at the three-day Future Turf Managers Seminar hosted by Jacobsen in mid-May. Jacobsen invited 14 college students, including Micklas, from top turf schools around the country to participate in the event, which included a variety of activities,

from seminars and plant tours to go-kart racing and grilling out. More than 600 turf students have participated in the Future Turf Managers Seminar since its inception in the 1970s.

The guys and gals who get to go through the program should be proud. Every year, Jacobsen contacts the country's top turf schools and asks the department heads to nominate their top students to attend the event. Jacobsen officials select a fortunate few to attend the event from the pool of nominees.

"We started this to get our arms around the up-and-coming superintendents," says Dan Wilkinson, Jacobsen's president. "It gives us some good insight into what these young folks are thinking about the industry as they come into it."

The attendees toured Jacobsen's manufacturing facility in Charlotte and tested some of the company's latest equipment at the nearby Tega Cay Golf Club on the first day of the three-day event. On the second day, the group traveled to Graniteville, S.C., for a tour of Sage Valley Country Club with Director of Golf Course Operations Chuck Green; a tour of E-Z-GO in Augusta, Ga., the golf car manufacturer that is Jacobsen's sister company; and a tour of Lake Olmstead Stadium, the minor league ball park of the Augusta Green Jackets.

On the third day of the event, the group heard talks from several turf industry experts, including Mark Wilson, the certified superintendent of Valhalla Golf Club; M.C. Engelke, associate center director of AgriLife Research at Texas A&M University; and Teri Harris, the managing director of development for the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America.

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Recent graduate John Micklas says he has the personality for sales.

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There was also a lot of talk about the future, as the name of the event suggests. What does the future hold for the future turf managers of this country?

"It's a tough industry," Wilkinson says. "There are not 1,000 new courses being built in the next five years. The top students are the ones who will be the future leaders in this industry. But it won't be an easy road."

Micklas has a job as assistant superintendent at Oak Hill Country Club in Fitchburg, Mass. But he eventually wants to go into sales and sell equipment, such as Jacobsen mowers.

"I have a plan," the ever-smiling Micklas says. "I have the personality for sales."

Sammy Elfstrom, a 23-year-old who recently graduated from Oregon State University, also has a sunny disposition but plans to use it to help grow turf as a superintendent. Elfstrom is upbeat, despite the fact that the market isn't bursting with jobs. Elfstrom says it is up to him to make a name for himself in a stagnant job market.

"I just have to try extra hard," says Elfstrom, who has a four-year degree in horticulture/turf and landscape management. "I have to try and separate myself from other people. That's why I'm here."

Elfstrom considers himself fortunate to have attended the Future Turf Managers Seminar and used the event, not only to learn, but to make connections with people like Engelke and Wilson.

Elfstrom heard about the Future Turf Managers event from Tom Cook, an associate professor of horticulture at Oregon State University. Cook nominated Elfstrom to attend.

Elfstrom is not the only one who realizes he must stand out in the job market. Greg Caldwell, a recent graduate of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University with a four-year degree in crop and soil environmental sciences with a turfgrass option, knows more people are going into turf maintenance than ever before and that competition is and will continue to be fierce for jobs. Caldwell, who took a semester of school off to intern at Winged Foot Country Club in 2006, the year the club hosted the U.S. Open, hopes the connections he has made throughout the industry will pay off in the future.

"It goes back to whom you know and where you have been," the 21-year-old says.

Speaking of which, Caldwell accepted a post at Galloway (N.J.) National Club on Memorial Day after being contacted by the club's superintendent, Scott McBane, a fellow Virginia Tech grad. Caldwell began as an intern but will soon move up to an assistant in training.

"I've been playing golf since I was 4 years old," he says. "I want to be a superintendent."

Caldwell, who grew up in Virginia, would like to end up there or North Carolina for the majority of his career. But he

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J. Landon Messal and Sammy Elfstrom realize they might have to go where the jobs are if they want to move up the career ladder.

realizes it's a transient business and that he has to move where the jobs are.

"I'll go where I have to," he says.

So will Elfstrom, who grew up on the Oregon coast and would like to work in his home state as well and be near the ocean. That said, Elfstrom would take a job smack dab in the middle of the country if he had to and be landlocked for a few years.

"To climb the ladder, you have to take those steps, and every step is a step you want to take but you might not always end up where you want to be," he says. "I know where I want to go, and I

know how I need to get there."

J. Landon Messal, a recent graduate of the University of Tennessee with a degree in turfgrass science management, is going where he wants to go — for now. Messal relocated to Charleston, S.C., where he accepted a job at the Golf Club of Briar's Creek as an irrigation tech and assistant in training. The 27-year-old, who was born in Florida and has lived all over the country, is in a good field because he's not afraid to move around from town to town.

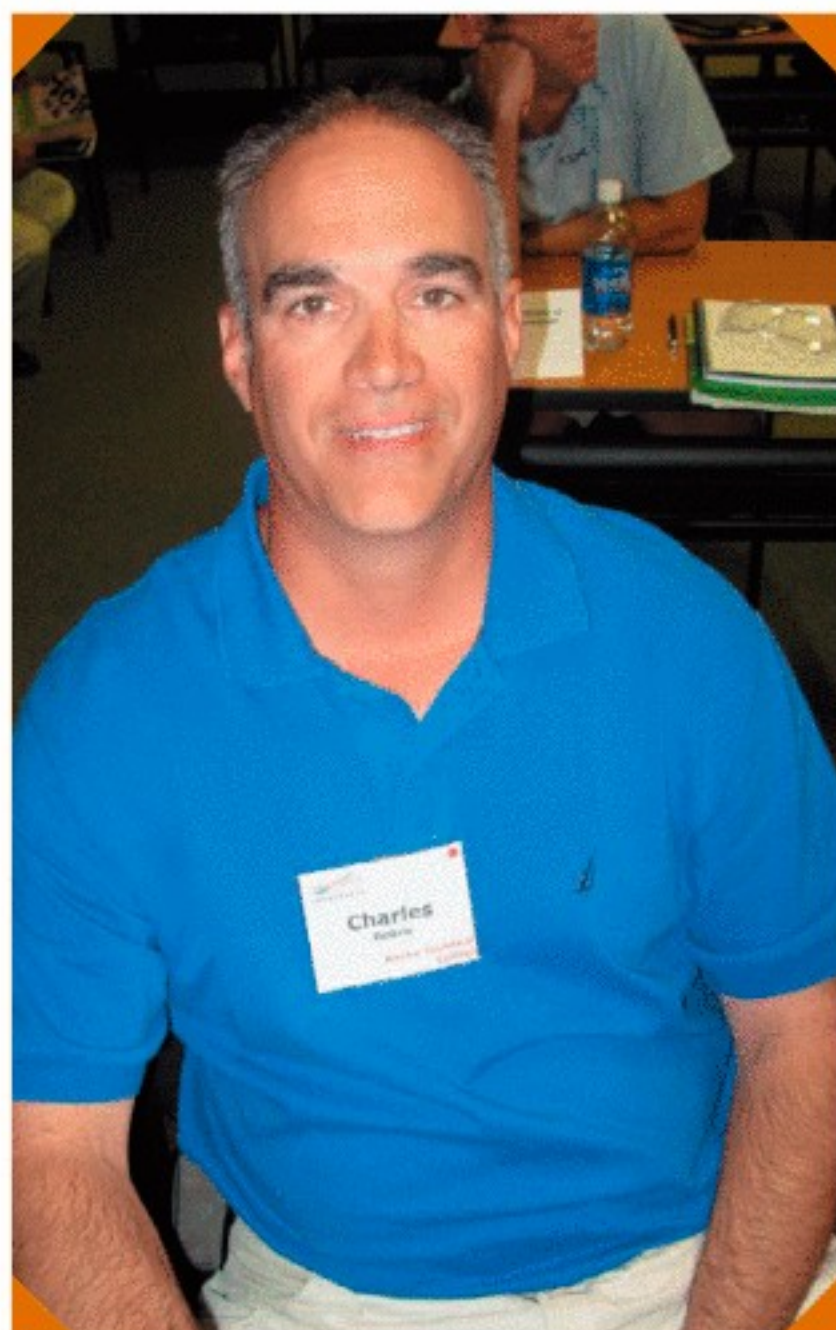
"It will be necessary," Messal says.

But it concerns him that the golf industry, which was overbuilt in the 1990s, is undergoing a correction with fewer courses being built. He's afraid there won't be much turnover in a tight market in the next few years.

One of the graduates at the event, Charles DeGrio, appeared a tad different from the rest. He didn't sport the baby face like some of the others and even had some gray hair.

That's because DeGrio is 43 and embarking on a second career. The Minnesota native retired from the U.S. Army two years ago after 23 years. He went to Anoka Technical College near Minneapolis on the G.I. Bill for two years and received an associate's degree in golf course management. He has been working at Monticello (Minn.) Country Club as an assistant.

"I thought this would be a great career choice," DeGrio says with a smile. "And I'm loving every minute of it." ■



U.S. Army veteran Charles DeGrio is beginning his second career.



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