

Back To School

Most golf course superintendents are horticulturists by trade, but they will be the first to say their jobs go far beyond making the grass grow. They dabble in budgeting, resource management, accounting, public relations, personnel management, mediation, meteorology, maintenance, wildlife habitat — all while keeping 18 fairways, greens and tee boxes in top form.

“There are roughly 50 different hats that we wear,” says Jim Loke, certified superintendent at Bent Creek Country Club in Lancaster, Pa. “We have to be an astronomer, a weatherman and a liaison between governments and the people.”

With so many hats, which one would superintendents wear if they went back to school for 30 days? Ray Davies, director of golf course maintenance and construction for Petaluma, Calif.-based CourseCo, provides an answer

with which many of his peers agree.

“When I went to college, I was going to get a major in ornamental horticulture and a minor in business,” Davies says. “That’s what I did, and now I wonder if I shouldn’t have done it the other way around.”

For all the facets of the job Loke describes, he says he also believes a master’s degree in business administration would likely serve him best. But in the next breath, he acknowledges that perhaps studying psychology would be the way to go.

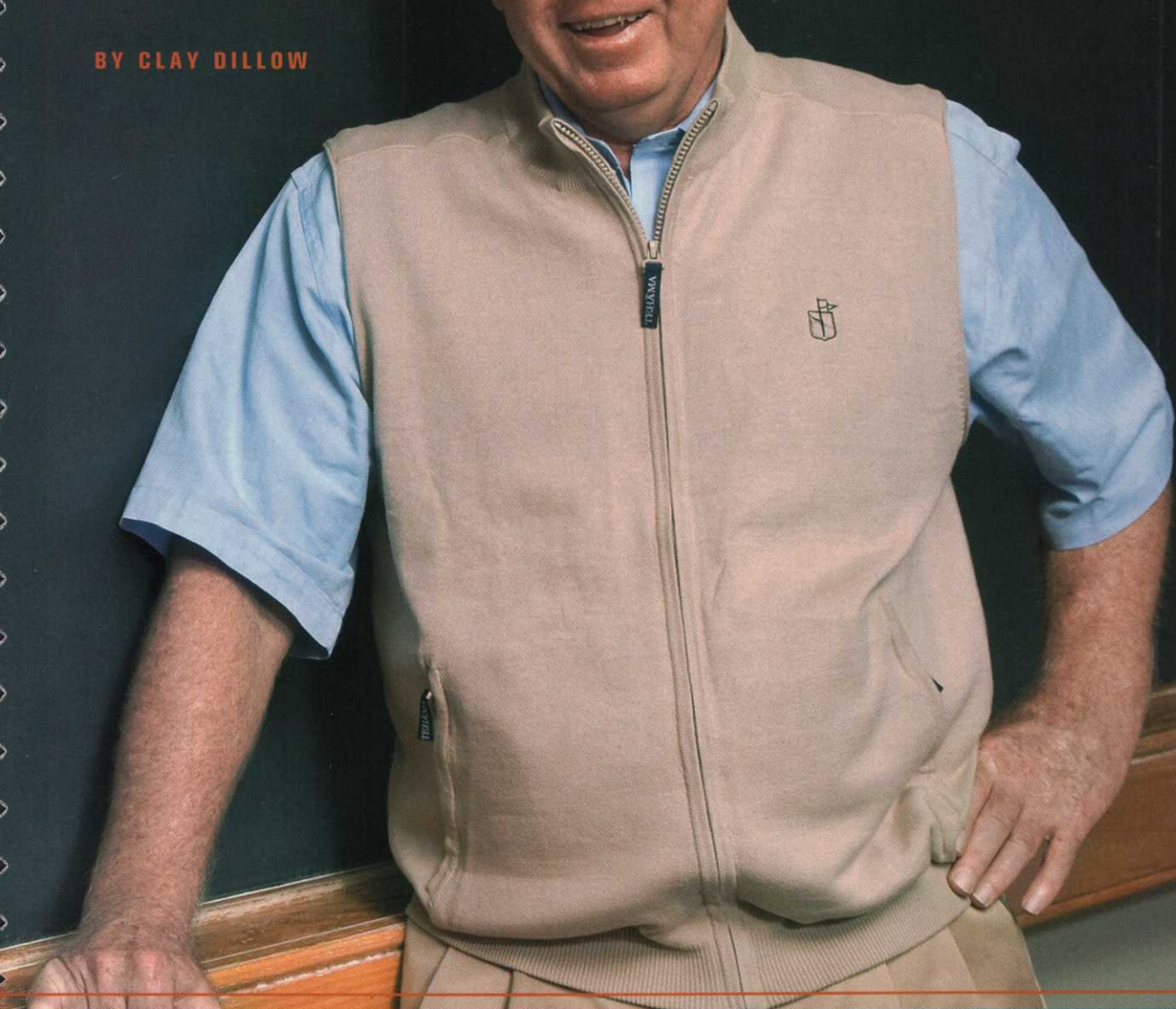
“Understanding people,” Loke says, describing one of his most common challenges. “The psychology of people as in the motivating of people ... directing people.”

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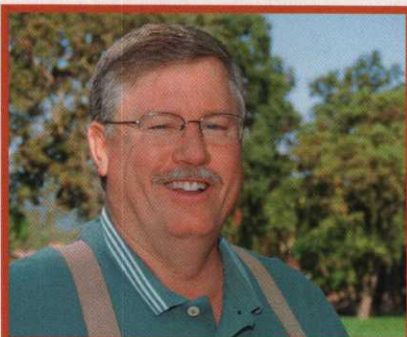
What would you
study if you could
return to college
for a month?

Jim Loke, certified superintendent of
Bent Creek Country Club, would hone
his business and psychology skills.

BY CLAY DILLOW



Back To School



"You can be the best superintendent in the world, but if you only have half of what you need, you're going to fail."

Ray Davies



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Davies and Loke essentially represent the field when it comes to the subjects superintendents might study if offered an opportunity to return to higher education. Of the professionals interviewed for this story, almost every one mentioned psychology or business as the subject he or she would most like to study to facilitate his or her day-to-day duties, both on and off the golf course.

Moreover, regardless of the path each would take to get there, a common goal emerges from them: "We need to better articulate the message we need to get out, whether it's to the community, the board of directors and even our own staffs," says Mark Clark, certified superintendent of Troon Golf and Country Club in Scottsdale, Ariz. He says environmental issues, wildlife habitat and day-to-day agronomy naturally consume the golf course superintendent. But in large part, communication is the No. 1 skill the modern superintendent must possess.

"You're not mid-management anymore," Clark says, noting that most superintendents manage a budget that tops \$1 million. "You're key staff. You have to be able to show those that hire you what you are capable of doing. Most of the time, that means being able to communicate what you are trying to do."

Clark, like Loke and Davies, says he would study business, but it's the ability to write and present to others that interests him. In a position that rests semi-autonomously somewhere between the community, the members, the board of

directors and the golfing public, superintendents have found effective communication skills to be some of the sharpest tools in their shed.

"He who gets the best resources wins," Davies says. "You can be the best superintendent in the world, but if you only have half of what you need, you're going to fail."

To that end, Davies believes superintendents are unintentional salespeople. They are knowledgeable advisers who must be able to help boards of directors understand the needs of the course and communicate with them in a way that helps them make good decisions.

"As superintendent, you're in charge of the biggest asset of the golf course: the golf course," says Mike Osley, certified superintendent of Aurora Hills Golf Course in Centennial, Colo. "You're the one who attends board meetings and says, 'This is why we need to spend this money.' You have to be a salesman. You have to be able to go into a boardroom in a business suit and tie and tell the members why you need this money to maintain this golf course."

The communication challenges don't end in the boardroom. With a budget secure, superintendents must turn around and motivate, educate and direct a staff that is often made up of temporary help. Keeping a large staff motivated is a full-time job, says David Phipps, superintendent at Stone Creek Golf Club in Oregon City, Ore. Like Clark, if he were to have another crack at the university, Phipps would consider studying business as it pertains to personnel management.



"I think I could be a stronger motivator."

David Phipps



"When you find yourself in a management position, you're almost thrown to the wolves if you're not ready for it."

Joe Boe

"I think I could be a stronger motivator," Phipps admits, adding that keeping crews energized — especially when the boss is not looking over their shoulders — is not easy.

While communication skills are handy in-house, the biggest challenge might come from the outside. Golfers and the general public make great demands on the course, and the role of public relations director often falls squarely on the superintendent.

"I think nowadays it's key that the superintendent be responsible to the members of the club, or in my case the golfing public," Osley says. "You can't be the guy behind the scenes anymore."

Superintendents don't just have to sell their budgets to the board, Osley notes. They must sell who they are and what they do to the public, and for that, Osley says a little training in psychology couldn't hurt.

Joe Boe, superintendent of Windermere Country Club near Orlando, agrees. Boe says he would like to better gauge where people are coming from and why they react the ways they do. For that, Boe would spend his hypothetical 30 days at school tackling psychology.

"We had a fella' who wanted the greens rolled for his events each Friday," Boe says. "I prefer a double-cut."

Here, Boe explains the things he's learned over the years, the nuances of body language and how a guy has a tendency to stop listening when someone tries to tell him something he doesn't want to hear. When Boe tried to explain to the golfer why he was going to dou-

ble-cut instead, the guy began to close up. So Boe shifted strategies.

"I told him, 'Next week I'm going to roll nine holes, and I'm going to double-cut the other nine and I'm not going to tell you which,' " Boe says. The next week, the golfer finished his game, clearly preferring the nine Boe had double-cut.

"Because I had changed my tactic, he had the opportunity to be part of the solution," Boe says. "Now he's one of my biggest backers."

This is where psychology comes into play, Boe says, knowing how people think, how to avoid mental land mines and elude confrontation. By understanding people's reactions, a superintendent can save a lot of headaches on the course, he says.

"That's something that, when you're getting into this business, you don't get those interpersonal skills," Boe says. "When you find yourself in a management position, you're almost thrown to the wolves if you're not ready for it. You have to deal with people face to face. I've seen it sink quite a few people."

So what would superintendents study if they could go back to the classroom for 30 days? Perhaps they would study psychology, perhaps business or personnel management. But perhaps what they most need to learn simply cannot be taught. It must be learned.

"It's being able to relate to all the people around you," Osley says. "I don't know if you learn that in school. I think you just learn that each and every day as you live the days that are given to you." ■

Dillow is a freelance writer from Chicago.



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