

The Spackler Syndrome

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

• He was an oddball who depicted you as disheveled and deranged. • He toked on turf, lived like a slob and displayed a combative side, at least when it came to gophers. •

HIS NAME WAS CARL SPACKLER and he helped put the job of golf course superintendent on the map — for better or worse — when the film “Caddyshack” was released 28 years ago this summer. If it wasn’t for Spackler, the fictional assistant greenkeeper who aspired to be head greenkeeper of Bushwood Country Club, a lot of people might not know what you do for a living.

That said, some superintendents (many prefer *not* to be pigeon-holed as greenkeepers) believe that Spackler, portrayed by Bill Murray in the popular and lasting film, set them back several years in their quest to be viewed as professionals — not just as sweaty, smelly types who cut grass, dig ditches and eradicate varmints for a living.

“[Spackler] put us at least 10 years behind in how we’re viewed professionally,” says Cliff Beckmann, a former Oregon superintendent, who left the profession several years ago.

Other superintendents agree. That said, many of them say they’ve come a long way in how they’re viewed professionally. And most superintendents can laugh off the effects that Spackler and “Caddyshack” have had on their profession after almost 30 years.

Most superintendents agree that sustaining a professional image is vital to the roles they play at their respective clubs and golf courses, not to mention their self-esteem.

So where do they stand in that regard?

Dead on or dead wrong?

There is much debate about whether Spackler portrayed the profession as fact or fiction. Some superintendents say Murray’s character was quite accurate for the late 1970s and early 1980s. Others dismiss Spackler as a caricature and a slam to superintendents then and now.

Todd Voss, superintendent of the Dou-

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Just how much has
Bill Murray's "Caddyshack"
character tarnished the
profession's image?

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The Spackler Syndrome

"If they wanted to remake the movie now and portray the same image, it wouldn't bother me a bit."

• **TODD VOSS** •
SUPERINTENDENT,
DOUBLE EAGLE CLUB



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ble Eagle Club in Galena, Ohio, spent much of his youth working on the golf course at the Walden Golf and Tennis Club in Aurora, Ohio, where his father, Joe, was the superintendent. Voss filled divots, picked up cigarette butts and performed other odd jobs. He was 11 when "Caddyshack" was released in 1980, and he begged his father to take him to see it.

"I thought the movie was hilarious because I could relate to it," Voss says.

When Voss watched Murray as Spackler on the silver screen, he says it was just like watching his dad's assistant superintendent at work. "He had the same appearance, attitude and lifestyle," Voss says. "I'll just leave it at that."

But Voss attributes his dad's Spackler-like assistant to the times. In the early 1980s, during "Caddyshack's" reign, there weren't many college-educated superintendents and assistant superintendents around. "I grew up around many Carls," Voss says.

But that didn't discourage Voss from wanting to grow up to be a superintendent.

"It was a funny movie," the 39-year-old says. "If they wanted to remake the movie now and portray the same image [of our profession], it wouldn't bother me a bit."

But Tommy Witt, a certified superintendent and director of golf course operations for Northmoor Country Club in Highland Park, Ill., calls the Spackler character a farce. Witt thinks "Caddyshack" is a funny film, but he doesn't want superintendents to be compared to Spackler.

"The roles that superintendents play are significantly more important than the cartoon character that Bill Murray portrayed," Witt says. "I don't find any satisfaction in being viewed as a cartoon character."

Witt was 24 years old and just beginning his career as a superintendent at the Riverhill Club in Kerrville, Texas, when "Caddyshack" came out. At the time, Witt didn't give much thought to the way his profession was portrayed in the film. But several years later, and as the film continued its run of popularity, Witt thought, "What a horrible movie for our profession."

Jon Jennings, the certified superintendent of the Chicago (Ill.) Golf Club, saw "Caddyshack" when he was in high school. Jennings worked on a golf course at the time but had no idea he would make the field his own. "I never laughed so hard in my life," Jennings says of the first time he saw the film.

But Jennings, who graduated from the University of Massachusetts in 1984 with a two-year degree in turf management and in 1986 with a four-year degree in environmental economics, understands why superintendents like Witt were offended by Spackler and "Caddyshack" at the time, especially if they were trying to upgrade their images with golfers and their employers.

"I may not take offense to it, and I may think it's funny, but I also see it from other people's eyes and listen to what they're saying about it," Jennings says.

Berry Collett, director of golf maintenance for the Sea Island Co. in St. Simons Island, Ga., was a student studying turfgrass management at North Carolina State University when he saw "Caddyshack." He agrees with Voss in that the film had the profession pegged for the period.

"You did what you had to do to get rid of a gopher back then," Collett quips.

But superintendents are still trying to overcome the image cast by Spackler, the 47-year-old Collett adds. "A lot of people still see superintendents to that extent."

But Collett believes the stigma is fading among golfers. And he says many up-and-coming superintendents haven't even watched "Caddyshack."

"My son is studying to be a superintendent, and he has never seen it," Collett says.

Randy Kehres, a certified superintendent who's the director of golf course mainte-

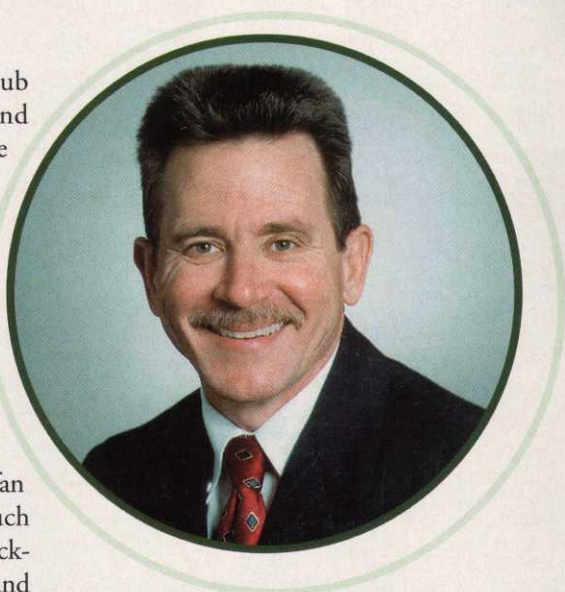
nance for the New Albany Country Club in New Albany, Ohio, can't understand why anyone in his profession would be offended by Spackler.

"Give me a break," says Kehres, who first saw the film when he was a student in turfgrass management at The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute. "The movie was a comedy. Anybody who takes it seriously or thinks it degrades our profession ... that's their problem."

The 49-year-old Kehres is still a huge fan of the film. He enjoyed the film so much that he joined The Carl Club, a Carl Spackler fan organization created to "understand and preserve the Carl character." (See Kehres posing with his official club certificate on page 41.)

When he was the superintendent of Pleasant Valley Country Club in Sutton, Mass., where he hosted a PGA Tour event, Kehres began "Caddyshack" Night, a celebration held on the last night before the final day of the tournament. Kehres and his staff partied by renting a giant television screen to show the movie. Everybody munched on barbecued food, drank beer and watched "Caddyshack."

"Nobody ever asked, 'Why are you showing this movie because it degrades us,'" Kehres says. "And if someone did, I'd tell him to get lost."



"I don't find any satisfaction in being viewed as a cartoon character."

• **TOMMY WITT** •
DIRECTOR OF GOLF
COURSE OPERATIONS,
NORTHMOOR COUNTRY
CLUB

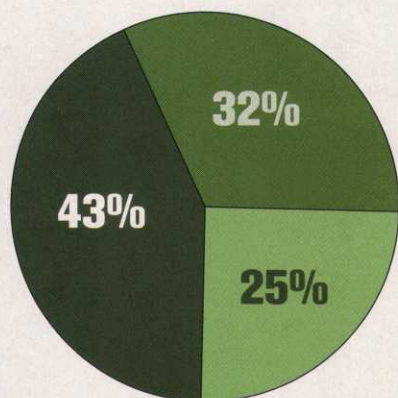
Michael Bavier, the longtime certified superintendent of Inverness Golf Club in Inverness, Ill., became president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America shortly after "Caddyshack" was released. One would think an association guy would rail against the film for the way it parodied the profession, but not Bavier, a superintendent for 41 years.

"I still have guys who call me 'Carl,'" he says. "But at least they're not calling me a dirty name. You take it in stride. If it bothers you, then you get a bridge and get over it."

Chuck Borman, executive director of the Carolina Golf Course Superintendents Association, has heard superintendents com-

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• **Do you think golfers have a better appreciation for what golf course superintendents do compared to five years ago?**



43% YES, they understand more of what we do.
32% SOMEWHAT, but I still hear plenty of complaints.

25% NO, they still don't understand what it takes to provide them with excellent conditions.

• Based on 640 responses



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plain about Spackler. Borman says it's easy for superintendents who are frustrated with the way they are perceived, to blame Spackler for their woes.

"But I'm the last person who thinks superintendents ought to use that as an excuse," Borman adds.

Perceived as professionals

While Witt may not have liked how his profession was portrayed in "Caddyshack," he thinks the film is hysterical.

"If I wasn't in this profession, it would be one of my favorite movies of all time," says Witt, who, when president of the GCSAA in 2001, pitched the idea of getting Murray to be the keynote speaker at the association's conference and show. (Not everyone on the GCSAA board was warm to his idea, however.)

But "Caddyshack" also motivated Witt to campaign to improve superintendents' image among golfers, as well as green committees, general managers, pros and owners. Witt set out to educate

"I may not take offense to it, and I may think it's funny, but I also see it from other people's eyes and listen to what they're saying about it."

• **JON JENNINGS** •
CERTIFIED SUPERINTENDENT,
CHICAGO GOLF CLUB

them that a superintendent's job is much more involved and more serious than how Spackler portrayed it in "Caddyshack."

Witt is so serious about it that he teaches seminars on the subject.

Jennings, Voss and other superintendents also long to be viewed as professionals who are serious about their craft. If you see Jennings and Voss at the Golf Industry Show, they'll be well groomed and wearing coats and ties and shiny black dress shoes.

They aren't trying to show up anybody; they just want to appear professional. "It is what it is," Jennings says. "I want to convey a high level of professionalism for our industry."

It doesn't bother Jennings that other superintendents might wear jeans to such an important event.

"It's an individual choice," Jennings says. "I guess you have to ask them if the way I dress bothers them. They might think I'm some uptight guy."

Voss says superintendents have to know when to dress up and when to dress down. "If you go to the clubhouse for dinner, you put on a coat and tie," he adds.

While it's important to maintain professionalism through appearance, that doesn't stop Voss from donning his work boots and jumping in a ditch to help his crew fix an irrigation leak.

"Yes, there's a professionalism within the industry that I'm trying to promote, but that doesn't stop me from getting dirty," he says.

Voss, who graduated in turf management from Penn State University, also says his crew members appreciate his efforts to work side by side with them and lead by example.

Bavier doesn't have a problem with getting dirty, either. If he does, he makes

sure to shower and change his clothes afterward, especially if he plans to visit the clubhouse. "I always keep extra clothes and an extra pair of shoes in the locker-room," he says.

Bavier believes that how you look helps define you. "If you dress like a professional, then more than likely you'll get treated that way too," he says.

Voss says some superintendents believe it's beneath them to get their pants dirty. "They believe they've earned the right not to do certain things," he adds.

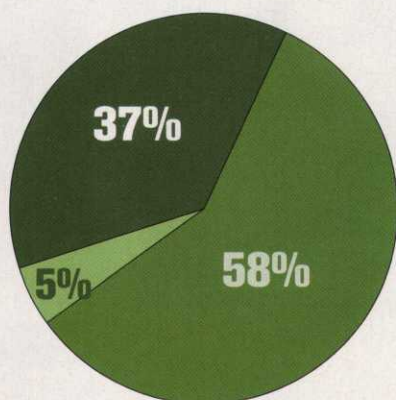
And Voss says those same superintendents view the getting-down-and-dirty superintendents as degrading the profession's image.

Kehres says the superintendents who don't like to get dirty are bound to be offended by Spackler. Kehres, who has a two-year associate's degree in turfgrass management and has been a superintendent for 25 years, doesn't care if he's viewed as a white-collar or blue-collar employee. What's important to him is gaining respect from his club's members for providing them with a well-conditioned golf course.

"Then I feel appreciated, which makes my job easier," Kehres says.

While on the topic of appreciation,
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• **Do you think superintendents are viewed more professionally for what they do compared to five years ago?**



37% YES, our image as professionals has improved substantially.

58% SOMEWHAT, but we have a long way to go.

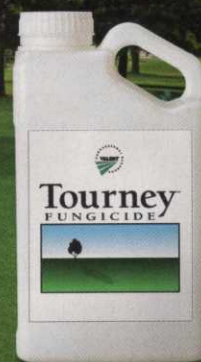
5% NO, we're still viewed as Carl Spackler types from "Caddyshack."

• Based on 640 responses

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Golfdom recently asked 640 superintendents: Do you think golfers have a better appreciation for what you do compared to five years ago? Forty-three percent answered, "Yes, they understand more of what we do." Thirty-two percent answered, "Somewhat, but I still hear plenty of complaints." Twenty-five percent said, "No, they still don't understand what it takes to provide them with excellent conditions."

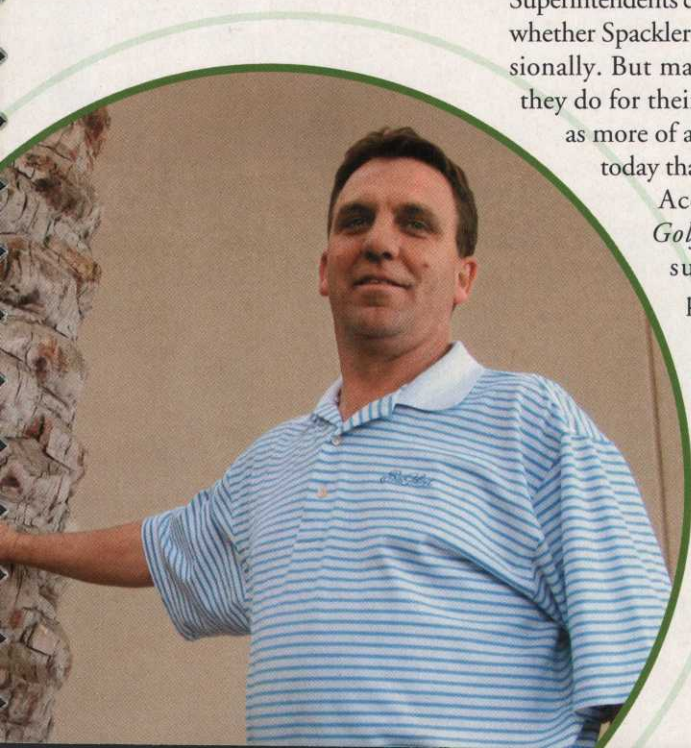
Voss says golfers, who are also paying customers, shouldn't have to understand what superintendents do every day. He says superintendents get paid to hear golfers' complaints. "The bottom line is we're only as good as yesterday's greens," he adds.

However, Voss welcomes the occasional "atta boy," although he doesn't let compliments go to his head.

"You have to take the good with the bad," he says. "If you take the compli-

"You did what you had to do to get rid of a gopher back then."

• **BERRY COLLETT** •
DIRECTOR OF GOLF MAINTENANCE,
SEA ISLAND CO.



ments, you have to take the complaints."

If superintendents want to be more appreciated, they need to promote themselves more to golfers, Borman says. "A lot of golfers don't know who their superintendents are or what their qualifications are," he adds.

Witt says he feels more appreciated, but much of that appreciation stems from his own efforts to develop relationships with his club's members and to make sure they know that he's the go-to guy when it comes to the golf course's condition.

"I want to be the person to answer any complaints," Witt says, knowing well that taking such responsibility will only build his credibility with his club's members.

Jennings says improving your image takes work. He should know. Jennings has been invited by his club's members to speak at various functions. He has also been invited to socials at members' homes. This kind of thing didn't happen very much to any superintendent 20 years ago, let alone Carl Spackler.

"But this has to be built," Jennings stresses of his relationships. "It's not something that's just handed to you."

A long way to go?

Superintendents can argue forever about whether Spackler set them back professionally. But many believe that what they do for their livelihood is viewed as more of a profession by golfers today than ever before.

According to a recent *Golfdom* survey of 640 superintendents, 37 percent said, "Yes, our image as professionals has improved substantially," when they were asked if they think they are viewed more professionally now than they were five years ago. Another 58

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The Spackler Syndrome



"The movie was a comedy. Anybody who thinks it degrades our profession . . . that's their problem."

• **RANDY KEHRES** •
DIRECTOR OF GOLF COURSE
MAINTENANCE, NEW ALBANY
COUNTRY CLUB

PHOTO BY: LARRY AYLWARD

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percent said their image has improved "somewhat" but insisted "we still have a long way to go." (Incidentally, 5 percent answered, "No, we're still viewed as Carl Spackler types from 'Caddyshack.'")

Witt believes the profession has made tremendous strides, but he's not surprised that most superintendents say "we have a long way to go" because of the variance in their responsibilities for the type of golf course at which they are employed. But Witt challenges the superintendents who feel "we have a long way to go" to write down 15 things they have done in the past 10 years to help them be more visible among golfers to help them gain more respect.

"A lot of them can't write down 15 things," Witt adds.

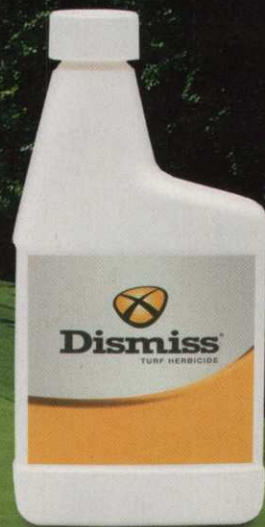
Borman says superintendents are viewed more professionally and are more appreciated than they were several years ago. "In the 14 years I've been involved with the business, I've seen superintendents make tremendous strides," he says.

That said, Borman says superintendents can only build credibility for themselves and their profession by taking time to communicate with golfers. That might be as simple as stopping golfers as they drive by in golf cars and asking them how the course is playing.

"If I was [a superintendent], I'd try to spend at least one hour a day on the course doing nothing but talking to golfers," Borman says.

Unless, of course, you're unshaven, wearing camouflage and bragging to golfers about your license to kill gophers. Then golfers might think you resemble Carl Spackler or something. ■

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