

Budget CRUNCH

Maintenance costs are soaring, but golfers' expectations for superb conditions remain the same. What's a superintendent to do?

BY LARRY AYLWARD
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Excuse me, Mr. Golf Course Superintendent, but is that your maintenance budget circling the drain?

While I know it's not easy for you to watch the money being sucked out of your operation, you can take comfort in knowing that you're not alone. Superintendents from across the land are lamenting about their maintenance budgets gone awry. Sharp increases in fuel prices — which seem to affect about everything from the cost of fertilizer to the price of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich — have thrown most everyone's financial situations out of whack.

And pardon me for saying this, Mr. Golf Course Superintendent, but you look a little green under the gills. And not "green" as in lush-green turf. You look "green" as in sick.

Maybe it's because the boss man — whether it's your owner, general manager, green committee chairman and/or members/golfers — expect you to deliver the ultimate

in turf conditions despite your blown budget. They don't care that you budgeted three bucks for a gallon of fuel for 2008, and you've been paying up to and more than four bucks since June. They also don't care that your budget has been battered because of other increased costs, such as the surcharge you must pay for a delivery of topdressing sand — a charge that costs more than the product itself!

"Costs are going through the roof, and you're being asked to do more with less," says Certified Golf Course Superintendent Don Sutton, a sales manager for AmegaA Sciences, a manufacturer of wetting agents, colorants and other turf products.

Of course, how to do more with less is the \$64-million question.

Sutton previously worked at a club where maintenance expenses had increased dramatically, but the club's brass still wanted the finest-looking course in town. But Sutton says he wasn't allowed to go over budget to continue giving them the look that they were accustomed, despite being hamstrung by high prices ranging from gas to fertilizer — items for which he had budgeted much less only to see their prices rise rapidly.

It's a difficult situation for a superintendent to be in because the superintendent is the last person who wants to see the course's conditions suffer, Sutton says.

“A lot of us are in this because of the pride we have for the products we put out every day,” Sutton says.

There are some things superintendents can do to stay within budget without sacrificing the course’s looks, which is the key to solving this dilemma. At The Olde Farm Golf Club in Bristol, Va., General Manager Marc Eubanks says the maintenance staff is spraying more plant growth regulators to reduce mowing. This is probably nothing superintendents haven’t heard before, but it seems more of them are doing this to reduce costs without sacrificing quality.

“We’re down to mowing fairways once a week, but you would never know it,” Eubanks says. “You just find a way to get more efficient at your job so you can offset these increasing operational costs.”

Mitchell Wilkerson, the certified golf course superintendent of Moss Creek Golf Club in Bluffton, S.C., says combatting budget problems equates to creating efficiencies to stay within budget. To Wilkerson, time is money. Hence, he’s taking a few different approaches to reduce time spent on certain tasks to save money. For instance, Wilkerson is cutting down the time it takes to complete projects that involve fuel, such as mowing and mechanical bunker raking. Regarding the latter, Wilkerson has instructed his crew to inspect bunkers before raking them, which they would normally rake if the bunkers needed it or not. But if a bunker can get by another day without being raked, the crew doesn’t rake it.

While he’s paying more for it, Mitchell has been able to use less fuel. “We’re saving 5 percent to 6 percent a month in fuel costs from what we budgeted,” he adds.

Mitchell is also using his knowledge of his course’s clientele to his advantage to save money in the budget. For instance, the average age of members at Moss Creek is around 64. Because of the higher age, Wilkerson knows he can raise the cutting height on the greens without causing a stir among members. Raising the height means less stress on the turf, which can translate into less cost to maintain the greens.

Jim Husting, certified superintendent of Woodbridge Golf & Country Club in Woodbridge, Calif., is going through the budget blues, too. But Husting is getting by with a

little help from his friends, as in his club’s general manager and board members.

Like other superintendents, Husting’s budget was waxed by high fuel prices. He budgeted \$2.95 for a gallon of gas last September. The price hit \$4.40 earlier this summer. “With the rising price of petroleum — and everything seems to be made from petroleum in one way or another — everybody out here is raising their prices,” Husting says.

The many suppliers who make deliveries to Woodbridge, whether for golf maintenance or clubhouse operations, are adding fuel surcharges on the shipments. So Woodbridge’s board members decided to send a note to the club’s 600 members explaining that the increased costs were being passed on to them in the form of a \$30 surcharge.

“Nobody complained,” Husting says, noting the club raised \$18,000. “Everybody can see what’s going on.”

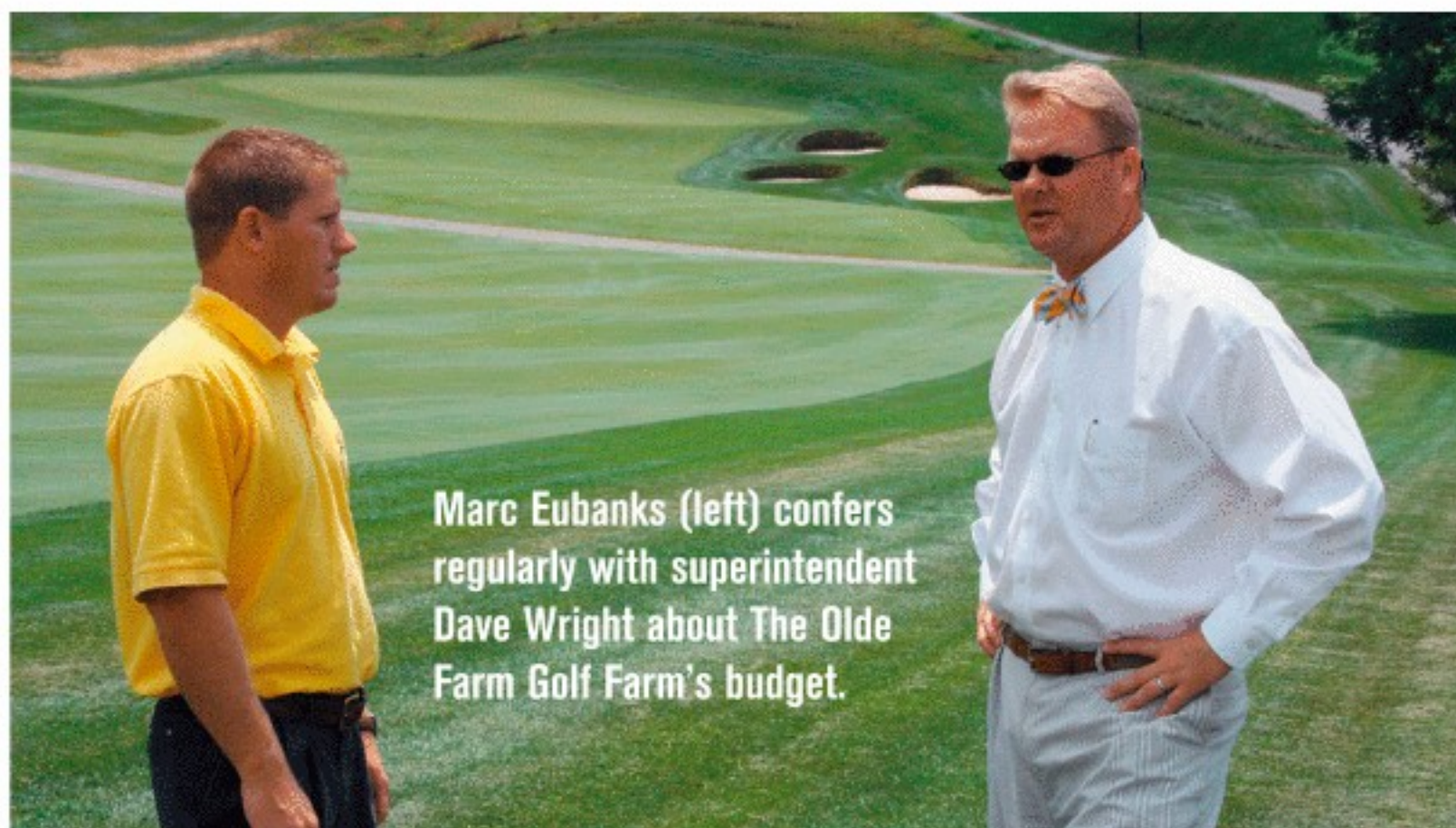
The members see the challenges that Husting has had to endure. A big reason for that is Husting communicates with them and his general manager to let know them the good, the bad and the ugly of any situation. In this particular situation, Husting told them that he would have to reduce mowing fairways and fertilize less if they wanted to stay within budget. But after hearing that, the members told Husting to conduct business as usual.

That’s not to say that Husting and the club aren’t watching what they spend. They are. All salaries have been frozen, and there have been layoffs, including one person on Husting’s staff.

Continued on page 26

“You just find a way to get more efficient at your job so you can offset these increasing operational costs.”

— MARC EUBANKS



Marc Eubanks (left) confers regularly with superintendent Dave Wright about The Olde Farm Golf Farm’s budget.



“The burden of working miracles should no longer be passed onto the superintendent.”

— DON SUTTON

Continued from page 25

But Husting's situation drives home the most important part of this equation: Talk to anybody on your staff who will listen about your budget woes.

“Communicate, communicate, communicate,” Husting says. “Just don't hunker down in your office and say there's no way you can get through this.” Tell it like it is to your owner, general manager, green committee, members and golfers and anybody else who needs to know. “Tell them, ‘This is what's going to happen if you're not going to give me any more money,’” Husting says.

“Keep on saying that you'll do the best you can with what you're given,” he continues. “But put the ball in their court.”

That's precisely what Eubanks has done at The Olde Farm. “I always try to throw the ball in the court of our owners, accountants or whomever the governing body is,” he says.

It's not his intention to dump the responsibility on anyone else, Eubanks says. It's simply to involve them in the budgetary process. It's vital for the general manager, the superintendent, the golf pro and others to strike an understanding between themselves about the budget, Eubanks stresses. And it's just as vital for the same people to solve any budget woes together. “The objective is to offset economic hardships by coming up with creative solutions together,” Eubanks asks.

If everyone is not on the same page, they need to make an effort to get there. Eubanks suggests that superintendents invite their general managers, owners or green chairmen “to come in the arena and see the fight.” By that,

he means the financial decision makers need to see the maintenance operation in action to understand the cost it takes to run it efficiently and successfully. When people are on the same page, they will have the same goal, he adds.

Sutton agrees with Eubanks' assessment. He also says superintendents must be trusted as budget prognosticators. When he was a superintendent, Sutton says he has had to fight for essential items in the budget for which he says he shouldn't have had to fight. And while Sutton believes general managers and others would learn and benefit from a day in the trenches with superintendents, he says he has found it difficult to get them to do so.

Eubanks, a former superintendent, understands Sutton's point but says superintendents must continue to press on to educate general managers, owners and others about the process. Eubanks suggests doing it in an engaging manner by seeking input and asking for advice.

Strong communication is especially key during difficult financial times because it's crucial to make the right business decisions, Eubanks stresses. That decision is probably not a knee-jerk decision by the general manager or superintendent to stop spraying fungicides. Such a decision might save money in the budget now, but it could lead to more severe problems, such as a wicked turf disease that wipes out half the greens. Of course, a lot more money than the cost of a fungicide application would be needed to fix that problem.

Another bad business decision would be to fire an experienced and well-liked superintendent just to dump his salary. Such a move could also come back to haunt the operation if that superintendent's agronomic know-how had been saving the operation money all along.

In the end, it's a matter of superintendents simply enduring the economic struggles. Husting offers some sound veteran advice on how to do so. “These are tough times,” he says. “But we've been through this before. You just have to tighten your bootstraps.”

Sutton agrees, but says golfers still need to tone down their great expectations for near-perfect conditions if the maintenance budget is out of whack. “The burden of working miracles should no longer be passed onto the superintendent,” he says. ■

Products you gotta have!

- Easy syringing of greens. Anytime. Anywhere. Optional electric rewind saves time, work.
- Easy Transport. Can be towed easily by any vehicle.
- No more hose dragging, scuffing, coiling, hanging. Save on maintenance.



@hiiks.com

**The Reel Thing.
Save Time. Save Work.**

(From left) Assistant superintendents Sammy Gore and Chris Labaff confer with superintendent Paul Kaufman, author of this story.

GOLFDOM BUDGET GUIDE

Hire Right

Personnel issues are widely regarded as the most challenging aspect of a management-level position. To golf course superintendents, this simple truth becomes more and more apparent with each passing year. Personnel expenses make up at least half of most golf course maintenance budgets, so it is easy to see the logic of maximizing this resource.

Besides being the largest expenditure, it is also the most difficult to control. Of all the resources at your command, it is the only one that thinks on its own, has feelings and forms its own opinions. Employees also share feelings with other staff members, other managers at your facility and customers. So it makes sense to do all you can to build a strong personnel team and be particularly careful when introducing a new member to that team through the hiring process.

The logical first step in harnessing the most of your human resource is to cultivate a true team concept. In most cases, this is easier than it sounds. Your staff members are watching you as much or more as you are watching them. They are watching to see if you really care about them and if they are being treated equally compared to other members of the team. It is of the utmost importance to treat everyone consistently

and understand that rules are only rules if they are enforced. Building a team requires trust — trust that a manager cares about the members of his team, treats them fairly, empowers them to make decisions and credits them for their contribution to the overall success of the team.

No matter how strong of a team you establish, sooner or later you will lose a member and be faced with finding a replacement. The goal should be to find someone who will fit into and not disrupt the team culture you have worked so hard to establish. If the vacated position is one with more responsibility than entry level, then it is always prudent to give current team members the opportunity to apply for the position prior to going outside of your company.

First, you are dealing with a known commodity. Second, they already understand and fit into your existing team culture. Third, it demonstrates that there are opportunities for advancement within your organization. For entry-level positions, a good starting place is with recommendations from existing team members.

If you have a good team already, most teammates will be reluctant to be the one who recommended someone who does not fit in and disrupts the team. If the position

Continued on page 34

It makes good business sense to hire people who fit into your team concept. Here's how

BY PAUL KAUFMAN

It is prudent to go through at least two separate interview sessions with as many as four interviews.

Continued from page 31

you are looking to fill is for an assistant superintendent or an equipment manager, it never hurts to contact fellow superintendents you respect who have cultivated a similar team atmosphere as you and see if they have anybody ready to fill the bill.

Also, industry professionals, such as equipment or turf product representatives, might know of good candidates they can recommend. The most common method of locating potential candidates to fill your open position, however, is by some form of advertising. No matter what vehicle you choose to advertise the position, it is of utmost importance to convey an emphasis on a strong team culture. Most job listings place too much emphasis on education and work experience. Although some degree of education and experience is important for some positions, the mention of a willingness to train the right candidate could bring out a real diamond in the rough who

might be too intimidated to apply if the listing is too heavily weighted toward education and job experience. As the years have gone by, I have learned to place more emphasis on a positive attitude, motivation and the desire to be part of a team.

Thinning the herd

Once you start to get resumes and applications, a good course of action is to cull them down to a small pool that can be evaluated more closely. Depending on the position you are looking to fill, it never hurts to get others involved. If it is a first assistant you are going to hire, some input from the general manager or golf pro can be useful. For all other positions, I like to include my first assistant in the process because let's face it: he or she will be the one to supervise the new team member.

When evaluating resumes and applications, it's easy to make the mistake of putting less effort into the hiring process for entry-level positions compared to, say, an assistant superintendent or an equipment manager. But within the parameters of a team concept, all positions are important. There are certain red flags that show up on applications and resumes, including large gaps in employment, the frequent changing of jobs, terminations and an unwillingness to permit current or former employers to be contacted, to name a few. The depth of the pool of resumes or applications you have of which to draw should determine if any of these red flags are reason enough to prevent the applicant from being a candidate for an interview. If an applicant has one of these red flags, but still intrigues you, there is no rule that says you cannot contact him to gather more information prior to discarding him from the to-be-interviewed list. The goal of the culling process is to establish a list of three to six candidates for interviewing.

For all open positions, it is good to go through an interview process that consists of at least two separate interview sessions with as many as four interviews depending on the amount of responsibility the open position carries. Hiring someone after one interview is irresponsible and has the potential to disrupt the team culture you have

patented impermeable protection • ripstop reinforcement

an impermeable barrier between your turf & the winter elements!

green jacket®

- Minimizes temperature fluctuations & protects against ice damage, crown hydration and desiccation.
- Lightweight and durable—years of easy installation & storage.

for more details and free samples
GreenJacket.com or 888-786-2683

millions of square feet of turf protected • see photos & research results online

Jrco

Hooker Soft-plug Aerator

Fast, Efficient Fairway Aeration

- Hooking tines lift soft soil plugs - no hard cores to clean-up.
- Low cost, Low maintenance.
- Tow-behind Aerator attaches to tractors & utility vehicles.
- Electric lift.
- Great for overseeding.

800.966.8442




Made in the U.S.A.

www.jrcoinc.com

worked so hard to achieve. Always have a prepared list of questions that you ask each candidate, and always emphasize the importance of the team atmosphere during each interview.

The initial interview should be one where you explain the parameters of the position a person is interviewing for and how the right candidate will fit into the team. The first interview is a good time to ask questions that pertain to why the person wants to work on your team, what he has to offer the team and to learn about the person's past work experience. The initial interview should be a get-to-know-each-other experience that probably won't determine who you are going to hire, but it has a good chance to determine who you will not. One thing that you want all candidates to understand after the first interview is that they are not just being evaluated for a job, but more so to become a member of a team.

Narrowing the field

After the first interview, you will most likely be able to reduce the number you call back for a second interview. In many cases, the ones who are looking for just any position will find a job and cull themselves. The second interview is a good time to really get to know the remaining candidates. The object is to get them to talk. It is good to use tried-and-true interview techniques, such as having them list three things in their past work experience they are really proud of and three they felt they could have done better, or have them list five strengths and five weaknesses and list what attributes they possess that would make them a good addition to the team. By the end of the second interview cycle, you should have a good opinion about which candidate is the best fit. But it's still a good idea to have a third interview with the strongest candidates.

The third interview is a good time to have other key members of the team sit in, be it your first assistant, the general manager or the golf pro, and take into

account their opinions as well. By the end of the third interview, you have really made the candidates jump through some hoops, and you will leave all of them with the opinion that the position they have interviewed for is viewed as being very important to your organization.

When you have made your final decision, it is time to extend an offer of employment. Take time to clearly establish all the particulars of the position, answer any questions the successful candidate might have and determine a start date, but make it clear that the job offer is contingent on a favorable reference check.

Depending on your individual situation, it might be you conducting the reference check, or it might be a representative of your organization's human resources department. I prefer the latter, as the human resources person usually has not formed an opinion of the candidate, and that person's report will be based purely on what he or she garners from the reference check. By law, what you are able to ask former employers is usually limited to dates of employment, wage information and would they re-hire. Any disparities between the reference check and what the candidate has told you should be a big red flag, and it is prudent to err on the side of caution because it is quite frankly easy to hire someone and not so easy to fire him. If all checks out, you have done your due diligence and most likely, you have done your best to protect your team culture.

Team building is a rewarding process that does not happen overnight. But once you have successfully compiled the right blend of personalities and skill sets, it makes for a very pleasant and productive work atmosphere. You as the leader owe it to your loyal team members to be cautious when making hiring decisions of which you all must live. So take your time and hire right. ■

Paul Kaufman is golf course superintendent of Prestwick Country Club in Conway, S.C.



3336. THE AUTHENTIC ORIGINAL.

- Provides highly effective, broad spectrum systemic control of major turf diseases on tees, greens, fairways, year after year, time after time.
- Extensive control for: • Anthracnose • Ascochyta Leaf Blight • Bermudagrass Decline • Cool Season Brown Patch • Copper Spot • Dollar Spot • Fusarium Blight • Fusarium Patch • Large Brown Patch • Leaf, Crown & Root diseases • Leaf Spot • Necrotic Ring Spot • Red Thread • Rusts • Snow Mold • Spring Dead Spot • Stripe Smut • Summer Patch • Take-All-Patch • Zoysia Patch
- Available in 3 convenient formulations.

SOLUTIONS FOR BETTER TURF

For more information on **3336** or other **Cleary turf products**, contact your local distributor or visit www.clearychemical.com.



Make it a Cleary Day.

Read and follow all label directions. The Cleary logo and 3336 are trademarks of Cleary Chemical Corporation.
©2008 Cleary Chemical Corporation.



Labor Savivors

BY DAVID FRABOTTA
SENIOR EDITOR

▲ Plant growth regulators have proven to be one of the most effective labor savers for turfgrass managers.

There was almost no way to foresee the extent of this year's price increases. Rising crude oil prices have impacted almost everything that makes up a superintendent's budget. Fertilizer, turfgrass seed and sod, irrigation equipment and diesel fuel costs have forced superintendents to either go over budget or make some drastic cuts.

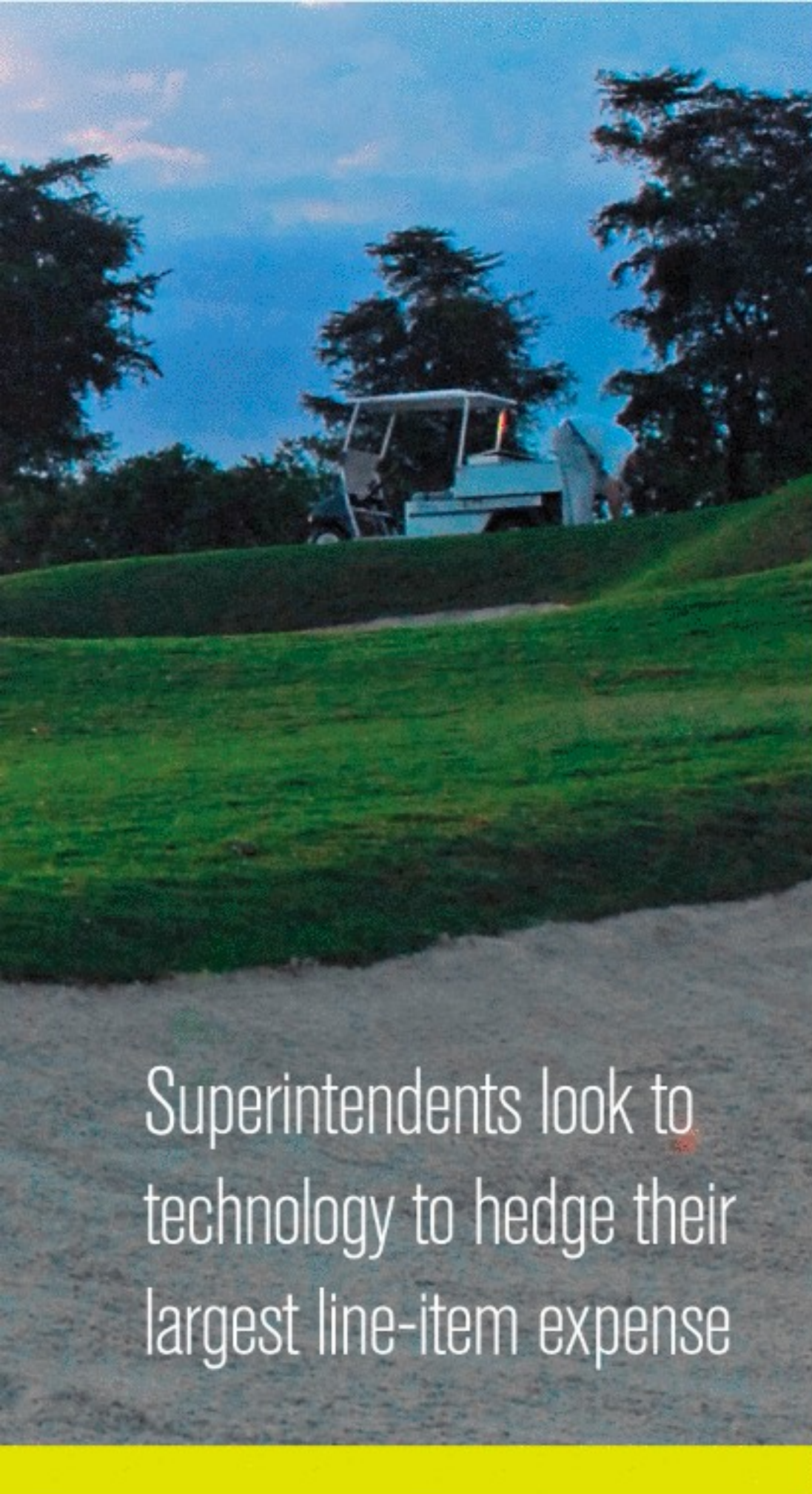
The largest line-item expense in most golf course maintenance budgets is labor, which means that many superintendents can cut overtime or scale back hours in an effort to save capital in one area in an attempt to mitigate unforeseen price increases in other areas.

Scaling back hours might sound simple, but it isn't easy. Golfers assume conditions will meet long-standing expectations. But there are a few equipment innovations and technologies that might help superintendents hedge the largest line item in their budgets. Larger mowing decks, longer-lasting chemicals, plant growth regulators and advances in irrigation technology all can help golf course crews operate more efficiently.

In an online *Golfdom* survey, readers were asked, "What equipment or technology saves you the most labor?" Out of 45 respondents, 40 percent said plant growth regulators saves them the most labor; 20 percent said irrigation technology; 13 percent said aeration core harvesters; 13 percent said longer-lasting chemicals; 9 percent said mechanical bunker rakes, and 4 percent of respondents said larger mowing decks eased their labor woes.

"One of the most important labor-saving technologies in our arsenal is (plant) growth regulators, which has decreased our fairway-mowing frequency from four days a week to two to three days," says Tim Sanchez, director of grounds of Woodmoor Pines Golf and Country Club and neighboring King's Deer Golf Club in Monument, Colo.

Sanchez estimates that he saves between eight and 16 hours each week with reduced fairway mowing, and the fuel savings of keeping a mower in the shop more often is an additional savings. Plus those man-hours can be spent elsewhere on the course to get additional work done.



Superintendents look to technology to hedge their largest line-item expense

Some courses can save even more using PGRs. Superintendent Mark A. Livingston of Ridge Creek Golf Club in Dinuba, Calif., says PGRs can save him up to 40 man hours a week, much of it on his large practice facility.

“Our practice facility is 25 acres and requires six hours to mow. PGRs reduce the down time for maintenance and increase the revenue by extending hours of operation,” Livingston says. “We also have 101 deep bunkers that require hand mowing of steep faces. Again, the mowing interval is increased allowing labor to go elsewhere.”

Of course, being able to save on labor depends on the club and the type of expectations from golfers. Even courses that use PGRs regularly on greens and fairways might not be able to cut mowing because of expectations from golfers.

At The Club at Crested Butte, superintendent Stephen Rue values how PGRs suppress *Poa annua* seedheads and helps create fuller, healthier grass plants, but he can’t skip mowing without members of the high-end club noticing. He walk-mows greens — at less

than one-tenth of an inch — and approaches every day, and fairways get cut every other day, whether they need it or are just getting cleaned up. He says the only way to really save labor at the course is to reduce bunker grooming.

The same is true at Berkeley Hall Golf Club in Bluffton, S.C. Its 770 members expect its 36 holes to continue to play like they’re in tournament-ready condition.

“We are basically spending over our budget,” says Danny Malone, superintendent of two layouts. “We’ve cut back a little on pine straw and mulch, but we’ll continue to walk mow greens and tees every day.”

Being creative

But higher-end clubs might be the exception to the rule. Even some PGA Tour venues capitalize on the labor savings of chemical technologies amid a tight budget. At East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta, certified superintendent Ralph Kepple started using PGRs heavily last year to reduce clippings and tighten the turf. It was especially helpful around the golf course’s steep bunker faces, which require walk-mowing.

Limiting the growth of the turfgrass around the bunker faces allows Kepple to mow them once a week with less cleanup instead of twice a week as he did without PGRs. He saves about 20 hours to 24 hours a week, which is a welcomed relief for the 26-member crew, especially as it prepares for the PGA Tour Championship this month.

Continued on page 39

Even some PGA Tour venues seek technologies that can help save labor in certain areas.



Many superintendents can reduce mowing of bunker faces in half with the use of PGRs.

Labor Savors

Larger mowing decks can help save some time, but significant time and labor can be saved by triplexing greens, if golfers allow it.

Continued from page 37

Many clubs are looking to improved chemical technologies to help trim labor, but it might not be enough. At Shelter Harbor Golf Club in Charlestown, R.I., Certified Superintendent Ed Walsh says he's using more PGRs this year, and likely will recommend additional usage to the board of directors when budget talks for next year roll around. But he likely will need to take more drastic measures to stay on fiscal track.

"As all of us get close to budget time for 2009, we try to be as creative as we can," Walsh says.

He's taking a close look at generic chemicals to help save money when efficacy is the same, and Walsh says he'll look to expand his contracted services when appropriate to alleviate his labor needs. In addition, he might hire more part-time workers next year instead of full-time seasonal workers. This year, the Hurdzan/Fry course has eight full-time workers, 12 full-time seasonal workers and 20 part timers.

At the St. Lucie County (Fla.) Fairwinds Golf Course, Superintendent Chris Gamble doesn't have any leeway for skyrocketing turfgrass maintenance costs, so he's running his operation a little differently these days. First, he now mows greens with a triplex mower instead of walk mowers. And he added a piece of equipment that saves him dozens of man-hours: a tractor-mounted boom mower for lake, pond and stream banks.

As you might guess, the bunker edges don't get quite the attention they used to, either. Other aesthetic parts of the

golf course get a little less attention as well, including perennial beds, mulch beds and cart-path edges.

"We concentrate on the play areas and do the detail work as we can," Gamble says.

To cut labor significantly, golf course managers need to take care of the golf course differently, such as spending fewer man-hours on bunker maintenance or limiting the mowing of out-of-play areas. Changing maintenance practices is what some courses might need to do keep labor and budgets in check.

At many golf courses, natural areas are getting bigger, especially at golf courses trying to mitigate their environmental impact. Larger natural areas cut down on mowing, and they create an opportunity to use fewer chemicals.

In many cases, better-scripted chemical-management programs could reduce or eliminate the need for edging and string trimming.

Also, using contracted labor, Walsh says, could mitigate unnecessary capital expenditures. Tree-maintenance companies and aeration services might be viable options, even when working with tight budgets.

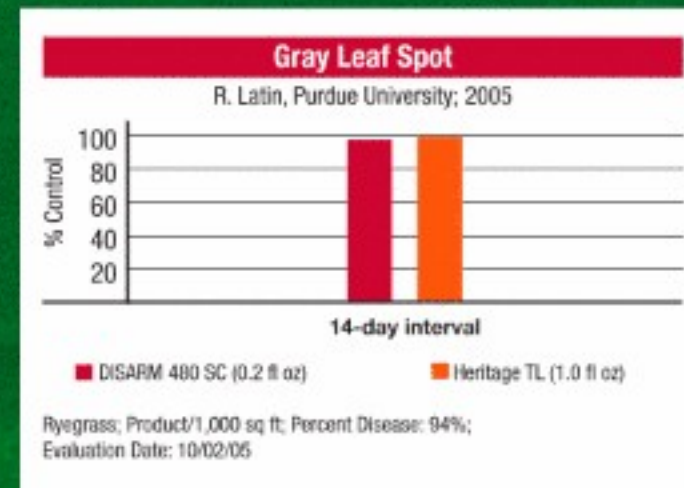
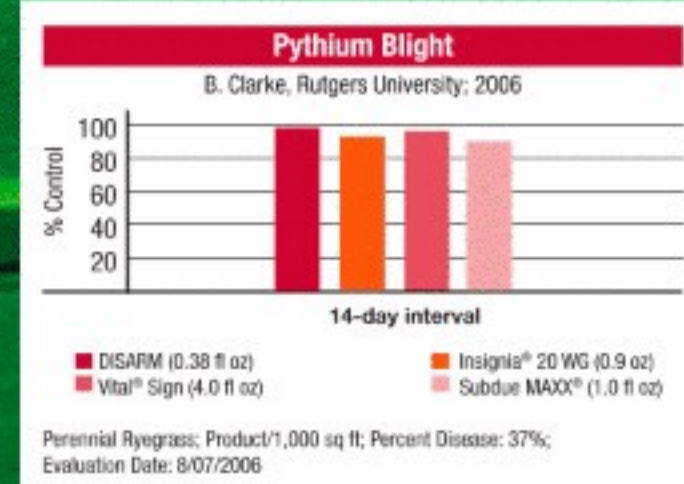
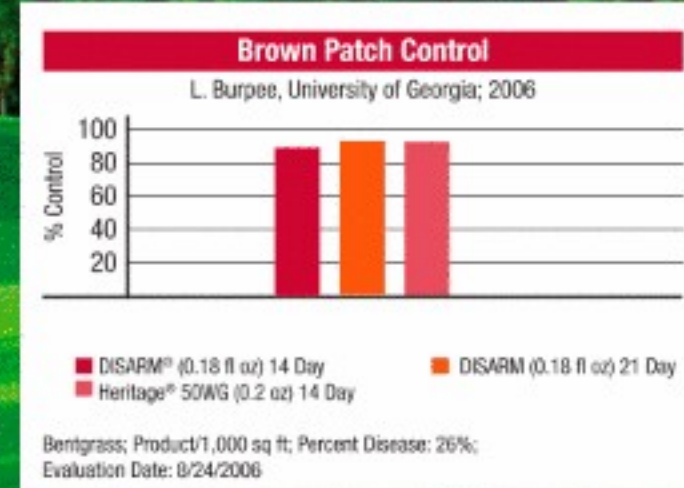
Whatever cost savers golf course managers are considering, it's clear that superintendents have unprecedented price pressures affecting their operations in addition to the environmental pressures that influence their turfgrass.

"For the most part, superintendents are a creative bunch, so we'll survive," Walsh says. "But our creativity is really going to be tested this year." ■

Disarm®

Protection From Tee To Cup™

Greens control with fairway affordability.



Insignia is a registered trademark of BASF. Vital is a registered trademark of Luxembourg Industries (Pamol) LTD. Heritage and Subdue MAXX are registered trademarks of a Syngenta Group Company.



Arysta LifeScience