

# Training Can

Tree trimming is hazardous work, so superintendents insist on a safety-first policy

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**GOLF COURSE** superintendent Scott Schraer had done his share of tree trimming during more than 20 years of working on golf courses. So when he noticed a dead limb hanging from a tree on the fifth hole at Kinsale Golf Club in Columbus, Ohio, in July 2008, there wasn't much to think about. Armed with a ladder and chain saw and accompanied by a crew member, Schraer set out to remove the limb.

He figured, as he usually did, there would be nothing to it.

Twenty-five feet above the ground, however, something went terribly wrong. As Schraer was cutting a branch, it broke off and knocked the ladder out from underneath him. The branch, chain saw and ladder all hit Schraer as he fell to the ground.

Schraer sustained a broken rib, collapsed lung and his pelvis was fractured in eight spots. But he considers himself lucky — more so than ever after hearing of the death of Dan Gross, superintendent of Salem (Ohio) Golf Club, who was struck and killed by a falling limb while trimming a tree last December.

"It is difficult to hear about a tragic death in our industry," Schraer says. "From a personal standpoint, I realize how extremely lucky I was. It certainly could have been a lot worse."

Tree trimming can be one of the most hazardous duties that golf course grounds crews undertake.

"I would say it's one of several items we do on the course that has a very high potential of danger," says John Szklin-



# Prevent

# Tragedy

ski, superintendent of Charlotte (N.C.) Country Club.

To cut down on the potential danger, most golf clubs have a policy — either formal or informal — as to who can do the trimming and what type of trees can be trimmed. Charlotte Country Club, for example, will only trim small, ornamental trees. Szklinski brings in an outside arborist if a larger tree needs trimming.

As for the equipment, the potential danger of operating a chain saw is self-explanatory. So superintendents mandate in-house training programs, including chain saw operations safety and etiquette.

“We make sure we have knowledgeable operators anytime we need to run a chain saw,” says Jeff Corcoran, manager of golf courses and grounds for Oak Hill Country Club in Rochester, N.Y. “It’s the type of work that scares me the most when my staff is out there. There are a lot of potential accidents that can happen with a chain saw, especially with an inexperienced operator.”

**Scott Schraer (left) says nothing matters more than employee safety when it comes to tree trimming.**

On the course, employees are not allowed to operate a chain saw on their own until Corcoran reaches a level of comfort with their abilities.

“It’s a person-by-person evaluation,” he stresses. “We have staffers that I never want to see operate a chain saw.”

While using a chain saw, employees must wear protective equipment, including helmets, eye and ear protection, gloves and chaps. They must wear helmets when operating a chipper. Also, Oak Hill crew members aren’t permitted to climb trees — their trimming is done on the ground. The club employs an arborist, who works with a dedicated crew member. They are the only two employees allowed to climb trees, Corcoran says.

Charlotte Country Club and Southern Hills Country Club have similar policies.

Szklinski says the policy at Charlotte, which will host the U.S. Women’s Amateur in August, is for the first assistant to cut down a tree, while he oversees the situation. Once a tree is felled, three trained employees make the cuts and run them through a chipper. They are the only staff members involved in tree trimming.

“It limits our potential exposure to

liability and keeps a dangerous situation to a small group,” Szklinski says.

Southern Hills has its own dedicated staff of four employees to conduct tree trimming and removal, says Barry Hargrove, director of horticulture for the Tulsa, Okla., course, site of the 2001 U.S. Open and 2007 PGA Championship. They’re the only employees allowed to climb trees, and the group does the overwhelming majority of trimming on the course.

All members of the grounds crew, however, must be trained in the proper use of a chain saw and chipper in case they’re needed in an emergency.

Hargrove tries to preach a common-sense approach to the work, saying employees need to be aware of their situation at all times, whether a limb is hanging or on the ground.

“You need a plan, know where you are going to start and where your access route is if there should be a problem,” he urges. “You just can’t jump into it without thinking through the situation. Common sense can prevent accidents.”

Hargrove emphasizes to his employees that while they’re up in a tree, they should work diligently and at a steady pace.

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"You don't want to be swinging from limb to limb," he stresses.

When working with chain saws, employees should avoid a complacent attitude.

"Everyone thinks it's no big deal to operate a chain saw," Hargrove says. "But when you become complacent, you slip up. The next thing you know, there is a chain-saw accident."

Schraer, the father of two young children, has adopted a new attitude since his accident. Prior to it, he often told his employees not to undertake potentially hazardous work without supervision but admits that he didn't always follow that advice himself.

"I've become more apt to examine a situation," he says. "If I don't feel comfortable from a safety standpoint, I won't send out my staff."

Sometimes, a superintendent has to call in an outside company to take care of tree trimming if the potential for danger is too great. When it comes to higher costs vs. endangering employees, the safety and well-being of employees must win out, Schraer says. Superintendents should work with their greens committee and other club officials responsible for budgetary decisions to make sure all interested parties are on the same page on this point, he says.

"We're all here trying to do the best for our clubs to give them as much as we can within our budgets," Schraer says. "At the same time, we have to draw a line if something is outside the scope of our abilities." ■

*Krizner is a freelance writer from Willowick, Ohio.*



## If You Must Do It Yourself ...

**Y**ou're making your way around the golf course and notice that some trees need to be trimmed. What's your first move?

According to R.J. Laverne, a board-certified master arborist and manager of education and training for Kent, Ohio-based Davey Tree Expert Co., your first move should be to hire a trained arborist to do the job.

"It's dangerous to remove large pieces of suspended wood," he says. "As we have seen over and over again, lives can be lost or serious injury can be suffered when you try to lower a heavy piece of wood to the ground in a controlled manner."

But Laverne acknowledges that some superintendents don't have the budgetary funds to hire an outside arborist, meaning they will assign the trimming to their crews. For those superintendents, Laverne offers some tips to safely trim trees:

- ▶ Careful pruning using proper reduction cuts of weakened branches can be beneficial by reducing the weight on the limb without removing the entire limb, which may be too heavy to safely remove without advanced rigging.
- ▶ An employee shouldn't use a chain saw while standing on a ladder or use a chain saw when its bar is above the shoulder.
- ▶ Employees should always wear suitable protective equipment when cutting wood, including hard hat, eye and ear protection, and ballistic chaps that cover the legs.
- ▶ Don't stand more than 6 feet off the ground on an extension ladder. Davey Tree's internal policy dictates that if its workers are more than 6 feet up on a ladder, they must be tied into the tree using an approved climbing saddle.
- ▶ Only a trained arborist should use a chain saw when working on a ladder. An employee who is not a trained arborist should only use hand tools (pruner, hand saw) when working off the ground.
- ▶ If you use an extension ladder, it should be placed firmly against the tree – not the limb – and a co-worker should be at its base holding it in place.
- ▶ Don't trim at the end of the day. You shouldn't start a dangerous task if you're tired or fatigued.

Laverne emphasizes the potential for injury is greater when an employee is trimming a tree compared with allowing the limb to fall on its own. The odds are in your favor that no one will be underneath if the limb falls, he says.

"The level of risk jumps substantially – exponentially – as soon as a person starts working on a tree because there is a target," he stresses. — Ken Krizner