

# Superintendents Debate Hiring Philosophies

## POINT

HIRING CURRENT AND  
FORMER SUPERINTENDENTS  
AS ASSISTANTS WILL  
NOT BE CONSIDERED  
FOR MYRIAD REASONS

**T**hroughout my 25-year career in the golf course maintenance business, I've seen many changes. I've experienced the positive surge of a building boom, and now I'm dealing with the biggest downturn in the history of the business. During all of this, I've built a course, rebuilt a few others, lost a maintenance building to a fire, cleaned up after four massive hurricanes and hosted 13 PGA Tour events. Hence, I've had to hire, fire, promote and interview hundreds of people for jobs.

I'm proud to say 18 of my assistants have now become golf course superintendents working around the world. Did my assistants get these jobs because of luck or was it because of the system I use that teaches them the importance of gaining experience so they move on to better jobs? I say it's both. I look for candidates who have completed schooling and have a sound foundation, as well as a few years in the business and the desire to learn. I want people who have drive and goals to become superintendents.

It doesn't matter where they're from, because I'll teach them the practices to take care of the grass at hand as long as they want to learn. Every step they make is an important one. They pick up and leave DNA at every job they have and from every person they work for.

During my years of recruiting candidates for jobs at the multi-course operations of Doral Golf Resort in Miami and the PGA West in La Quinta, Calif., I looked for people who were not set in their ways. Depending on the course, position and the current team in place, I'd scout for people that fit the mold. If I needed a pitcher, I'd find one. I'd look in the minor leagues, and I'd look for those who had been to the World Series. It depended on what event was approaching, which project we were doing or what opening we had in the company. But I looked for people who could be moved up and around in the system.

Today, I'm back in the private sector at a classic Donald Ross course near Miami. Recently, one of my assistants, who has been with me for three years, had the opportunity to become a superintendent at another prestigious private club in the area. He was ready and the timing was perfect. He had worked hard to do everything right and this was his time to shine.

Before we even told the crew he was leaving, the calls started coming from people inquiring about the job he was leaving behind, and if they could send in their resumes

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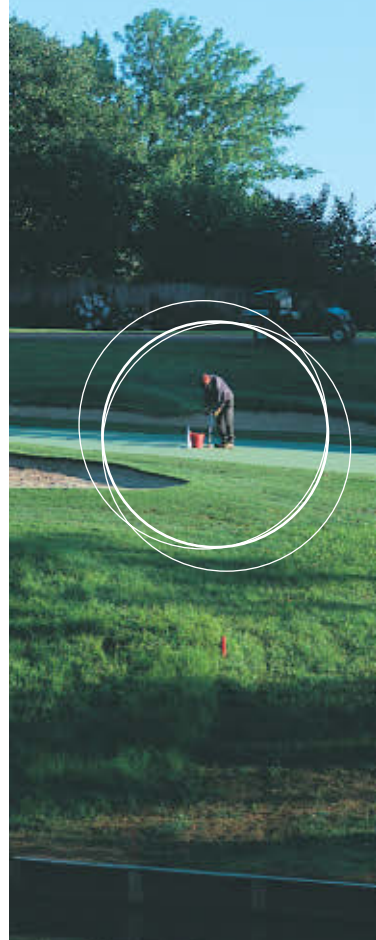


BY ERIC J.  
VON HOFEN

Eric J. Von Hofen and Christopher S. Gray Sr. are experienced golf course superintendents who have hired many employees in their careers. That doesn't mean they possess the same hiring styles, however.

Von Hofen says he will not hire current and former superintendents for assistants for myriad reasons. But Gray

PHOTO BY: MIKE KLEMM



disagrees and says superintendents can bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to their roles as assistants.

Both men present compelling cases for their points. Read on and see who you agree with. If you form your own opinion on the matter and would like to express it in *Golfdom*, please drop us a line at [info@golfdom.com](mailto:info@golfdom.com).

I've said it before and I'll say it many times again before I retire: Our industry's strong sense of brotherhood is one of the many reasons I entered this profession. That's why the notion of not even considering hiring a current or former golf course superintendent for an assistant's position is so completely lost on me.

Ten years ago, this situation really didn't exist, as it was fairly common to hire former superintendents for assistant positions. There were many reasons why superintendents would be interested in making seemingly backward career moves. Some were looking to change facility types from public to private courses. Others were interested in changing climates from northern geography to southern or vice versa. And, in some circumstances, superintendents were simply out of jobs because their courses shut down. Regardless of their situations, these experienced former superintendents made excellent candidates for assistant positions at other facilities.

Apparently, with today's volatile economy and contracting marketplace, some superintendents and directors have a completely different frame of mind — one where former superintendents are automatically disqualified from assistant's positions in their operations.

In a time when there are more out-of-work superintendents than ever, being able to capitalize on these uniquely qualified candidates for an assistant's position makes both common and practical sense.

Experience carries an enormous amount of value when selecting and evaluating candidates for any job openings in any field. When you take into account the very specialized nature of our profession and the ultra-specific skill set we must develop to become successful, experience becomes an even greater asset.

Former superintendents already possess a foundation of experience that allows them to hit the ground running without the costly need to begin training at square one, unlike many other candidates. Now, that certainly doesn't mean they don't need to be trained. Every golf course operation performs similar job tasks, but goes about them in different manners.

It's an incoming assistant's responsibility to learn and operate within the established procedures of the new facility. Both the current superintendent and the incoming assistant should have a crystal-clear understanding of

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BY CHRISTOPHER  
S. GRAY SR.

**SUPERINTENDENTS CAN  
BRING A WEALTH OF  
KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE IN  
THEIR ROLES AS ASSISTANTS**

# COUNTERPOINT

## Superintendents Debate

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to apply for it. Before posting the job, I spent time properly wording the job ad so I wouldn't get overloaded with over-qualified resumes. I'd heard stories about a few open jobs in Florida receiving 300 to 400 resumes. I didn't want that. I wanted to stick with the process that has worked, and hire an up-and-comer.

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BETTER COMES AROUND.

As more phone calls came in asking about the job, I couldn't believe the conversations I was having. Several people asked me to "just give me a chance." Others told me, "My last club screwed me over." My favorite was the guy who said, "I want to move to Florida to wind down my career and hang out on Miami Beach." I replied, "I was also looking for that, but Florida was not a place for old supers to come and be parked in the sun like old airliners in the desert. We work 13 months out of the year, buddy!"

Some of these phone calls and resumes were from past and current superintendents, even after I posted that they wouldn't be considered. Now, I understand this a business and many superintendents have lost their jobs because of the economy and other reasons. But we're not a rehabilitation center. I won't put my time into someone who checks the job boards every time I turn my back and leaves after three months when something better comes around.

And when they leave, they tell me it's because the wife hates Miami or that it's too hot. I've been down that road, and I won't take my club on that trip again.

But I've never had that happen when I hired up-and-comers. They stick around and wait their turn.

Hiring people costs money and each dollar needs to be used properly during the process. You can't recruit and hire people who don't fit the plan, because the job won't match their expectations, especially after they've been used to making more money and calling the shots for a number of years at their own courses.

It's human nature that we never want to go backwards. ■

*Eric J. Von Hofen is director of agronomy and building maintenance for Riviera Country Club in Coral Gables, Fla. His younger brothers — Nick and Kurt — are also in the business and worked several years as interns and assistants before becoming superintendents.*

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## Superintendents Debate

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their respective roles and expectations.

As superintendents, we're only as good as the people we work with. Believing that a potential candidate has "too much experience" for an assistant's position flies in the face of that fundamental philosophy. By surrounding ourselves with the most qualified and experienced people, we're not only improving our maintenance operations, but also our personal ability to successfully manage a variety of people with different skill sets.

When it comes down to it, fear and insecurity on behalf of the people doing the hiring are the most overwhelming reasons why former superintendents wouldn't be considered for assistant's positions.

There's a fear of hiring an assistant with comparable skills, and often times, more practical experience, but at a

salary much less than the superintendent's own. This carries with it a perceived inherit risk for those managers who aren't secure with their current positions and/or abilities.



THERE SHOULDN'T BE  
ANY REASON **NOT TO**  
**CONSIDER** HIRING A  
FORMER SUPERINTENDENT  
AS AN ASSISTANT.

We've all heard the rumored stories about how an unethical assistant replaced the superintendent after some behind-the-scenes,

political bad mouthing. While this scenario has probably happened at times, it's certainly not the norm. Yet, the fear it represents is very real.

The bottom line is most people, including superintendents, will do virtually anything to protect and provide for their families. I get that. But to believe that every former superintendent looking at an assistant's position is planning to go behind your back to sabotage your career is simply close-minded and reeks of insecurity.

There shouldn't be any reason not to consider hiring a former superintendent as an assistant. The benefits they bring to the table, such as practical experience, maturity, proven work ethic and industry-specific knowledge, qualifies them as ideal candidates and most likely a valued asset to both you and your operation. ■

*Gray is superintendent and general manager of the Marvel Golf Club in Benton, Ky. Gray is also an award-winning contributing editor and columnist for Golfdom.*