

Superintendents Debate Hiring Philosophies

POINT

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

Throughout 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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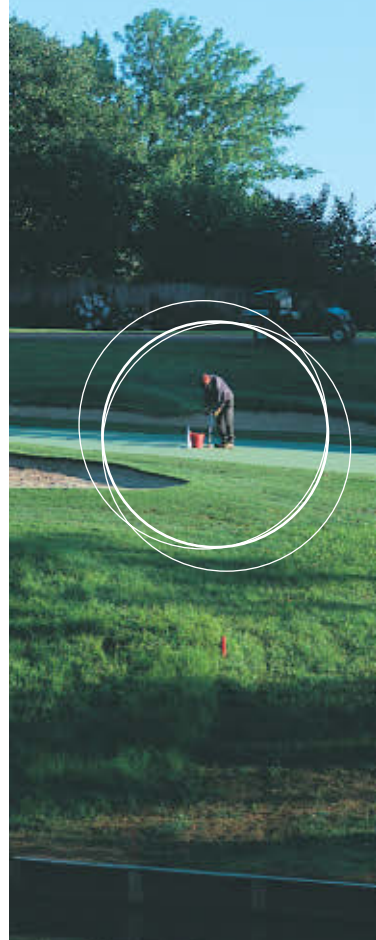


BY ERIC J.
VON HOFEN

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



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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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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