

POWWE



Women superintendents know they must bring their “A” game if they want respect.

BY BETH GERACI

Of the thousands of golf course superintendents in the U.S., only a handful are women. They are so few in fact that they rarely — or never — meet. We talked to a few of them about life on the job, why they love it and what it’s like to be female in this business.

Tracey Holliday

As a youth, Tracey Holliday didn’t do much mowing. Her brother took care of that.

Regardless, today Holliday, 51, is living her dream as superintendent at Sterling Farms Golf Course in Stamford, Conn.

“I always wanted this,” she says. “When I got the head job at Sterling Farms, I felt extreme excitement and fear at the same time. It was both emotions at the same time. It re-

ally was. To me it was like achieving a goal. It was a goal I had in mind, and I never took my eye off of it.”

The fear set in the minute she was hired, says Holliday, Sterling Farms’ superintendent since 1988. She had to grapple with a crippled irrigation system and install a new one her first year, which happened to be a drought year.

She conquered that challenge and has relished every one since, even cutting, rolling and applying amendments to greens as golfers tee off on the 1st and 10th holes.

“We literally do things under conditions that are a joke to people who work on a private course,” says Holliday.

Holliday is proud of her role in making Sterling Farms the number one public course in Fairfield County. And she beams that she was among the first to use border collies in geese control.

The passion and pride she feels for her job can be heard in her voice. She loves what she does, and there’s no place she would rather work than Sterling Farms. As for the realities of being a female superintendent, she is as candid as she is unfazed. Raised by her dad and her brother, and the lone girl in her class at UMass Stockbridge School of Agriculture, Holliday was used to being the only female. But she acknowledges it’s a lonely profession.

Having worked as a superintendent for 23 years, Holliday has seen “how men act in their little world at conventions and stuff. I’ve been kicked out of clubs because the association meeting would be held at an all-male club. And I’d get in my car and leave.”

Interviews have been enlightening, too,

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Kate Heffron

When she was a junior in high school, Kate Heffron's older brother worked on a golf course grounds crew outside Toledo, Ohio. "It's not a place for a girl to work," he told her.

One week later, her brother joined the Navy and Heffron was working on the golf course grounds crew. "It was more to spite my brother," she says. "I just wanted to prove to him that I could do it."

She must have done all right. The 28-year-old Michigan State University

when her adviser asked her if she wanted to work for a female superintendent.

"It confused me, because I thought, 'Should I be trying to find a female superintendent to do an internship for?'" she says. "I thought, 'Hmm, what does he mean?' I think he was just trying to make me feel comfortable, but that's not what I wanted."

Feeling comfortable has never been Heffron's goal.

"I feel like on the course I have to do even better than the guys. I have more drive to not mess up and to get it right the first time," Heffron says. "I don't ever want anyone to look back and think, 'It's because she's female.' It pushes me so much more to keep going and keep improving."

There have been times when Heffron has wondered if she wasn't hired because she is female. "Knowing the superintendent's personality a little bit, I do wonder if they would have been able to handle having a woman working for them. And people have made comments, you know, there's always going to be that 'if.' If I went to work for a female superintendent, they'd say I got the job because I am female."

But at Blytheheld, "they do a great job of treating me as an equal," Heffron says. "I have been to other places that have treated me like a girl, who put me on flower duty. Here they're good at giving me equal jobs but also know that some heavy lifting might be too much."

Because of her drive, Heffron was invited to attend last year's exclusive Green Start Academy. Fifty assistant superintendents annually from across the nation are handpicked for the two-day seminar based on winning essays they write.

"I was really proud of going to Green Start," says Heffron. "I thought, 'Why not? I'll try for it.' When I got accepted, my boss was very excited for me. It was very neat."

Heffron was the only woman in the group.

"I'm used to it," she says. "You can't
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Tracey Holliday and her border collie on the job. Holliday was among the first superintendents to use border collies to control geese.



from both sides of the desk. "There were times I'd interview someone for a position and they'd say, 'I just can't work for a woman.'" she says. "People wouldn't shake my hand. There were illegal questions, like, 'What if your boyfriend didn't want you to get up on a Sunday morning and come to work?' or 'Do you feel less feminine because you play sports?'"

Being a woman superintendent is "a constant battle of trying to produce the best you can with the thickest skin you can," she says.

Holliday has thrived despite it all. "I achieved my goal," she says. "I really love it here. This is where I want to retire."

graduate has worked as the assistant golf course superintendent at Blytheheld Country Club in Belmont, Mich. for the past four years.

"Growing up, I was that girl who played baseball. I was that tagalong little sister," says Heffron, the third of five children. "I wore a skirt but wanted to hang with the boys."

Heffron pursued a career in golf course management because she wanted a physical job where she could work outside.

As a Crop and Soil Science major at MSU, Heffron remembers hearing that only 1 percent of golf course superintendents were women. So it surprised her

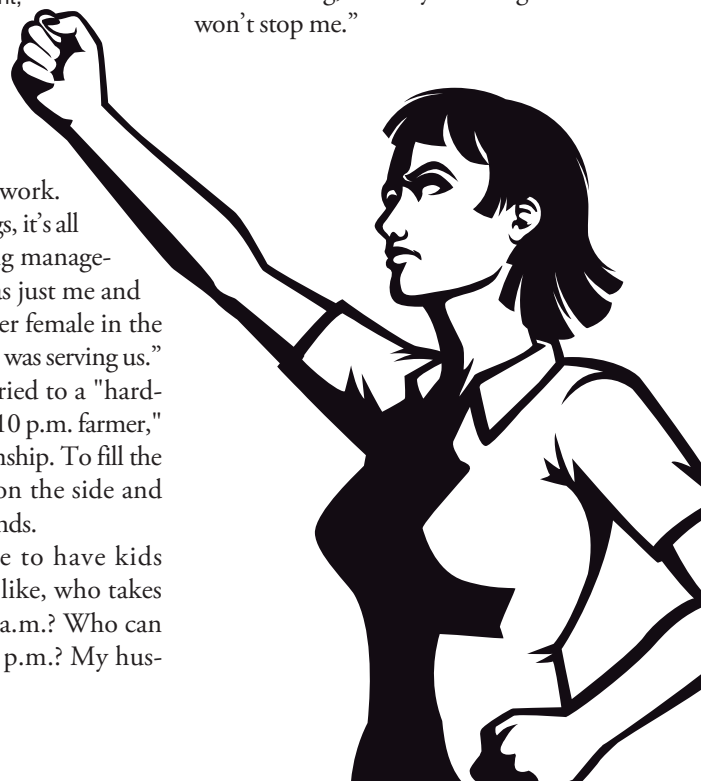


"I can make it happen when I put my mind to something. Being female won't stop me."

— KATE HEFFRON
Assistant Superintendent,
Blytheville CC

band can't carry around a baby when he's feeding cattle."

For now, Heffron is focused on her career. And she's optimistic about being promoted to superintendent one day. "I can make it happen when I put my mind to something," she says. "Being female won't stop me."



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make female friends at work. Even association meetings, it's all guys. We had our spring management meeting and it was just me and 150 guys. The only other female in the room was the server who was serving us."

Heffron, who's married to a "hard-working, come home at 10 p.m. farmer," craves female companionship. To fill the void, she sells jewelry on the side and meets monthly with friends.

Heffron would like to have kids someday, but "it's just like, who takes the kid to daycare at 6 a.m.? Who can pick them up at 6 or 7 p.m.? My hus-

Gillian Bean

As a 16-year-old, Gillian Bean worked on the grounds crew at a club near her hometown, Sunbury, Ohio. One small taste of that and she knew she wanted a career in turf.

"I was sold right away on wanting to do something outside and not sitting at a desk," says Bean, the golf course superintendent at Table Rock Golf Club in Centerburg, Ohio.

Now, the Ohio State grad's career is well established. But Bean's success has been a hard-fought battle, and she's not shy about saying so.

As a woman superintendent, "it's harder to gain the respect of coworkers, management — subordinates who work for you especially," she says matter-of-factly.

"I think females have to work twice as hard as men to earn respect. The guys who work for me on my crews — once they see me go out and dig a hole and see that I know how to do whatever I ask anyone else to do, that's when I get the respect."

Bean, 36, has been superintendent at Table Rock since fall 2009. It was a smooth transition for her. During introductions, she was "this oddity." But she had the support of Table Rock's outgoing superintendent from the start. And after creating good conditions her first season, Bean earned credibility.

Table Rock is supportive of Bean's role of mother to a 4-year-old girl. As a mom, it's often difficult to maintain a superintendent position, given the job's demanding schedule, Bean says.

"My daughter goes to daycare and preschool, but if the daycare calls me at 2 in the afternoon and my daughter has a fever, the course understands that I have to go." Other courses might not be so understanding, she says.

It's been more than two years since Bean was hired at Table Rock. But even now, she can never let up.

"I have to be very quick to show that I'm willing to do the physical labor,"



"I wanted to take care of turf in some way," says Bean.

Bean says. "I feel, as a female, that my staff has to see me do the work. Because — it's not the only way, but it's the quickest way — to earn respect."

When asked about other lady superintendents, Bean, the only female member of the Central Ohio Golf Course Superintendents Association, laments, "Honestly, I don't know any!"

"It does surprise me that I don't know any other women superintendents in the central Ohio area," she says. "But on the other hand, it doesn't surprise me. In my graduating class there were 87 men and two women. You have to have a thick skin, because there are always comments."

And those comments can be heard both on and off the course.

"Let's say I'm in the hallway near the restaurant," Bean marvels. "Without fail some guy will come up to me and assume I'm supposed to be working at the snack bar and say, 'Honey, will you get me a hotdog?' And I don't know how that will change. It happens several times a week."

"The golf community is such a good ol' boys kind of community," she continues. "You could work at a club where women aren't allowed in the clubhouse. That's today. That's not 20 years ago."

As a woman in the golf business, Bean's relentless pursuit of respect propels her success.

So she doesn't sugarcoat her advice to young women considering a career in golf course management. Rather, she says openly: "If it's really what you want to do, it's fantastic. It beats the heck out of being stuck in an office. Just assume you're going to have to prove yourself twice as hard as if you were a man." ■

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