



THE **5.9%**

AS THE AUTHOR, A FORMER
SUPERINTENDENT, CAN ATTEST,
BEING A SUPERINTENDENT AT AGE 60 IS
SO WHERE DO OLD SUPERINTENDENTS GO?

** Only 5.9% of today's
superintendents
are 60 and over.*

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The author of this story was a superintendent in Kentucky for the last 30-plus years until losing his job last year. Since then he and another former superintendent, Mark Wilson, CGCS, have started Superintendent's Choice Sod in Louisville, Ky. (see sidebar, page 18.)*



A TRICKY PROPOSITION.

BY JAY CHARNES

PHOTO BY: SETH JONES

OLD SOLDIERS NEVER DIE, THEY JUST FADE AWAY. General Douglas MacArthur spoke these words to a joint Senate and Congress meeting in 1951 as his military career ended.

Of recent notice to me, and many others, is the decline of the number of older, long-term superintendents. In my area of the country there has been a noteworthy decline in our numbers.

There are a host of reasons and possible explanations for why these superintendents, whose age, compensation and knowledge have grown over the years, are in decline. Taking a few moments to delve into this may shed some light on why a 60-year-old superintendent is as rare as an honest handicap.

First, a hard look at some numbers, courtesy of the GCSAA:

SUPERINTENDENTS' AGE

20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+
2.5%	29.3%	34.4%	27.9%	5.9%

Mark Twain used a phrase attributed to British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli. It went, "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damn lies and statistics."

With that in mind, the above statistics show 5.9 percent of 4,023 superintendents who responded to the survey were over 60 in 2011. Granted, people generally retire in their 60s. But statistically this looks like a good many superintendents disappear as they reach their golden years.

If they are not retired or playing golf at the Pearly Gates Golf Club, where are they?

Personality and popularity versus performance

Do you suppose a conversation like this has ever taken place at a golf course?

7-handicapper lawyer Chuck: "Aren't you glad ol' Sam the superintendent aerated greens last week? That is going to make them better than ever in a few days."

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ONWARD AND UPWARD

By **Beth Geraci** Senior Editor

Jay Charnes may not be a superintendent anymore, but he's certainly not sitting still. In 2011, Charnes partnered with his good friend Mark Wilson, the former superintendent at Valhalla Golf Club, and together they launched a sod business called Superintendent's Choice Sod.

The pair is growing zoysia grass on a 35-acre plot in Louisville, Ky. they leased and revitalized last fall. And at a second, smaller location about 10 miles away, Charnes and Wilson are growing one acre of bentgrass and three acres of bluegrass. The partners were joined in March by Marc Messersmith, who was Wilson's assistant at Valhalla for 10 years. He now helps Charnes on the production side of the business.

Charnes and Wilson launched their business because they recognized a need



for a sod farm in their region.

"We're doing what nobody else does," Charnes said. "We're the only people in Louisville that have high-quality, low-mow sod."

Wilson and Charnes are selling their product directly to golf courses. The sod

would be ideal for superintendents who want to reconstruct their greens, Charnes explained. "The pipe dream would be that we could contract for a golf course that's planning a renovation and install it on their site," he added. "The other pipe dream is that zoysia for lawn grass would take off in this area."

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13-handicapper banker Felix: *"Damn straight, he does a great job!"*

A good superintendent who does what he is supposed to do, in fact what he is hired to do, by the nature of his work is not a popular person. The superintendent aerates the course, closes the course in inclement weather and performs myriad other activities that do not make him or her a beloved person at the 19th hole.

Unfortunately, another item that can lead to a superintendent's loss of popularity is the inherent nature of the work environment and greens staff. If even once, it is too often, that the super is viewed as being a little lower class because he or she works in a barn and has a staff comprising a melting pot of people whose income and education level are viewed as subpar. Despite efforts to call the "barn" a "turf care center" and to give each person on the greens staff a proper title, the misconcep-

tions and prejudices still prevail.

All in all it becomes too much personality and popularity versus a performance system. In the performance area it is plain and simple that superintendents are like people who ride motorcycles: You have either been down or you are going down. With the variables that exist (weather, equipment, personnel, micro environments) every year is not going to be a 10. When I first entered the superintendent trade some 35 years ago, some of the then old timers used to say, "Be careful — you don't want to have too good a year because then they will expect it every time." This statement was a bit tongue-in-cheek, but a bit of biting truth hides within.

The "180" rule

The natural progression of a superintendent's popularity is on a sliding scale, downwards. After 8, 10, 12 years those who were in leadership and played an integral part in the hiring of a superintendent are often less active in the club organiza-

tion, have moved on, or are teeing it up at the aforementioned Pearly Gates GC. Additionally, the compensation package of the super has grown, as was the case in the glory years of the '90s and early 2000s.

The whole dynamic changes over that span. New and younger club leadership, new club management personnel, and existing club personnel in management roles now defend their own ground and work to secure their own piece of the pie. The employment of the long-term superintendent, who is likely 50 or older, has become vulnerable.

The "half the age, half the wage" phenomenon comes into play. A superintendent who has worked 25 to 35 years in the profession, whose salary and benefits have grown, is easily replaced by an upstart superintendent or qualified assistant — approximately half the age and half the wage.

Perhaps the phenomenon should be called the "180" rule. Before the age of 60 you will likely be replaced by someone

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Former superintendents Mark Wilson and Jay Charnes have embarked on a new journey, launching a sod farm outside of Louisville, Ky. Here, Wilson (right) walks the grounds with partner Marc Messersmith, and they're joined by a suspenders-clad Charnes (this page).

The men behind Superintendent's Choice Sod may be setting some big goals, but they're also putting themselves in position to meet them. Because zoysia grows well in Kentucky's climate, Wilson and Charnes are marketing the zoysia to golf courses within 100 miles of Louisville. They plan to market their bentgrass and

bluegrass over a broader area in the region, Charnes said.

Many people have expressed interest in their business so far, said Wilson, who's responsible for product promotion and sales. But he added their undertaking is not without challenges.

"It's kind of coming along," Wilson said, "but at the same time, it's sometimes

scary. The value of what you're doing is down the road. It's not immediate."

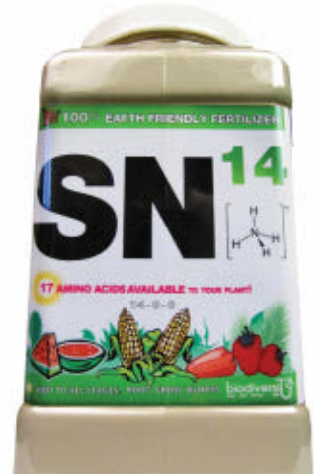
Wilson's looking forward to eventually having that value show itself. He and Charnes have invested a year's worth of labor, not to mention their own money, in the business.

The former supers' bentgrass and bluegrass will be ready to move onto the market this fall. "The real test will be in October," Charnes said. "It's all coming along, looking real good. The most labor intensive would be when we harvest it, ship it and sell it."

"The whole year is a learning curve," Wilson added. "The greatest lesson I've gotten so far is that you're trying to make the best use of your time. Without a doubt, it's easier on paper than in real life, like running a golf course."

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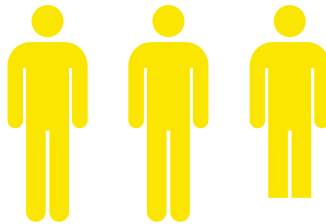
60 and Over

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60 percent your age at 60 percent your wage making a 180-degree change in your circumstances. But that doesn't flow off the tongue as smoothly as "half the age, half the wage."

To add insult to injury the new super is touted as better qualified, having graduated from thus and so turf school and worked as an intern at thus and so hoity-toity golf clubs. The superintendent of 30-plus years has only spent that time learning on the job, attending professional conferences and seminars, and honing the skills necessary to be a top-notch turf man.

Put the old guy out to pasture and spin



replaced in the last quarter of his career is a devastating event.

If the average salary of a superintendent is \$81,000, and if an ousted superintendent has approximately 10 years left until retirement age, that's \$810,000 of income lost. At a time when college expenses are over, the weddings are paid for, and the mortgage is gone, a person in this economic class now has a chance to prepare for retirement, long-term health care and the many needs of the last trimester of life.

practical defense is hard to come by.

When all is said and done, where does a superintendent go to find the last 10 years of employment? Current GCSAA statistics show 60 percent of superintendents feel secure in their job position. The average age of a non-certified superintendent is 45; the average age of a CGCS is 49. If 4 out of 10 do not feel secure, how many will find themselves looking for employment? Will they fall prey to the half the age, half the wage scenario? The 180 rule? Where are they going to land that last job when the time comes?

Clearly there are more questions than answers. The point to be taken home is be prepared. Be aware. Employers,

IN THIS AGE OF SUSTAINABILITY, ARE GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENT POSITIONS SUSTAINABLE THROUGHOUT A 30- OR 40-YEAR CAREER?



it to where the new person looks to be a Cracker Jack superhero and while you're at it, provide a larger budget, more capital funds, and more resources overall — resources that were not made available to the former superintendent, who had learned to overcome the obstacles by clever management and cunning skills.

At this point let me make one thing perfectly clear: There is no stated or implied criticism of the newbie in the turf profession. The focus is to be on personnel management practices and the devalued worth of an experienced golf course superintendent.

Sustainable profession?

Certainly no one owes anyone a living. But a scenario where a superintendent has served a club for 15 to 20 years and is

Assume this individual is fortunate enough to find a job at half the average superintendent wage. The net impact is still \$405,000 in lost income over 10 years.

Employers would do well to do some long and hard thinking before employment changes are made. Are there alternatives and compromises that would benefit both parties? Or are there alternatives and compromises that both parties can accept?

Mr. Creativity and Dr. Fairness need take the lead in addressing these questions. The likelihood of those two characters doing so are slim and none, and slim just left town. The likelihood of those two characters being players against finance chair Bill Budget, director Don Dollar and GM Mike Money are even less.

The onus clearly does not fall on just the employer. The superintendent must guard against the natural destiny that has been described. But when personality and popularity are strong factors in determining one's job security, not performance, a

stop and think through your personnel management decisions. Superintendent positions are few and far between. Superintendents not only deal with micro environments, they deal with micro employment potentials as well.

In this age of sustainability, are golf course superintendent positions sustainable throughout a 30- or 40-year career? Are you going to be one of the 5.9 percent still to have a job as a 60-year-old in a few years?

Old soldiers never die, they just fade away. But what becomes of old superintendents? Are they a discarded resource of no value like a triple-rinsed pesticide container? The situation has been presented. The resolution need be developed.

Or, it is what it is. Life goes on. ■

Charnes, a former golf course superintendent, is the co-owner of Superintendent's Choice Sod (www.lifeisshortsodit.com) in Louisville, Ky.