

Dave Fearis has "been at it for a while," he laughs. His first job on a golf course came as the back nine starter... at age 14.

LET'S GRAB A CUP OF COFFEE

Golfdom sits down with seven veteran superintendents from around the country to discuss their careers, the future of the business and advice for today's superintendent.

BY SETH JONES, CHRIS LEWIS AND STEVEN TINGLE

In just these next few pages of the magazine, there is collectively more than 250 years of experience in this great industry.

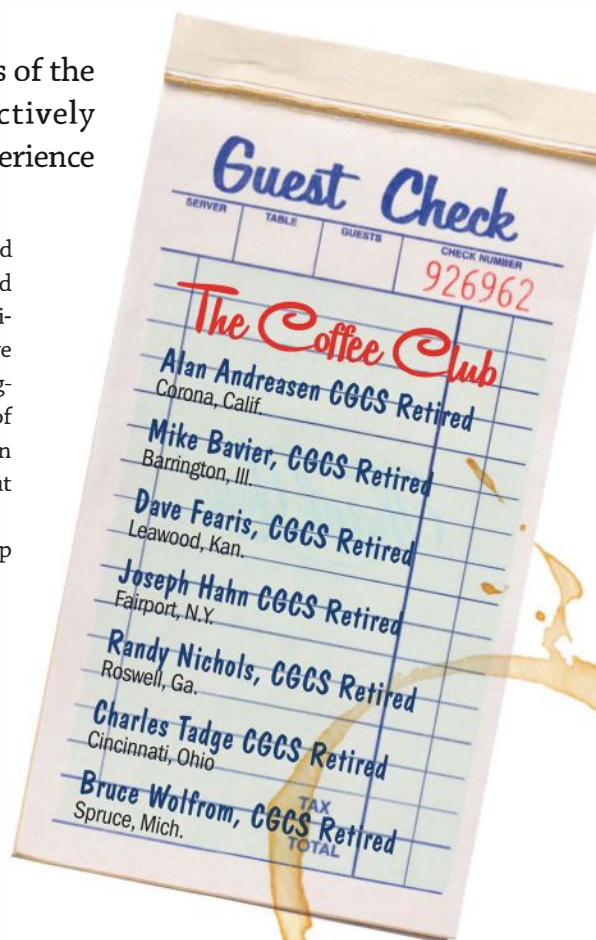
These veteran superintendents — all retired Certified Golf Course Superintendents and happy to give their time to chat about the business — come from across the nation and have grown (and killed) just about every grass imaginable. Among them are former presidents of the GCSAA, hosts of majors and mentors to an innumerable amount of superintendents out there working on golf courses today.

So, how do you take your coffee? Grab a cup and join us for one heck of a conversation.

GOLFDOM: Looking back at your career, knowing what you do now... would you do it all over again?

Dave Fearis: I probably would, in some capacity. I think it's a young man's profession. It's a sacrifice. Your job, unfortunately, comes first. It's hard to describe, that course becomes such a big part of you... superintendents are very proud. First thing in the morning, it's a neat experience to drive around and see the course without anyone on it... to see the beauty of it.

Randy Nichols: If you are talking about doing it all over again during the same time period, I would do it all over again. If you are talking about working as a superintendent



again in today's environment, I am not so sure.

Back in the '60s, when I was first introduced to the turf/golf business, the pressure on the superintendent was self-imposed. Today, the expectations are either difficult, or nearly im-

Continued on page 22

Continued from page 21

possible to achieve. "Perfect" is not good enough in many cases, even if you have a limited budget.

Joseph Hahn: I would absolutely do it again. It gave me the opportunity to do nine tournaments including three majors. I also got to do a lot of traveling and I got a lot of satisfaction when things went right and I learned to take it when Mother Nature humbled me. Plus I've enjoyed the opportunity to work with the 30 or so young guys who have gone on after working with me to become superintendents or assistants.

Charles Tadge: I think I would if I had the same conditions. But today things have changed a lot. There are opportunities if you get hooked up with the right golf course but a lot of the other opportunities are not as good. When I got out of Purdue there were a lot of the old timers retiring in the next few years, so there were a lot of opportunities for good jobs. That cycle hasn't repeated itself yet.

Alan Andreasen: No. It's too brutal of a business. If I had to do it all over again with the knowledge I have now I would look at something probably in golf but with some equity. You know, where you've got some kind of security rather than the whims of a board of directors or a management company.

Bruce Wolfrom: Sometime in my last 50 years in the business, I realized I was providing an arena where the "average Joe" could be a hero. Anyone, at any age, could have a hole-in-one, a birdie, an eagle. Even if the golfer never thought about my involvement in his or her moment of success, it's rewarding to know I was involved in that success. So I definitely would do it all over again.

Mike Bavier: I definitely would do it all over again. Working as a superintendent provided me the opportunity to make a living by enhancing the beauty of this earth and helping (my crew) feel a sense of accomplishment, while working to sustain an environment for the pleasure of golfers, as well as others.

How do you think the future of the game looks?

Bavier: It's been a tough few years for everyone. Play has been down in most areas.



Right now, I feel the focus should be on getting new players involved, especially juniors, as they are the future of the game, while also maintaining the interest of long-time players.

Fearis: I work at St. Andrews, our maintenance facility is right next to these 12 soccer fields Overland Park (Kan.) has, and those babies are always crowded. I thought this the other day: you can't play soccer when you're 50.

I think this Golf 2.0 is the way to go, showing the pluses of what golf can do besides just being outdoors. At different courses I've worked at, you get these emails about cut rates. All they're stressing is price. They're not promoting the game.

I remember Steve (Mona, then the CEO of GCSAA) and I went to a National Golf Foundation conference... they told us the growth of the game is in women and kids. Women don't play because of intimidation and time. And kids don't play because of cost and accessibility. That holds true to a point now.

Nichols: Unfortunately, I do not see a bright future for golf, nor our superintendent industry. I am not seeing the youth of today embracing the game as it has in past decades. Today's professional people do not have six or more hours available to complete a round of golf anymore. Many are more family-oriented than in the past, whereas my generation was work-oriented, neglecting our families.

Many courses have closed and many more are in bankruptcy protection or are considering "shutting the doors" altogether. New federal government mandates have made things even worse. Superintendents now have to worry about point source pollution, pesticide restrictions, water use restrictions and air pollution, particularly new restrictions on diesel engines, which drive up costs. These restrictions may lead to even more course closures.

History could very well repeat itself, as only the rich will be able to afford the game of golf again.

Wolfrom: I think the future of the game is bright. Golf is a game that can be played by anyone at any age. I believe that more and more people are realizing that.

There are a lot more junior programs around, too. Schools, public courses and recreation de-

Continued on page 24





Continued from page 22

partments are introducing kids to the game with classes, camps, leagues and clinics. There was a time when lessons for kids were only available at private clubs, which limited the number of new players. Now, anyone, anywhere, can take up the game at any age.

We'll probably see a few more courses close, but we're going to reach a point again where the demand is greater than the available courses, so we'll see new courses once more.

Andreasen: I think the future of the game looks outstanding for PGA Tour golf. Those courses have the TV technology to make their courses look good. It's almost mandatory, I think, excluding the USGA for a minute, that Tour golf knows that a large part of their popularity is the beauty of the golf course regardless of the playing conditions.

The average Joe Golfer kind of understands Scottish golf but they won't tolerate it at their own course. The USGA and the GCSAA have been making the pitch for years and years that you don't need lush park-like conditions to play golf.

In my area I'm seeing a lot of jobs that used to be \$90,000-a-year jobs are now \$55,000- to \$60,000-a-year jobs and the superintendent's job is being filled by high school graduates.

What advice do you have for today's superintendent?

Andreasen: Go back to college. After you get out and you have your degree and you have a job at a golf course get into some night classes, get a secondary skill.

Tadge: I would say keep your eyes and ears open and do the best job you can, even though the situation you're in might not be what you want it to be yet and you may have to move on to a different job. But I still think there are opportunities for the young superintendent.

Wolfram: If you haven't already, get a four-year degree. It doesn't have to be in turf. Business is a good degree to have. Be a profes-

sional. Wear a suit and tie to local and national superintendent meetings. Give back to the community you live in. Be a leader at your golf course, not a follower.

If you don't have strong communication skills, work on that. Write letters to your board of directors, owners and players. Don't rely on blogs, Twitter or Facebook. Use whole sentences. I've seen too many knowledgeable, talented people fail, due to their lack of ability to communicate. Always look for new knowledge. Research is continuously finding new answers to old problems. The most important asset you have is you. Develop yourself and you'll go far.

Fearis: Most of them are coming out of the turf schools. The only thing turf schools don't teach them is communication. I'll readily admit I wasn't the best superintendent, but I knew how to communicate.


On weekends I'd get there and do set-up, change tee markers, then I'd come back to the pro shop — the assistant pro was inevitably late — so I'd go in and make a pot of coffee and greet the early golfers. It's the little things, but it's on that line of communication.

You can't speak to the golfers in agronomic terms. These are businessmen and businesswomen. You've got to make it relate.

Nichols: First, receive the best education possible. Then, work (as an intern or assistant) at a club/facility similar to the facility you desire to be a superintendent at, and network with everyone in the industry — assistant superintendents, superintendents, sales representatives, university personnel, golf professionals, general managers, club officials and other allied professional groups. Be involved with your professional associations as often as possible.

And, finally, never forget how extremely important education is. Continue to receive certifications throughout your career.

Bavier: Most superintendents are experiencing the downsizing of their crew and budgets. Sure, superintendents are working longer hours, but they are also realizing that their sacrifice will have a positive, long-term effect on the game, as they are maintaining golfers' participation.

Most importantly, however, during these difficult periods, it is still necessary to maintain an acceptable balance of time between work and family. 

Can you pass the sugar?

As you might imagine, we had more than one cup of coffee with our sources. But we couldn't fit everything into the print magazine.

If you'd like to see the complete interviews with any of our sources for this story, stop by **Golfdom.com**, where we'll be posting all of the unabridged conversations.