

# Best



## The Makings of a Super Superintendent

years ago and pay top dollar for someone with proven ability. "Salaries are definitely moving upward," he says.

Salaries for the leading jobs range from \$85,000 to \$100,000, with the best jobs commanding even larger salaries, Kopplin says.

Sea Pines/Harbor Town Resort has one private club, two daily fee resort courses and one PGA course that hosts the MCI Classic each year. For Corbitt,

superintendents need experience hosting a tournament (at least for the PGA course). They also need to understand that the job requires a long-term commitment and cannot serve merely as a stepping stone to somewhere else. Corbitt says his company mandates a minimum of six years experience and demands at least a five-year commitment to stay once a job is offered.

"It's one of the first things we talk

about in the hiring process," Corbitt says. "Turnover isn't something we like, and we haven't had turnover in a long time."

Frank Jemsek, owner of Cog Hill GC, a private club in Chicago, says he also looks for someone with a proven track record.

"You want to look for someone who did a good job elsewhere before you hand your course to him," Jemsek says. "I wish

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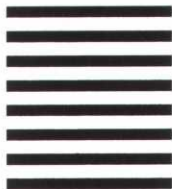
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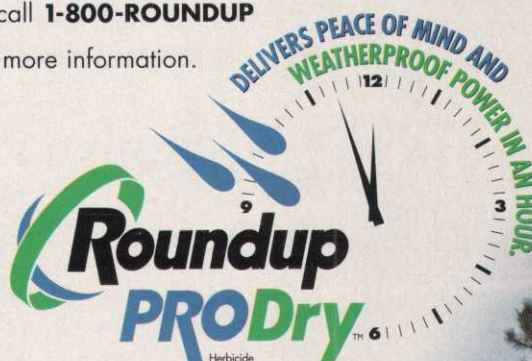
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## Simply the best

*Continues from page 61*

I knew how to hire a guy who's 25 years old and a great superintendent, but sometimes you don't have the portfolio."

Tommy Cuthbert, director of golf for Kiawah Island Golf & Tennis Resort in Kiawah Island, S.C., says turnover at his five courses is minimal. The least-tenured superintendent has worked there eight years.

Cuthbert says familiarity with the region is high on his priority list for superintendents. It's not easy to grow grass in South Carolina, so it helps if a superintendent has already done it, he adds.

### WWLD?\*

#### \*(What Would Latshaw Do?)

Paul R. Latshaw's résumé reads like a Who's Who list of the top courses in the United States: Congressional CC, Oakmont CC and Augusta National GC, just to drop a few names. Now at Winged Foot CC in Mamaroneck, N.Y., Latshaw says working at one of the top 10 courses in the country isn't always as glamorous as some might think.

"People believe it's great to work at one of those courses, but that's not necessarily true," Latshaw says. "When a course finally breaks into that upper echelon, it can become hallowed ground. No one wants to let you work with it."

Latshaw says his ideal job would include:

- a large budget;
- a small committee so decisions could be made more quickly;
- a course that kept its rounds to between 10,000 and 30,000 per year, depending on the number of holes;
- free rein to set the maintenance agenda; and
- the freedom to shut down the course periodically to do the necessary maintenance work without having to worry that golfers will be champing at the bit to play.

"Ideally, you'd love to work for a course where no one would play at all," Latshaw quips. "But that would kind of defeat the purpose."

Sea Pines' Corbitt says superintendents should probably pick a region in which they want to work and stay there. Expertise in maintaining regional courses elevates superintendents to leading positions within that geographic area.

### People skills paramount

Since growing grass in South Carolina is challenging, Kiawah's Cuthbert says superintendents who want jobs with his resort must also possess great people skills.

"When the conditions get stressful — and because of where we are located, they will — we can't have someone who's flying off the handle at the crews," Cuthbert says. "You've got to handle stress because it will be part of any job where golfers expect perfect conditions every time they play."

Good communication — with employees, employers and golfers — can squelch some of those problems before

they surface. It falls under those "people skills" the best clubs look for, says Jerry Faubel, president of Executive Golf Search in Saginaw, Mich.

"You have to be able to talk to the owner and the golfers about what will happen depending on what they decide to let you do," Faubel says. "If the membership has an understanding of what's going on and why it's happening, members may be more willing to let the superintendent do his job with minimal interference."

Top courses seek superintendents comfortable with high visibility, Kopplin says. Superintendents shouldn't wait for members to come to them with suggestions about the course — they should invite input from club members and owners, he adds.

But Faubel says top courses don't want constant confrontation.

"The courses aren't worried about

## SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

A wise man once said, "Be careful what you wish, young man, for someday you shall surely receive it" The advice applies to deciding whether to move from one superintendent's job to another. Jerry Faubel, president of Executive Golf Search, says money shouldn't be the sole factor in deciding when to take a new job.

"I would caution superintendents against just chasing the money," Faubel says. "Money's nice, but there are a lot of other factors integral to the top jobs that may make them less attractive."

For example:

• **Cost of living.** What it costs to live in Saginaw, Mich., where Executive Golf Search is located, is not the same it will cost you to live in Los Angeles, New York or other cities where the top courses reign.

"A lot of people don't take that into consideration when they make a decision," Faubel says. "They just look at the number." (For help in calculating cost of living differences, check out <http://homefair.com/index.html>. The site will help you decide in which job you will be better compensated.)

• **Increased stress:** As might be expected, the best jobs also incur more stress (see "Lights, Camera ... Angst!", pg. 50). Be sure you're ready to accept the scrutiny that comes with keeping a top course in top condition all the time.

• **Curtailing of family time:** Top courses expect superintendents to be on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Free time, already compressed for all superintendents, becomes nearly nonexistent. Such constraints often put further strains on marriages and relationships with children, Faubel says. "Your family life often goes right out the window," he adds.

Faubel isn't suggesting superintendents shouldn't pursue better jobs when they have the opportunity. He just advises them to do so cautiously.

"There are many factors that go into a decision about pursuing a top job," Faubel says. "Weigh them all carefully before making a final decision."

someone who stands on principle as long as the person isn't constantly in a fighting mood," Faubel says. "Tact and diplomacy are a premium at the top courses."

Top superintendents should stay flexible to handle challenges as they arise, Faubel says. Kiawah's Cuthbert says the best superintendents hire good support staffs, and they should be open to the latest thinking, especially that of the younger generation.

"You have to be willing to talk to young people today and not be threatened by what they have to say," Cuthbert says. "The more exposure you have to new ideas, the better the course will be."

Faubel says great superintendents should never fear asking advice about solving problems. "One of the beauties of this industry is how willing people are to share information," he says.

#### **Business savvy necessary**

At the highest levels, superintendents need business skills to handle budgets, Kopplin says. They must relate budgeting needs in terms owners will understand. Corbitt says budgeting experience is a must at his courses because his company isn't running the courses as a public service — they expect to make money.

"Our superintendents have to be willing to stick to budgets," Corbitt says. "As we've become more of a business, margins are growing thinner, and superintendents have to know how to deal with that."

Finally, as with other professions, education and certification pare down the list of superintendents who can compete for jobs at the highest levels. Kopplin says the educational level of today's top superintendents far eclipses that expected in the past. Sea Pines requires a two-year turf management degree as minimum educational experience and expects its superintendents to be certified, Corbitt says.

Cog Hill's Jemsek says owners' money is best spent enrolling superintendents in local associations.

"Superintendents need to increase their knowledge regularly and being a mem-

ber of the local organization is a perfect way to do that," Jemsek says. "They build relationships there that can help them learn about maintaining golf courses."

The emphasis on education has grown exponentially, Kopplin says. "People are realizing that this is a multimillion dollar enterprise they're handing over to a superintendent. They

won't just take anyone," he says.

But even in a competitive market, a superintendent with the right skills is worthy of reaping the rewards for his hard work.

"Top-quality superintendents command top-quality salaries," Corbitt says. "If they're good at what they do, they can command whatever they want." ■

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# Star Search

A healthy economy and shrinking labor pool have attracted more headhunters to the golf course industry

BY PATRICK QUINN

**F**our years ago, Rick Fogarsi considered changing jobs. The construction and grow-in specialist had just finished supervising the grow-in at Brookshire G&CC outside Lansing, Mich., and he was thinking about re-locating.

Fogarsi admits he finds the routine of day-to-day maintenance "a little boring." He had nearly decided to leave Michigan and go to work for Billy Casper Golf Management when he received a phone call from a headhunter. Would he be interested in talking to the owners of the Golf Club at Apple Mountain in Freeland, Mich.? They were looking for a superintendent to oversee the last few years of construction and to grow in the course.

Fogarsi's phone call was the product of a growing trend: A go-go economy, a shrinking labor pool and an average superintendent job tenure of less than eight years have made executive recruiters, more commonly known as headhunters, more popular in the industry.

Fogarsi was interested in the offer, and at the recruiter's behest he completed a multi-page questionnaire about his background and employment history. The document went not to the course owners but to the recruiter, who used the results to screen applicants based on criteria provided by the owners.

Attractive job openings typically draw more than 100 résumés in the current competitive environment, and reducing this mass to a manageable half-dozen is among the chief services provided by recruiters.

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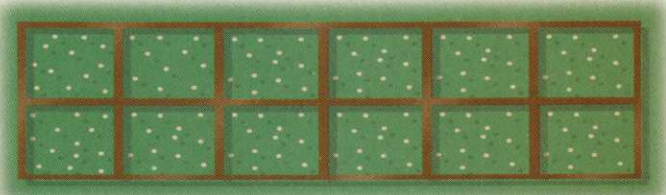






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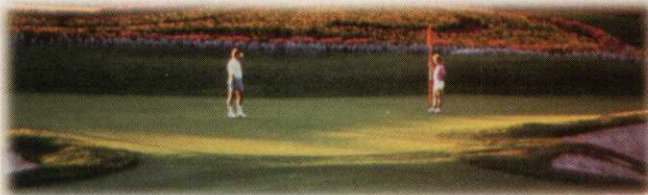
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**More than 90 percent of placement failures can be attributed to a faulty understanding of client expectations.**

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The screening document also allowed Fogarsi to note his compensation requirements.

"It asked what I expected in the way of a bonus and in the way of a vehicle," Fogarsi says. "It told them a lot about me and about what I was looking for, which meant we were all better prepared when we sat down to do the interview."

The first interview lasted almost four hours, and the recruiter sat in. Shortly thereafter, Fogarsi found himself hired and happily immersed in the details of Apple Mountain's drainage system.

Blissful outcomes are never guaranteed. Fogarsi, however, had the benefit of working with a qualified recruiter, Executive Golf Search, a search firm devoted solely to the golf course business and headed by two former presidents of GCSAA, Jerry Faubel, superintendent of Saginaw CC, and Bruce Williams, superintendent at the Los Angeles CC.

More superintendents are finding themselves approached by, and often working with, executive recruiters.

"More and more companies are using third-party sources for employees," says Dave St. John, a partner in GreenSearch, an Atlanta-based executive search firm in the green industry. "It has, historically, been somewhat rare in the golf course industry, but it's becoming a little more common because of the tightness of the labor market."

GreenSearch is an example of the most common type of company in the business today: the retained executive search firm — a company hired, typically by the would-be employer, to seek out potential employees, screen them and present a short list of candidates to the client. These firms collect their fees from the employer, usually calculated as a percentage of the new employee's first-year salary — commonly 25 percent. Thus, a firm that places an employee at a salary of \$60,000 would charge the employer \$15,000. (The fee is not paid by the employee.)

How well a recruiting firm performs its job is often a function of how well it knows the industry it is attempting to staff. A recruiter with years of experience at placing finance and banking personnel is probably not

the best bet for a club thinking about a new superintendent.

"We've learned there's a strong network of superintendents, a fairly select network that ensures that the word gets around very rapidly when an attractive position opens up," St. John says. GreenSearch has found a place in the market through specialization.

"It's all we do — consulting and search work in the green industry," St. John says. "We work with a number of different segments of the industry — landscape installation and management, interiorscapes for businesses, nurseries and golf courses. We spend a lot of time on business development, attending turf trade shows and association meetings. It's a matter of people in the industry getting to know you. Conventional corporate recruiters rarely have time for that."

Faubel and Williams have 65 years of superintendent experience between them, but Faubel believes the company's greatest strength lies in the clubhouse.

"We have dealt with boards," he says. "Some corporate recruiters may have sat on a board at some point or have some cursory knowledge of board operations, but we've been dealing with boards all our lives."


When they take on a search, the first thing Faubel and Williams do is go to the club.

"The key is finding out what the committee wants and what the club is like," Faubel says. "We interview the committee and the green chairman, and we tell them what they can expect at their club for their position and their salary. Then we select a number of skilled people with the talents to do the job, and let the interview committee do what it does best."

Recruiters and clients stress the importance of determining precisely what the client is looking for. Several sources cited studies indicating that more than 90 percent of placement failures can be attributed to a faulty understanding of client expectations.

"A high number of executive-level failures are caused by a poor cultural fit between the client and the candidate," says Susan Roberts, chief administrator of the National Association of Executive Recruiters. "Often, it's caused by clients not fully understanding what they want or need. Retained search peo-

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ple try to build an ongoing relationship with the clients to learn their client's culture to head off a bad fit."

Once the client's wishes are clearly understood, however, recruiters can often arrange relationships that last for a long time.

"It's ludicrous that the average superintendent changes jobs every seven or eight years," Faubel says. "Some people want to move around, of course, but when we put a superintendent in the right position, he or she can be at that club for years. Almost everyone

we've placed over the years is still in their positions."

For both employers and would-be employees, there are a few common-sense guide-

lines to observe when working with recruiters:

- Obtain references of a recruiter and investigate its history.
- Ask where the recruiter obtained your name or learned of your job opening.
- Find out if the search firm conducts independent background checks, or simply collects and passes along résumés.
- Learn the company's confidentiality policies.

Employees, for example, should obtain assurance that their résumés will not be posted on Internet job boards without their permission. Faubel's firm first asks if the current superintendent is still on the job.

"If the person is, does the person know he or she is leaving?" Faubel says. "If the answer is no, we say, 'No thanks.' We're not about to go in and work behind a superintendent's back." ■

*Patrick Quinn is a freelance writer from Lawrence, Kan.*

### On the Hunt

More superintendents are finding themselves approached by, and often working with, executive recruiters, including:

- Atlanta-based GreenSearch. Contact 888-375-7787 or [www.greensearch.com](http://www.greensearch.com)
- La Quinta, Calif.-based Kopplin Search. Contact 760-564-0231 or [www.kopplinsearch.com](http://www.kopplinsearch.com).
- Saginaw, Mich.-based Executive Golf Search. Contact 517-797-0677.

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