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The wage increase this year paid off almost immediately. One hard-working employee turned down a higher-paying job to stay at Walloon Lake.

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competition is stiff for labor throughout Florida. Construction is a vibrant industry in the state, especially in the aftermath of the hurricanes that have ravaged Florida in recent years. Construction companies attract potential golf course laborers with good-paying temporary jobs.

"The competition for that work force is getting tougher down here," Mullikin says.

So last December, Mullikin says Bonita Bay's owners implemented a raise from \$8 an hour to up to \$10 an hour.

"That put a smile on everybody's faces," Mullikin says. "It's amazing what 50 cents to 75 cents more an hour can do."

In addition, the company also awarded hourly employees a bonus. "Some people received \$1,000 before taxes, which is pretty sizeable," Mullikin says.

Like Mullikin, superintendent Dan Bissonette also recently got the go-ahead from the private club members at Walloon Lake Country Club in Petoskey, Mich., to begin paying his maintenance crew workers more money. Walloon Lake increased hourly wages from \$8.40 up to \$10. Bissonette says the club's

members, comprised of successful business owners, realized they had to make the move to attract potential employees. It also helped that the course doesn't have any debt.

"They realize it takes money to at least get people in the door," Bissonette says. "We can pick and choose after they are here. You don't have to take what you are given."

Bissonette's crew consists of eight seasonal laborers in addition to an assistant superintendent and mechanic. The latter two are the only full-time employees. Two of the employees work from April through November and the rest are summer help comprised of college and high school students.

It had been difficult for Bissonette to retain the summer workers by paying them \$8.40 an hour. Last summer, Bissonette hired 24 people throughout the golf season. "We had only six people last until the end of the year," he says, noting that some workers quit because they thought the pay was too low for the work they performed. But the wage increase this year paid off almost immediately. One hard-working employee turned down a higher-paying job to stay at Walloon Lake after receiving the increase.

Bissonette says it was time to increase the hourly wage. "Can we afford to give golf course maintenance personnel a decent living? For the sake of the game, I don't think we can afford not to," he says.

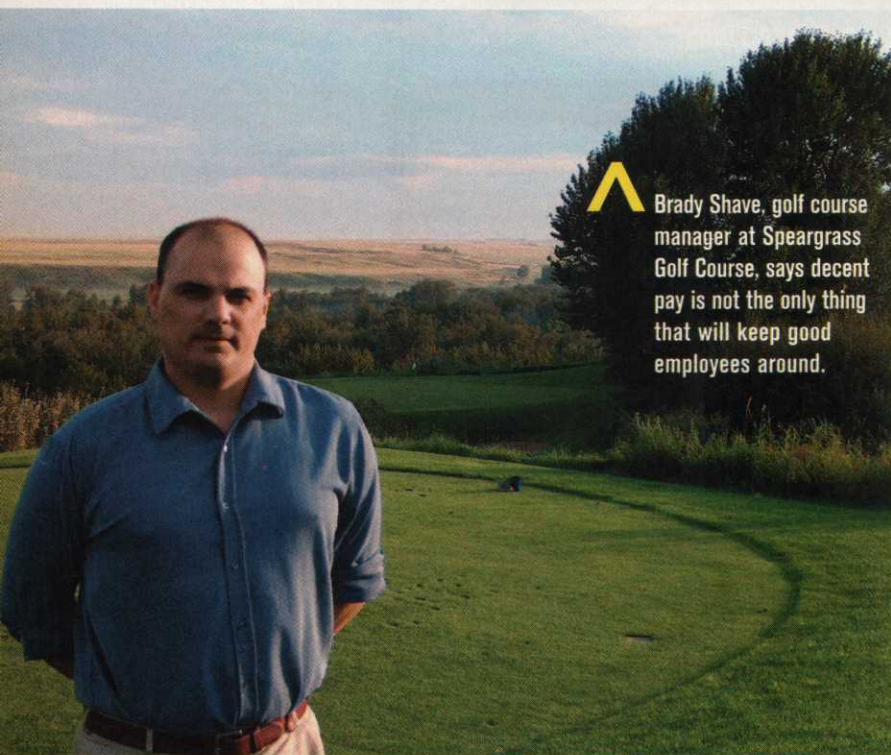
When Bissonette began at Walloon Lake 16 years ago, the club had a small and low-paid staff. Soon the club upped its employees' pay and had enough job applicants that it had applications on file.

"But we got away from that, and we didn't have anybody on file while other clubs were offering 401(k)s, health benefits and clothing allowances to their staffs," Bissonette says. "Hopefully, we're back in the game."

At Speargrass Golf Course, located in a small town about 30 minutes from Calgary, Alberta, golf course manager Brady Shave recently increased pay to seasonal workers to about \$12 an hour (Canadian). That might not be enough, though.

Competition among businesses is steep for laborers in the area, and Shave has had a difficult time attracting potential employees to

*Continued on page 34*



**A** Brady Shave, golf course manager at Speargrass Golf Course, says decent pay is not the only thing that will keep good employees around.



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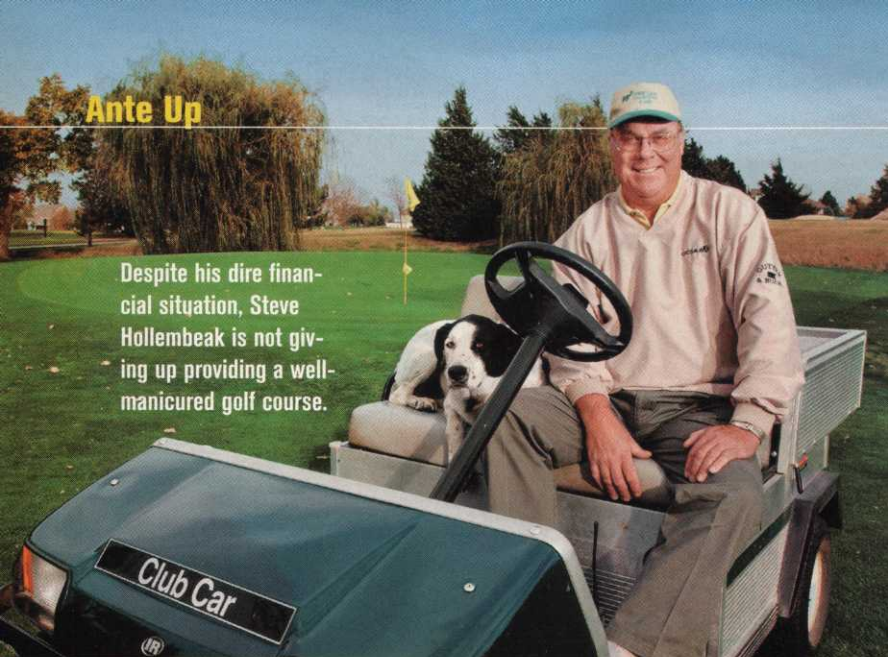
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Despite his dire financial situation, Steve Hollembeak is not giving up providing a well-manicured golf course.



## Despite Labor Woes, Superintendent Maintains

Somehow, Steve Hollembeak is making ends meet at Winfield (Kan.) Country Club.

The certified superintendent, who has been at the club for 27 years, has watched his maintenance budget decline dramatically with the club's membership the last few years. Gone are the days when Hollembeak had nearly \$290,000 to spend. That's when he employed a well-paid assistant and eight experienced crew members, and could purchase almost anything he needed.

But a struggling local economy and new competition in the area caused Winfield's membership to drop from 300 to 200 since 2001. The club's maintenance budget is now about \$200,000. Hollembeak employs three full-time employees from March through November and a part-time mechanic.

Hollembeak was asked earlier this year to cut another \$20,000 from his already-depleted budget. "When you only have two line items on the whole budget that are more than \$4,000, there are only so many places you can cut," he says.

So the 53-year-old superintendent, who doesn't even employ an assistant, slashed his own salary about 75 percent to help balance the bottom line.

Needless to say, Hollembeak's crew is inexperienced and shorthanded, and there is no money to hire more experienced employees.

"There's really no market out there for us to get members," Hollembeak says, knowing that only more members will infuse his maintenance budget with more capital to spend.

Hollembeak is not complaining, though. He's not bitter about cutting his pay. He understands the circumstances. He's also not giving up on providing members with a well-manicured course. Despite the financial strain on his budget, Hollembeak has found a few creative methods to help him get the work done. He struck a deal with one member who mows the course's fairways for free membership dues. Another member, who knows Hollembeak's situation, mows the intermediate cut a few times a week for free.

"I bought him dinner the other night," Hollembeak says. "That's a small price to pay."

Hollembeak has also implemented four member work nights a year. About 15 to 20 members usually show up to trim trees and perform other tasks.

Hollembeak says he doesn't have any answers about how to improve the situation. He'll just try to keep on keeping on.

He does know one thing, however. He doesn't want to leave.

"This is home," Hollembeak says.

— By Larry Aylward

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Speargrass, a daily-fee, 18-hole course that opened in 2003. Because of its distance from the populated city, Shave says it's more difficult to attract employees. And it's getting even tougher because of the increased price of gas.

"We rely more on the smaller towns around to attract labor," Shave says.

One of those towns is Strathmore, located about 20 minutes from Speargrass, which has outfitted the course with several employees. But Shave is concerned that Strathmore, which is booming with new businesses, will cease to be the providing ground that it has been because of new employers coming to town.

"It's tough to get a 20-year-old to drive 20 minutes at 5:30 in the morning to make \$12 an hour when he can sleep in and go to work [somewhere else] in the afternoon for the same amount of money," Shave says.

Shave's crew numbers 14 people. About half of his employees work from March through October and are considered full-season laborers and return from year to year. The remaining half is comprised of college and high school students hired for summer help. They are the workers Shave has a hard time attracting and retaining. "We're not always their first choice so we have to offer a little more to entice them to come here," Shave says.

Year-end bonuses help. At Speargrass, if seasonal employees make it through the season, they'll receive an additional 50 cents for the hours they work. If a crew member works 1,000 hours, he or she receives a \$500 bonus.

"It gives them something to work for, and it also gives me a little protection that they won't leave a few weeks early," Shave says.

But Shave says he's learned that employees desire more than money. Doing more for them than just paying a competitive wage will help keep them around. At Speargrass, workers can take advantage of inexpensive housing near the club. The club owns a farmhouse nearby with four bedrooms, and employees can live there for \$200 a month. Then they don't have to drive very far to work. That matters when gas is more than \$4 a gallon in Canada.

"Maybe they can justify making a little less money to work here if the cost of living is less," Shave says.



In addition, Speargrass offers free golf to employees and offers its clubhouse restaurant food at half price.

Shave says attracting employees is a lot like marketing a course to golfers. "It's not so much about wages or price, it's about value," he adds.

Tumlinson says the easiest solution to combat the labor problem is to pay employees more money. But while there has been a slight upswing in rounds nationally, Tumlinson says the people making the financial decisions at golf courses are wary of pouring a lot of money into their facilities.

"Everybody needs to be careful of the bottom line," she says. "The superintendent needs to understand that as well as everyone. ... Everybody needs to be cognizant of what the employer's needs are, and at the same time the employer needs to be cognizant of what the employees' needs are."

"But if the cash flow is not there, there might be some creative ways to increase the entire compensation package even if it doesn't come down to the salary or the wage," she adds.

Tumlinson likes what Shave does at Speargrass to attract potential employees and retain them. She suggests superintendents incorporate such fringe benefits into hiring packages. Superintendents should also include more fun events into work schedules, such as barbecues. Such simple events, which can also include employees' family members, put an entertaining twist on the job.

"I know several superintendents who do fun and creative things with their crews to help them enjoy their jobs more," she adds.

It also pays (pun intended) to be a reputable employer, Tumlinson notes. If you're a good boss — a fair person who cares about your employees, values them and empowers them — chances are more employees will want to stay with you, even if a higher-paying job beckons, she adds.

"If your employer makes your job enjoyable every day — even if you're just raking bunkers — it really says something for the employer, the golf facility and the superintendent," Tumlinson says. ■



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# ‘Working’ Plan

Superintendent  
offers ideas on how  
to get tasks done —  
and save  
money  
in the labor budget  
at the same time

**BY RON FURLONG**

I recently came across an Oscar Wilde quote that states, “Anyone who lives within his means suffers from a lack of imagination.”

For whatever reason, the author’s words got me thinking about how we tend to settle for things and, more to the golf course management point, settle for things because that’s the way we’ve always done them or that’s how we’ve been taught to do them. This contemplation led me, somehow (must have been a really slow day), to wondering about what types of inventions or, if you will, advances, could be conceived to help golf course superintendents in the future — specifically

to help them with the ever-growing problem of money spent on labor.

With prices for just about everything we purchase for the maintenance of the golf course skyrocketing — especially fuel — and the seemingly common trend of stagnant if not decreasing budgets, something has to be done to help us tow that difficult line. Decreasing money spent on labor, the No. 1 line item in almost every golf course superintendent’s budget, is perhaps the only reasonable way to combat the troubling issue of budget woes. And the only way to cut down on those labor costs without sacrificing quality is to come up with better and more efficient ways to do things.



I'm a good one for Top 10 Lists, and this topic seemed to literally cry out for one like a baby who hasn't eaten in four hours (recent newborn, can you tell?). So let's make this one a Top Five List. We'll call it (a bit tongue in cheek, if you don't mind):

### **The Top Five Inventions or Creative Advancements to Save on Man-Hours.**

(Not exactly catchy, I admit, but nevertheless to the point)

#### **5 Robotic Mowers**

You know the visual we all have of the mass of fairway mowers at Augusta National during Masters week charging across the 15th fairway like an army and mowing it in two minutes (if it's not two minutes, it can't be much more). Now imagine that same scene but with no one riding the fairway mowers. A bit scary, eh?

#### **4 No Maintenance Week**

How would this sign go over posted outside the first tee on Monday morning: NO MAINTENANCE WEEK! ENJOY! Actually, it would probably not be as bad on Monday morning of the week as say Thursday or Friday. And you might not want to show your face on the weekend.

#### **3 Deceptive Budget Reasoning With Green Chairman or Owner**

Quote professional football player Keith Davis to him or her: "We didn't actually overspend our budget. The allocation simply fell short of our expenditure."

#### **2 Growth Regulator Rates to Halt Vertical Growth For Entire Season**

I actually tried (by horrible accident) Primo Maxx at six times the rate. Not recommended.

#### **1 The Ultimate Versatile Mower for All Your Mowing Needs**

Picture this at the next trade show: A mower that can cut your fairways at one-half inch; then, at the push of a button, mow your rough at 1.5 inches; then, at the push of a button again, mow your approaches and tees at four-tenths of an inch. And then,

**Want to cut down on labor and, hence, money spent on labor? Then put away the string trimmers, and let the brush take over the water's edge.**

on the way into the shop, you mow the surrounds quickly at 1 inch with one more push of the button. Let's keep the mower off the greens though, shall we?

OK, these five ideas may be a bit on the unrealistic side, but there are some sound and creative ideas that could help superintendents cut down on labor money.

I posed the question — "What advancement in golf course maintenance could be made to help superintendents save on man-hours?" — to Larry Gilhuly, director for the United States Golf Association's Green Section in the Northwest Region. Gilhuly's answer surprised me a bit. He didn't come up with the expected answers, such as "better and more reliable electric mowers" or "more drought-tolerant grasses." Instead of addressing the superintendent's mindset, he directed the issue toward the everyday golfer.

"Honestly, having players that understand that fast greens do not always mean good greens would make superintendents' lives much easier," Gilhuly said.

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Picture this at the next trade show: A mower that can cut your fairways at one-half inch; then, at the push of a button, mow your rough at 1.5 inches.





*Continued from page 37*

At first, I simply assumed Gilhuly had misunderstood my question. Green speed? But after thinking about it for a moment, I realized he was definitely onto something. What if we are able to convince golfers that true and consistent greens are a much better barometer to measure the playability of greens

than how fast and firm they are? Think of the cascading effect on maintenance practices. Less rolling; less double cutting; more than likely less fungicides because of less stress; as well as less hand watering because of less stress. I have a funny feeling that wetting agents, growth regulators and fertilizers would all get more life out of them with slightly higher cutting heights.

All of these things would ultimately lead to fewer man-hours spent on rollers, mowers, sprayers and manning water hoses, as well as no doubt decreasing equipment repair hours in the long run.

The famous scientist Linus Pauling once said, "The best way to have a good idea is to have a lot of ideas." With that in mind, here are some suggestions to help in the battle against the dreaded labor budget. Maybe there are a couple good ones in the bunch:

■ **Creating or extending no-mow zones on the golf course.** This is, without a doubt, the No. 1 thing any superintendent can do to cut down on labor. Obviously, the less there is to maintain, the less it will cost to maintain it.

■ **Creating or extending buffers around water features.** Same principal as the no-mow zone idea. Let the reeds and lilies take over the water's edge. Put those fly-mows and string trims away.

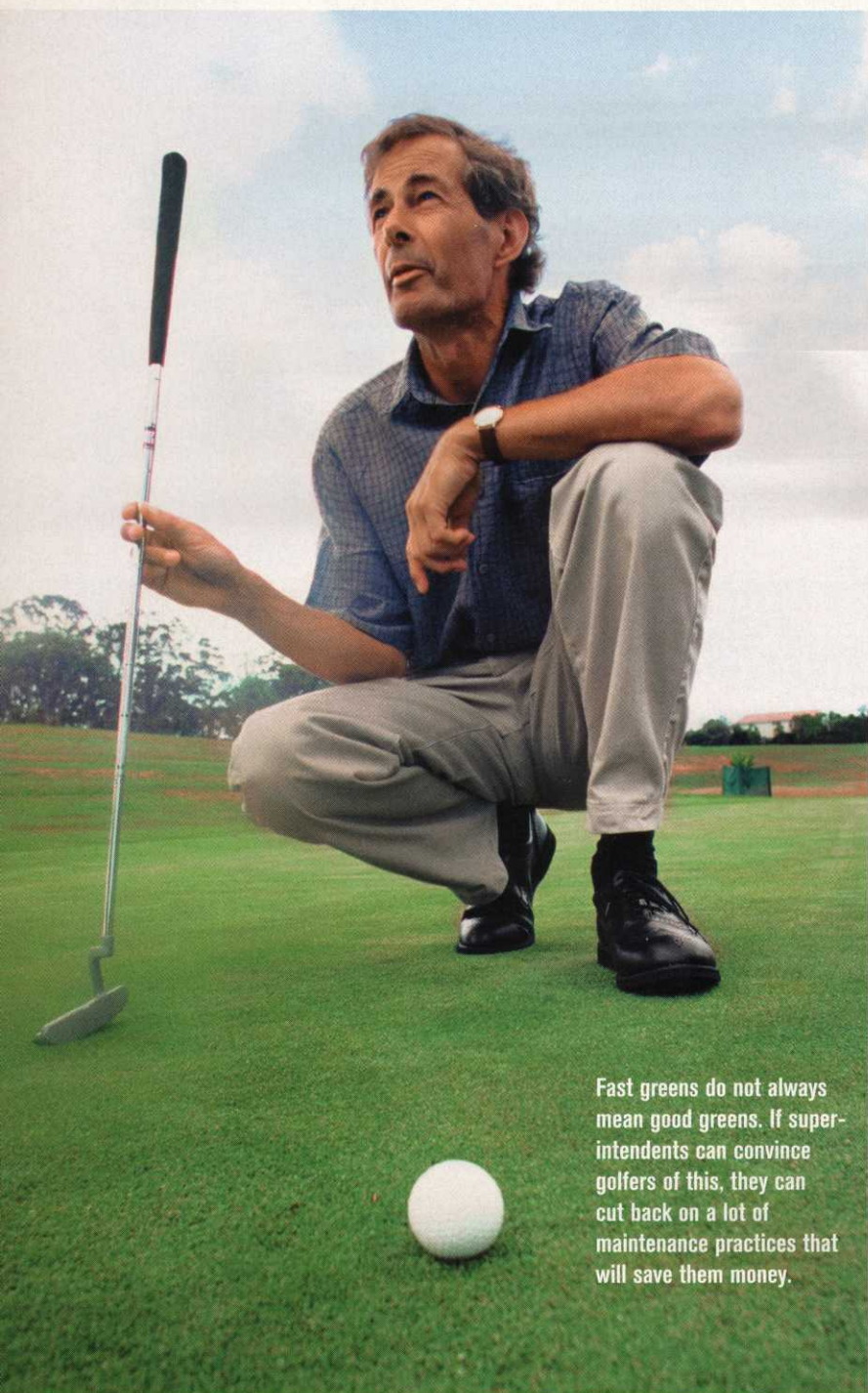
■ **Changing our acceptance levels on weeds.** Do we really need to kill every weed on the golf course? I think some clover and chickweed could be allowed to survive in the rough. Remember, a weed is only a weed if it is truly unwanted.

■ **Raising heights on greens.** As mentioned before, the benefits of this simple action could be remarkable.

■ **Better-trained employees.** The better trained your workers are to do jobs, no doubt the better and, ultimately, quicker they will be able to do them.

■ **Organization.** Keep in mind that this comes from a guy who makes a list of the lists that I need to make. If I do something that wasn't on a list, I'll add it to a list and then cross it off. Having said that, I do believe that organization helps efficiency, and efficiency helps productivity, and, well, you get the idea.

*Continued on page 40*



Fast greens do not always mean good greens. If superintendents can convince golfers of this, they can cut back on a lot of maintenance practices that will save them money.



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## 'Working' Plan

Creating or extending no-mow zones on the golf course is the No. 1 thing any superintendent can do to cut down on labor.

*Continued from page 38*

■ **Equipment advances.** I'm no engineer, but I have a few thoughts in this area for any who may be listening:

■ A cup cutter that removes the entire plug (year-round) without it falling apart and having to dig it out.

■ Dew whips that have a lifespan of more than a year.

■ A fairway mower that mows in the early morning without creating a mess of clippings.

■ A way for a sprayer to spray out as low as a half gallon of water per 1,000 square feet without having to drive 5 mph over your fairways.

■ Irrigation components with more durability than aluminum cans.

■ A more-efficient way to clean up behind an aggressive dethatcher.

■ A utility car that can be driven, by accident of course, into a lake and come roaring out on the opposite bank as clean as a whistle.

Right now, I kind of feel like American entertainer Oscar Levant when he said, "There's a fine line between genius and insanity. I have just erased this line."

This seems like a good place to bid adieu. ■

*Furlong is superintendent of Avalon Golf Club in Bellingham, Wash. He can be reached at rf7500@aol.com.*

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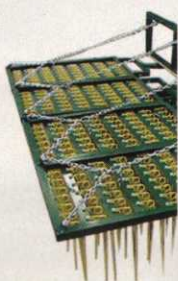
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