

(From left) Assistant superintendents Sammy Gore and Chris Labaff confer with superintendent Paul Kaufman, author of this story.



Hire Right

Personnel issues are widely regarded as the most challenging aspect of a management-level position. To golf course superintendents, this simple truth becomes more and more apparent with each passing year. Personnel expenses make up at least half of most golf course maintenance budgets, so it is easy to see the logic of maximizing this resource.

Besides being the largest expenditure, it is also the most difficult to control. Of all the resources at your command, it is the only one that thinks on its own, has feelings and forms its own opinions. Employees also share feelings with other staff members, other managers at your facility and customers. So it makes sense to do all you can to build a strong personnel team and be particularly careful when introducing a new member to that team through the hiring process.

The logical first step in harnessing the most of your human resource is to cultivate a true team concept. In most cases, this is easier than it sounds. Your staff members are watching you as much or more as you are watching them. They are watching to see if you really care about them and if they are being treated equally compared to other members of the team. It is of the utmost importance to treat everyone consistently

and understand that rules are only rules if they are enforced. Building a team requires trust — trust that a manager cares about the members of his team, treats them fairly, empowers them to make decisions and credits them for their contribution to the overall success of the team.

No matter how strong of a team you establish, sooner or later you will lose a member and be faced with finding a replacement. The goal should be to find someone who will fit into and not disrupt the team culture you have worked so hard to establish. If the vacated position is one with more responsibility than entry level, then it is always prudent to give current team members the opportunity to apply for the position prior to going outside of your company.

First, you are dealing with a known commodity. Second, they already understand and fit into your existing team culture. Third, it demonstrates that there are opportunities for advancement within your organization. For entry-level positions, a good starting place is with recommendations from existing team members.

If you have a good team already, most teammates will be reluctant to be the one who recommended someone who does not fit in and disrupts the team. If the position

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It makes good business sense to hire people who fit into your team concept. Here's how

BY PAUL KAUFMAN



6:52 AM...

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It is prudent to go through at least two separate interview sessions with as many as four interviews.

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you are looking to fill is for an assistant superintendent or an equipment manager, it never hurts to contact fellow superintendents you respect who have cultivated a similar team atmosphere as you and see if they have anybody ready to fill the bill.

Also, industry professionals, such as equipment or turf product representatives, might know of good candidates they can recommend. The most common method of locating potential candidates to fill your open position, however, is by some form of advertising. No matter what vehicle you choose to advertise the position, it is of utmost importance to convey an emphasis on a strong team culture. Most job listings place too much emphasis on education and work experience. Although some degree of education and experience is important for some positions, the mention of a willingness to train the right candidate could bring out a real diamond in the rough who

might be too intimidated to apply if the listing is too heavily weighted toward education and job experience. As the years have gone by, I have learned to place more emphasis on a positive attitude, motivation and the desire to be part of a team.

Thinning the herd

Once you start to get resumes and applications, a good course of action is to cull them down to a small pool that can be evaluated more closely. Depending on the position you are looking to fill, it never hurts to get others involved. If it is a first assistant you are going to hire, some input from the general manager or golf pro can be useful. For all other positions, I like to include my first assistant in the process because let's face it: he or she will be the one to supervise the new team member.

When evaluating resumes and applications, it's easy to make the mistake of putting less effort into the hiring process for entry-level positions compared to, say, an assistant superintendent or an equipment manager. But within the parameters of a team concept, all positions are important. There are certain red flags that show up on applications and resumes, including large gaps in employment, the frequent changing of jobs, terminations and an unwillingness to permit current or former employers to be contacted, to name a few. The depth of the pool of resumes or applications you have of which to draw should determine if any of these red flags are reason enough to prevent the applicant from being a candidate for an interview. If an applicant has one of these red flags, but still intrigues you, there is no rule that says you cannot contact him to gather more information prior to discarding him from the to-be-interviewed list. The goal of the culling process is to establish a list of three to six candidates for interviewing.

For all open positions, it is good to go through an interview process that consists of at least two separate interview sessions with as many as four interviews depending on the amount of responsibility the open position carries. Hiring someone after one interview is irresponsible and has the potential to disrupt the team culture you have

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worked so hard to achieve. Always have a prepared list of questions that you ask each candidate, and always emphasize the importance of the team atmosphere during each interview.

The initial interview should be one where you explain the parameters of the position a person is interviewing for and how the right candidate will fit into the team. The first interview is a good time to ask questions that pertain to why the person wants to work on your team, what he has to offer the team and to learn about the person's past work experience. The initial interview should be a get-to-know-each-other experience that probably won't determine who you are going to hire, but it has a good chance to determine who you will not. One thing that you want all candidates to understand after the first interview is that they are not just being evaluated for a job, but more so to become a member of a team.

Narrowing the field

After the first interview, you will most likely be able to reduce the number you call back for a second interview. In many cases, the ones who are looking for just any position will find a job and cull themselves. The second interview is a good time to really get to know the remaining candidates. The object is to get them to talk. It is good to use tried-and-true interview techniques, such as having them list three things in their past work experience they are really proud of and three they felt they could have done better, or have them list five strengths and five weaknesses and list what attributes they possess that would make them a good addition to the team. By the end of the second interview cycle, you should have a good opinion about which candidate is the best fit. But it's still a good idea to have a third interview with the strongest candidates.

The third interview is a good time to have other key members of the team sit in, be it your first assistant, the general manager or the golf pro, and take into

account their opinions as well. By the end of the third interview, you have really made the candidates jump through some hoops, and you will leave all of them with the opinion that the position they have interviewed for is viewed as being very important to your organization.

When you have made your final decision, it is time to extend an offer of employment. Take time to clearly establish all the particulars of the position, answer any questions the successful candidate might have and determine a start date, but make it clear that the job offer is contingent on a favorable reference check.

Depending on your individual situation, it might be you conducting the reference check, or it might be a representative of your organization's human resources department. I prefer the latter, as the human resources person usually has not formed an opinion of the candidate, and that person's report will be based purely on what he or she garners from the reference check. By law, what you are able to ask former employers is usually limited to dates of employment, wage information and would they re-hire. Any disparities between the reference check and what the candidate has told you should be a big red flag, and it is prudent to err on the side of caution because it is quite frankly easy to hire someone and not so easy to fire him. If all checks out, you have done your due diligence and most likely, you have done your best to protect your team culture.

Team building is a rewarding process that does not happen overnight. But once you have successfully compiled the right blend of personalities and skill sets, it makes for a very pleasant and productive work atmosphere. You as the leader owe it to your loyal team members to be cautious when making hiring decisions of which you all must live. So take your time and hire right. ■

Paul Kaufman is golf course superintendent of Prestwick Country Club in Conway, S.C.



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Labor Savivors

BY DAVID FRABOTTA
SENIOR EDITOR

▲ **Plant growth regulators have proven to be one of the most effective labor savers for turfgrass managers.**

There was almost no way to foresee the extent of this year's price increases. Rising crude oil prices have impacted almost everything that makes up a superintendent's budget. Fertilizer, turfgrass seed and sod, irrigation equipment and diesel fuel costs have forced superintendents to either go over budget or make some drastic cuts.

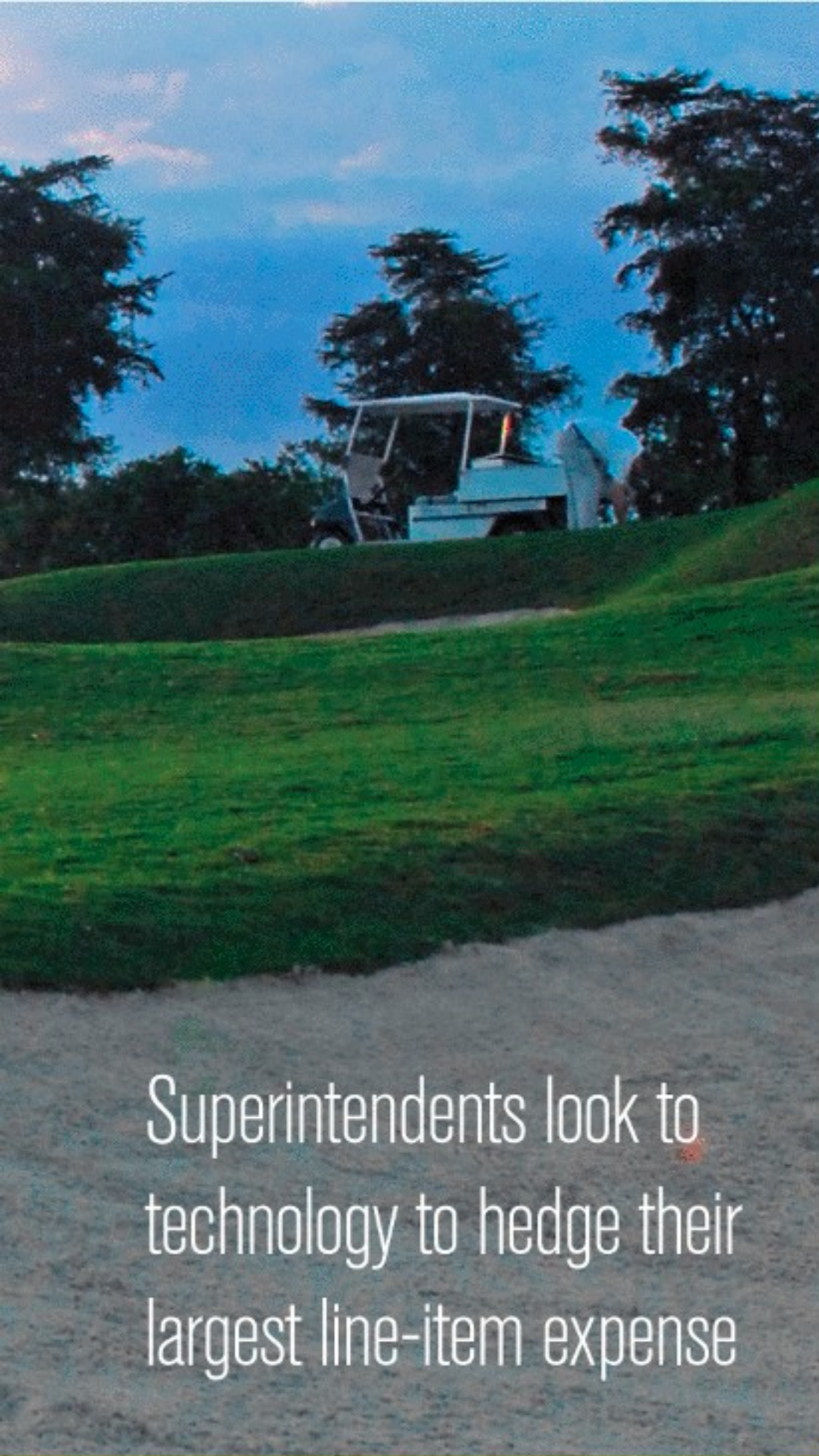
The largest line-item expense in most golf course maintenance budgets is labor, which means that many superintendents can cut overtime or scale back hours in an effort to save capital in one area in an attempt to mitigate unforeseen price increases in other areas.

Scaling back hours might sound simple, but it isn't easy. Golfers assume conditions will meet long-standing expectations. But there are a few equipment innovations and technologies that might help superintendents hedge the largest line item in their budgets. Larger mowing decks, longer-lasting chemicals, plant growth regulators and advances in irrigation technology all can help golf course crews operate more efficiently.

In an online *Golfdom* survey, readers were asked, "What equipment or technology saves you the most labor?" Out of 45 respondents, 40 percent said plant growth regulators saves them the most labor; 20 percent said irrigation technology; 13 percent said aeration core harvesters; 13 percent said longer-lasting chemicals; 9 percent said mechanical bunker rakes, and 4 percent of respondents said larger mowing decks eased their labor woes.

"One of the most important labor-saving technologies in our arsenal is (plant) growth regulators, which has decreased our fairway-mowing frequency from four days a week to two to three days," says Tim Sanchez, director of grounds of Woodmoor Pines Golf and Country Club and neighboring King's Deer Golf Club in Monument, Colo.

Sanchez estimates that he saves between eight and 16 hours each week with reduced fairway mowing, and the fuel savings of keeping a mower in the shop more often is an additional savings. Plus those man-hours can be spent elsewhere on the course to get additional work done.



Superintendents look to technology to hedge their largest line-item expense

Some courses can save even more using PGRs. Superintendent Mark A. Livingston of Ridge Creek Golf Club in Dinuba, Calif., says PGRs can save him up to 40 man hours a week, much of it on his large practice facility.

“Our practice facility is 25 acres and requires six hours to mow. PGRs reduce the down time for maintenance and increase the revenue by extending hours of operation,” Livingston says. “We also have 101 deep bunkers that require hand mowing of steep faces. Again, the mowing interval is increased allowing labor to go elsewhere.”

Of course, being able to save on labor depends on the club and the type of expectations from golfers. Even courses that use PGRs regularly on greens and fairways might not be able to cut mowing because of expectations from golfers.

At The Club at Crested Butte, superintendent Stephen Rue values how PGRs suppress *Poa annua* seedheads and helps create fuller, healthier grass plants, but he can't skip mowing without members of the high-end club noticing. He walk-mows greens — at less

than one-tenth of an inch — and approaches every day, and fairways get cut every other day, whether they need it or are just getting cleaned up. He says the only way to really save labor at the course is to reduce bunker grooming.

The same is true at Berkeley Hall Golf Club in Bluffton, S.C. Its 770 members expect its 36 holes to continue to play like they're in tournament-ready condition.

“We are basically spending over our budget,” says Danny Malone, superintendent of two layouts. “We've cut back a little on pine straw and mulch, but we'll continue to walk mow greens and tees every day.”

Being creative

But higher-end clubs might be the exception to the rule. Even some PGA Tour venues capitalize on the labor savings of chemical technologies amid a tight budget. At East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta, certified superintendent Ralph Kepple started using PGRs heavily last year to reduce clippings and tighten the turf. It was especially helpful around the golf course's steep bunker faces, which require walk-mowing.

Limiting the growth of the turfgrass around the bunker faces allows Kepple to mow them once a week with less cleanup instead of twice a week as he did without PGRs. He saves about 20 hours to 24 hours a week, which is a welcomed relief for the 26-member crew, especially as it prepares for the PGA Tour Championship this month.

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Even some PGA Tour venues seek technologies that can help save labor in certain areas.



Many superintendents can reduce mowing of bunker faces in half with the use of PGRs.

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Labor Savivors

Larger mowing decks can help save some time, but significant time and labor can be saved by triplexing greens, if golfers allow it.

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Many clubs are looking to improved chemical technologies to help trim labor, but it might not be enough. At Shelter Harbor Golf Club in Charlestown, R.I., Certified Superintendent Ed Walsh says he's using more PGRs this year, and likely will recommend additional usage to the board of directors when budget talks for next year roll around. But he likely will need to take more drastic measures to stay on fiscal track.

"As all of us get close to budget time for 2009, we try to be as creative as we can," Walsh says.

He's taking a close look at generic chemicals to help save money when efficacy is the same, and Walsh says he'll look to expand his contracted services when appropriate to alleviate his labor needs. In addition, he might hire more part-time workers next year instead of full-time seasonal workers. This year, the Hurdzan/Fry course has eight full-time workers, 12 full-time seasonal workers and 20 part timers.

At the St. Lucie County (Fla.) Fairwinds Golf Course, Superintendent Chris Gamble doesn't have any leeway for skyrocketing turfgrass maintenance costs, so he's running his operation a little differently these days. First, he now mows greens with a triplex mower instead of walk mowers. And he added a piece of equipment that saves him dozens of man-hours: a tractor-mounted boom mower for lake, pond and stream banks.

As you might guess, the bunker edges don't get quite the attention they used to, either. Other aesthetic parts of the

golf course get a little less attention as well, including perennial beds, mulch beds and cart-path edges.

"We concentrate on the play areas and do the detail work as we can," Gamble says.

To cut labor significantly, golf course managers need to take care of the golf course differently, such as spending fewer man-hours on bunker maintenance or limiting the mowing of out-of-play areas. Changing maintenance practices is what some courses might need to do keep labor and budgets in check.

At many golf courses, natural areas are getting bigger, especially at golf courses trying to mitigate their environmental impact. Larger natural areas cut down on mowing, and they create an opportunity to use fewer chemicals.

In many cases, better-scripted chemical-management programs could reduce or eliminate the need for edging and string trimming.

Also, using contracted labor, Walsh says, could mitigate unnecessary capital expenditures. Tree-maintenance companies and aeration services might be viable options, even when working with tight budgets.

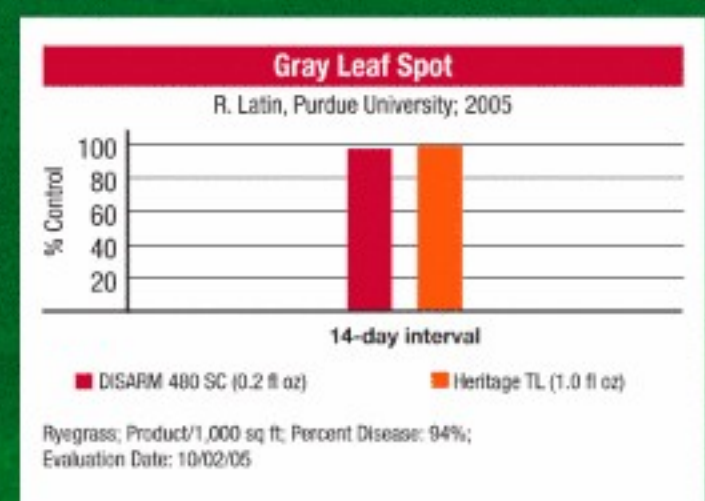
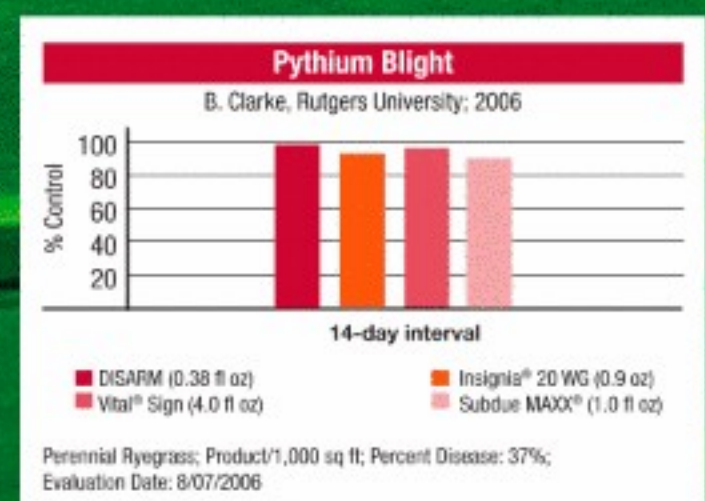
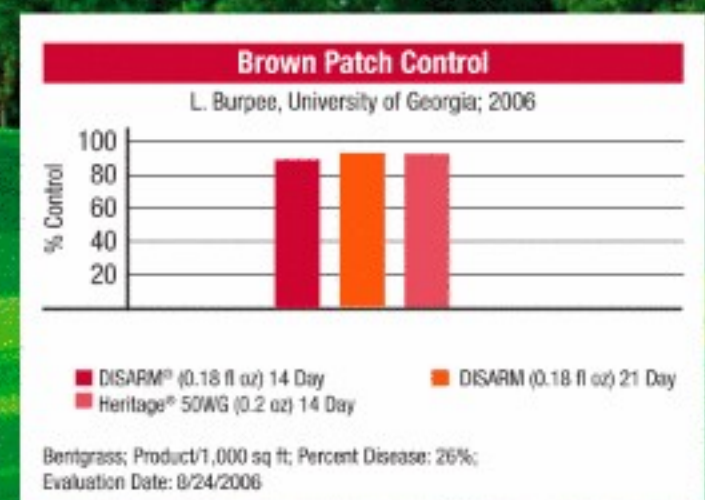
Whatever cost savers golf course managers are considering, it's clear that superintendents have unprecedented price pressures affecting their operations in addition to the environmental pressures that influence their turfgrass.

"For the most part, superintendents are a creative bunch, so we'll survive," Walsh says. "But our creativity is really going to be tested this year." ■

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A photograph of Mark Wilson, a professional golfer, sitting on a wooden bench outdoors. He is wearing a black t-shirt with a "RYDER CUP VALHALLA" logo and light-colored trousers. He is smoking a cigar, and a large plume of white smoke is rising from his mouth. The background shows a lush green golf course with trees and a building in the distance.

Give That Man a Cigar

Mark Wilson has a lot to celebrate — his 20th anniversary at Valhalla Golf Club and his facility hosting the Ryder Cup