

# The Assistant

by Tom Harrison  
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*Editor's note: This article was written nine years ago by Tom Harrison when he was the Assistant Golf Course Superintendent at Maple Bluff Country Club in Madison. It appeared in Volume 2, Number 4, June 1976 of the GRASSROOTS. Tom's perceptions are as valid today as they were in 1976 and we thought it would be worthwhile to print them again. They appear with the author's permission.*

The golf industry has undergone many changes over the years. In the last few years, the game has seen graphite club shafts and aerodynamically designed golf balls to name a few. The maintenance end has seen many changes itself. Years ago the prime function of a golf course greenkeeper was strictly mowing and keeping of the greens. But along with a change in title have come added duties and responsibilities. Superintendents are into all phases of construction. They are into planning and design as well as carrying out the work. The actual mowing and other routine course work have changed as well. These functions must now be done with greater burden on the superintendent. He has to deal with many new duties and responsibilities. However, he has met these new challenges with modern equipment and ideas. Bigger and more sophisticated equipment was purchased to get the job done faster. Radio communications and automatic irrigation have been added to increase efficiency. Time has become critical with the emphasis on getting the most out of each man hour per day.

But there is one management

tool that could greatly increase efficiency and lessen the burden on the superintendent. That is the use of an assistant. There are many people who are called assistants, but the definition is very broad. In some cases the title assistant is merely that, a title, given to a man in lieu of a pay raise. In some cases the mechanic or fairway man are called assistant. In very few cases is an assistant used to his fullest capacity. The assistant could be a tremendous aid if used to the fullest extent. A superintendent in the course of a day has to perform many tedious and repetitious jobs. They are important to the running of the golf course, yet very time consuming. Some of these routine jobs are crew supervision of routine work, mechanic work and supervision, record keeping and parts ordering. If the superintendent were willing to give up a few or all these duties to an assistant it would free him to concentrate on other areas. He could spend more time planning projects; supervising projects; and increasing communications with members, pro, and manager. He could take a more overall view of the maintenance operation if he were not so tied up with small problems.

Hiring an assistant is relatively easy. However, it is not easy to find the right man to work closely with the superintendent. He must be able to carry out the work of the superintendent the way the superintendent wants it done. The assistant must not let personal ideas interfere with carrying out the job the way the superintendent wants it done. The assistant when called upon to make decisions, must make them along the lines of thought of the superintendent. When the superintendent is absent for a day, a week, or a month the golf course should be able to function fairly close to normal. This closeness in thinking between each man comes with hiring the right man and working together as a team.

From an assistant's point of view, he is looking for a little job security, room to make decisions and some challenge to the job. The assistant has several ways to look at his job. He may feel that his job is merely a stepping stone in his career. He may look at it as a two or three year internship period or

he may look at it as a full time job with no immediate plans to move up the ladder. Some people have this hangup about being second in command. They feel that this is like being a second rate person. Not everyone can be a chief or number one. Someone must be number two man in any operation. There is no reason that being number two man cannot be thought of as a full time career opportunity. It would certainly be advantageous for the club hiring an assistant to retain him as a permanent employee. He could become a very valuable member of the club staff. It is up to the superintendent and club officials to provide the two main ingredients to retain an assistant and interest him in becoming a permanent staff member. The first is the right working conditions which include the giving of responsibility, creating job challenges, and room to make his own decisions. The second item is money and fringe benefits. The club cannot pay poorly and expect the man to stay. If the pay is poor, he will work his two or three years and move on. This is of no benefit to the club. The club loses the first year or so to training. It is very difficult to say how much is too little or too great as far as pay and benefits are concerned. Money available for salaries varies from club to club. It would be easier to judge what you should pay for an assistant if you know what others are being paid. There seems to be a great taboo placed upon one man knowing what another makes as far as salary and fringe benefits. It is a strange thing, it is partially wrong, but it is human nature. Some day as professionals, I hope that we can overcome this. I am not afraid to state where I stand financially. I am neither ashamed nor proud of my salary. But I would like to use myself as an example to state my duties, responsibilities and salary. I feel that this would give a better idea of where, at least, one full time assistant stands in our state.

I started in the 1960's at Nakoma Country Club in Madison. I worked there three years under Peter Miller. I then went into the U.S. Navy and when I was discharged I went to work at Maple Bluff under William Eckert. When I was hired at Maple Bluff in 1968 I was to be worked in as assistant if I wanted

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the job. I started out at \$7,000 a year with no benefits. Over the years my duties and responsibilities have increased. I do all crew supervision and work assignments as far as day to day work. On construction projects and such I take care of the golf course while Bill Eckert personally supervises the construction. I may pitch in when I'm free but my responsibilities lie with the course. I also do some hiring and firing of employees. Up until last November, I did most of the mechanic work. In November I hired a young man from technical school to spend a year's apprenticeship under me as a mechanic. He will eventually take over the greater share of the mechanics duties. Last of all I take care of the parts ordering and inventory system. Since 1968 my pay as well as salary have increased with my duties. I now make a little over \$14,000 a year. I have full family medical coverage, full club retirement plan, three weeks paid vacation, paid membership in the GCSAA and WGCSA, paid expenses to the national conference each year and use of a '73 Jeep vehicle for personal transportation. Maple Bluff is not the wealthiest club in the state by any means but they believe in retaining their staff. They believe in as little interference to their staff as possible as long as we produce. It is a very fair and workable arrangement. The relationship between Bill Eckert and myself is very good. He gives me my area to operate in and I try to do my best within this area. We are always ready to cover for one another when either of us must be away. I try to make all decisions along Bill's line of thinking. It is his golf course and he is ultimately responsible for all decisions made no matter who makes them. I would not think of doing something contrary to his line of thinking.

I hope I have shown the areas where an assistant could improve the course operation. Only the superintendent can decide whether an assistant will fit into his operation. An assistant would prove to be a very valuable management tool if used wisely.

## WTA FIELD DAY

The 1984 WTA Annual Field Day has been set for Monday, August 27, 1984 at Oconomowoc Country Club in Oconomowoc. Harvey Miller, golf course superintendent at Oconomowoc Country Club will be the host. There will be a complete display from many industry leaders of outdoor power equipment. It will be a "hands on" type of exhibit where you will be able to discuss and operate the equipment. Dr. Gayle Worf has set up research plots at Oconomowoc that will be available for inspection.

Ed Devinger of Reinders Brothers is the chairman of this event.

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