



Confessions of the Wife of a Golf Course Superintendent: Especially Intended for Those Who Are Or Are About to Be Wives of Golf Course Superintendents

By Mrs. Roger Bell

We met, quite predictably, over drinks after a round of golf. Our first date was a par three course (one of the few times I was able to post the winning score). We dated by course-hopping, playing 18 holes on Saturday and another 18 holes on Sunday. Later on, when the topic of marriage came up, I envisioned a life of no greens fees, gratis carts, and golf balls with those cute little butterflies painted on them. Life would be in a real country club atmosphere with preppie alligators on all my clothes and the latest gimmick club in my color-coordinated golf bags. I dreamed of making my approach shots with the knowledge that my own superintendent was along with a cup-setter to rescue an errant shot. And, not of the least importance, my adoring husband would look like a golden-skinned California beachboy all summer long. (Winters, of course, we would be traveling around the country on our vacation.)

It didn't QUITE work out that way. True, I've been able to spend many hours in a country club setting — but maybe a few more hours than I'd choose, especially watching part-circle sprinkler heads that are really supposed to be full-circles. Also true, I haven't bought a golf ball in years — I get my choice of the findings, but there's not always a butterfly in the choosings. (I did get a "ginty" for my birthday last year, though.) But my private superintendent has yet to move a hole closer to my ball. Quite the opposite, he is under suspicion for choosing the toughest pin rotations when we're playing together (he categorically denies this). And for his California tan — well, experienced gals know that the tan stops where his shirt does — kindly referred to as a "golfer's tan." As for the winter vacation, there are a lot of rumors afloat ("but what does he DO during the winter?"), but the wife is the last to know. It sure looks to me that he works like normal people do during the winter months.

As reality set in, I learned that a golf course is indeed a living thing and it has the potential for requiring 24 hour a day care in the golf season. Our whole summer is geared to what Mother Nature decrees. That translates into no summer vacation in the traditional sense. On a daily basis, it means if it rains unexpectedly, we go back after hours to shut down the pumps. If the winds pick up and it's dry, we go back after hours to re-set the system for a second cycle. And even if the weather does just what it's predicted to do, we may still go back to check if everything is on or off as it should be. Obviously, I could stay at home instead of making the late evening forays, but they represent the single biggest opportunity for us to be together as a family during the golf season. At more than one summertime party we've attended, we've left the festivities early so we could swing (no pun intended) back by the course to see how things are. (It's amazing how much you can see by moon- or flash-light.) I truly believe that last summer was the worst I've ever been through as a superintendent's wife. It seemed as if the air was too wet, the ground was too dry, the temperature was too high, and the

healthiest thing growing was a St. Louis-type fungus. The days got to be so long for us in August, that we gave up playing golf at the course because it was too much like a busman's holiday. Fortunately, we survived and so did the course — the grass did come back for a gorgeous finish in the fall. ("The grass will come back" is a favorite saying of most superintendents. New wives would do well to cling to that thought about the second week in August.)

A superintendent's wife knows not to plan any social activities that last past 8:30 p.m. during the golf season — at least not anything that requires her husband to be awake. As a relatively inexperienced superintendent's wife, I chose (?) to give birth to our first child in July. After we had determined that the birth was imminent, I remained at home while hubby went back to check on the crew. Fortunately, we were able to go to the hospital together at 5:30 p.m. after the crew had gone home. Our second son had the good sense to be born in December.

There is a dark side to being a superintendent's wife — one that we all choose to ignore as much as possible. Being a golf course superintendent is a very dangerous profession. Few superintendents will allow their employees to work completely alone for safety reasons, but many times I have known my husband to stay an extra hour or two after the crew leaves "just to finish up" some task that didn't quite get finished during the work day. Fortunately, my husband is very understanding of my "worry habit" and he is good about making reassuring phone calls when the hour is getting late. Thunderstorms strike a real terror in my heart — and not because I fear for my personal safety. Many people are killed by lightning in this country every year and not a few of those victims are on golf courses. There is plenty of work to be done outside and no one wants to come in before the storm begins. That leaves the superintendent in a very dangerous position, and to a lesser extent, his crew, since they usually arrive back in the shop while the superintendent is still rounding up the stragglers. Besides the dangers of heavy

machinery and lightning, there are the more subtle dangers of the chemicals the modern golf course superintendent must handle. I am cognizant of the training that goes into the making of the professional superintendent, but one never knows what problems may turn up years down the road. (As my own precaution, I do wash work clothes that have been worn during spraying separately from my family wash.) We have been very fortunate not to have had any serious accidents. One time, a pressure tank blew up outside the pumphouse, taking out with it a corner of the building where my husband was standing. He was untouched. Another time, some uninformed motorcyclists decided to demonstrate their martial arts skills. My husband was kicked and bruised and his assistant had his nose broken. Fortunately, both recovered (and the motorcyclists were prosecuted, incidentally). Perhaps God does watch over superintendents in a special way.

Being a superintendent's wife is similar, I would suppose, to being a preacher's wife. The club membership ("congregation") knows who you are but you have to struggle to remember their names. Your husband works for the entire membership — not one person — and is expected to please them all, or at least as many as possible. And like the preacher's wife, the superintendent's wife must set a good example with her golf etiquette, including replacing divots even when there are no roots left because someone may be watching a couple of fairways away.

Another difficulty in being a superintendent's wife (or a superintendent for that matter) is the absence of a visible peer group. While doctor's wives can commiserate with each other over the hours their husbands work, superintendent's wives seldom see each other. And you can't expect much empathy from your neighborhood friends. Most of them don't know what your husband really does — they suspect he just rides a mower all day long and comes home wearing very dirty clothes. (They've even been known to question how you manage to afford to live in THEIR neighborhood!!) Now here's a plug for the GCSAA convention: it's

probably the best opportunity you're going to get to visit with women who understand your life and its frustrations. Everyone, of course, must find their own ways to cope with their frustrations, but a support group provides a good sounding board for your options. There are a few places where even the superintendents' wives could use a little education, though. Most recently in Las Vegas I was shocked to have a southern superintendent's wife ask that now-famous question: "but, what does he DO in the winter?"

Although we seldom see our peer groups, those we do know can become quite close friends even over long distances. The godparents to our two children are a prominent Wisconsin superintendent and his wife. (Our oldest son thought for a long time that **every** dad was automatically given his own golf course. He had since learned that his dad and his godfather are pretty special people.)

While we as a family must make sacrifices for the golf course, we do reap some advantages. The superintendent's job is a rather unstructured endeavor. When the course permits (most usually in winter), he can schedule his work hours to accommodate us. He has acted as a backup babysitter when my normal arrangements fall through and I must be at my (part-time) job outside the home. Our school age son is proud to have his dad in the audience at his daytime school programs. Our sons are growing up surrounded by nature — leaf picking is quite a project on a golf course. Both sons feel as comfortable around a tool box as they do around their toys. (There is some misinformation that gets picked up along the way, though. Our elder son was really surprised to discover that not every woods has golf balls lying around on the ground.)

As a superintendent's wife, I do get special treatment. I get to try out the new ladies' tees **first**. I'm also the guinea pig to see where the typical woman golfer hits to off of any given tee. I'm assured of getting flowers from my husband at least once a year (when he has to go to the florist to pick out the bedding plants for the clubhouse flower beds). I get to share some cool evening breezes when many others are sweltering at home. I

get to see some lovely sunsets with my family all together. Our children have a chance to be involved with their father's work and not so incidentally, to learn the work ethic first hand.

At this point in our lives, we are able to tailor our family life to accommodate the needs of the golf course. As our sons grow, I'm sure we'll have to make adjustments, just as we have had to in the past. When my husband first started at his present course, he would stay at the course until dark, then come home for a warmed over dinner. Nowadays, he comes home (relatively) early for supper and we all go back with him. We use a standard golf cart to tour the course — except instead of two golf bags in the rear, we carry our two sons, aged 6 and 3. Some nights, they fall asleep in the car on the trip back home, but that doesn't seem to have affected them adversely.

To insure that my life doesn't get **completely** swallowed up by the demands of the golf course, I have one morning a week that I save for me. I'm active in (what else!) a ladies golf league. It's a small job of being an ambassador for the game of golf and a big job of having fun with some really special friends.

Once or twice during the summer, we leave town completely to keep our sanity. If we're in town, my husband insists on "checking the course". It's hard to know when I should push for one of these "retreat" weekends. It has been known for us to cut our trip short because an assistant has called with a problem on the course.

For me, the secret to coping with being a superintendent's wife is to keep a sense of humor, be flexible in scheduling, and to savor my involvement with my husband and his job.

A few years ago I went to a cocktail party where a rather obnoxious lady proceeded to tell me how great her husband's job was (he didn't ever get dirty). Meanwhile, her husband was telling my husband how he couldn't wait to retire so he could spend more time growing things in his garden and putting around his shop. Maybe that's the neatest part of being a superintendent's wife: I'm married

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to a guy who's doing what **he** really want to do — and evidently what some others can only **wish** they could be doing.

Editor's note: Suzanne Bell (alias Mrs. Roger Bell) has been a golf course superintendent's wife for the past 8½ years. She is a person in her own right, however, as she holds a B.S. degree in chemistry and a Master of Arts in teaching degree from Duke University. She is employed as a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin—Fox Valley Center in the Chemistry Department. She is currently Secretary of Johnston School PTA, Secretary of Appleton Postcomers Club, and shares the office of President of the Sodbusters Couples Golf League with husband Roger. Although she considers herself to be a liberated individual, she does subscribe to the old-fashioned theory that behind every successful man there are two women — a supportive wife and an astonished mother-in-law.

ARE YOU A GOOD MANAGER?

By Steve Schmidt

Golf Course Superintendent
Butte des Morts Golf Club

Whether you are a Golf Course Superintendent, a course owner, a General Manager or some other supervisor in a golf course operation, how well you manage will have a direct bearing on the success of your golf course and the realization of its fullest potential. Anything that is done to improve your current management skills is a step toward even greater success.

Before success can be realized, there are some basic questions which have to be answered and some methods of organization which need to be established. Some of the questions to consider on the path to more efficient management are:

1. How well do I manage myself and my own time?
2. Am I a good teacher?
3. Do I ask of myself what I expect from others?
4. Am I honest and open with others?
5. Do I know when and how to offer constructive criticism?
6. Am I willing to give credit where and when it is due?
7. Do I help my Assistant and other staff members upgrade their jobs?

8. Does my pride get in the way of asking for help and advice from fellow professionals?

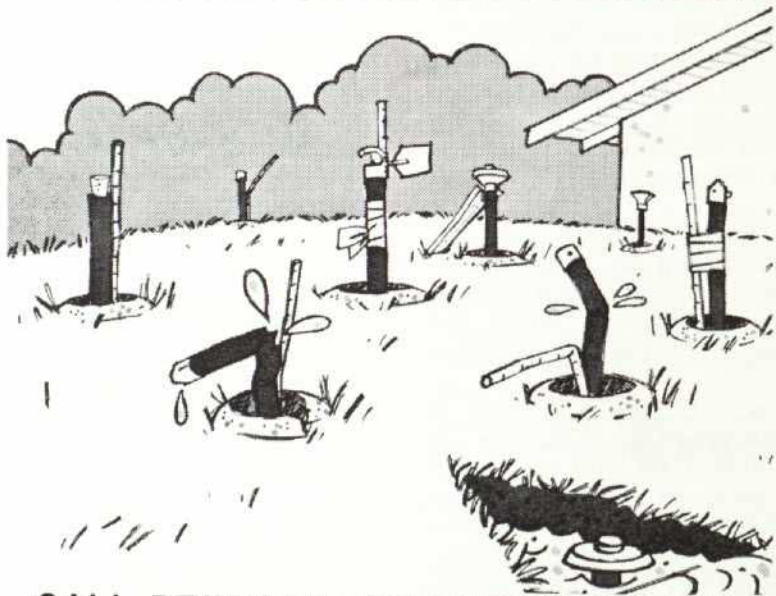
Too often, many of these questions are neglected or not even considered in the many management decisions we are faced with daily. An honest answer to each question can help in developing better methods one uses in dealing with particular situations that arise. The intriguing part of our job comes not from solving matters of practical knowledge, but rather whether or not we are practicing good business and intelligent management in our golf course operations.

A good deal of the success of any manager is based on his ability to recognize change and to understand that old and established ways often need review and up-

dating and improvement. Longevity does not insure efficiency nor does it justify long standing management practices. This is particularly true in times of stringent budgets. The demand by players for a higher quality product and more services creates a situation for us where we must keep a dynamic attitude toward our management practices.

We must, as golf course managers, incorporate new ideas, encourage innovation and constantly seek ways to improve our abilities. We have to understand the concepts of good planning, recognize the need for accurate record keeping and realize the importance of planning. We must learn to be flexible and open-minded to meet the ever-changing requirements of our profession.

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