



# A Super Job

By Frank Hannigan

**Editor's Note:** *Seldom does an article create as much interest and pride among golf course superintendents as the following piece did.*

*It was written by the former Executive Director of the United States Golf Association, Frank Hannigan. I'll never forget the 1984 Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium; Mr. Hannigan flew to Milwaukee specifically to address our annual luncheon.*

*All of us have heard Frank Hannigan, now that he is a successful network golf broadcaster and commentator. He's complementing that career with his excellent golf writing. His column "Loose Impediments" is a regular feature of Golf magazine.*

*I was close enough to Mr. Hannigan at this year's GMO to reach out and touch him and I wanted to ask his permission to reprint the article in THE GRASS ROOTS. The problem was that he was being chauffeured in a golf cart, at a high rate of speed. By the time I opened my mouth, he was out of sight!*

*The good side of that missed opportunity is that I had to call the editorial offices of Golf magazine to ask permission to share their feature with THE GRASS ROOTS' readers. As a result I had the chance to visit with Golf's executive editor, Jim Frank.*

*Jim certainly is a pleasant and helpful person, sort of like you would expect from the editor of one of the game's best journals.*

*So read "A Super Job". Savor it, re-read it and realize that there are some articulate people who understand (read the last sentence!) and appreciate what we do. One of the directors of our club read the article on a plane back to Madison and enjoyed it as much as I did.*

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We live in a society of declining standards. It's not easy to put your finger on anything that's better today than it was 20 or 30 years ago. Our air is lousy, our politics disgraceful and our music appalling. Golf courses, though,

are in better shape than they used to be.

That's partly because there is more knowledge about how to maintain delicate turfgrass under conditions never intended by nature, but mostly because today's turfgrass managers are better at their jobs.

If somebody gave me a new golf course to manage along with a decent budget, the first thing I'd do would be to hire the best golf course superintendent money can buy.

After that, I'd probably get a little cheap. But so what? The only part of the operation that matters — the course itself — would be in the best of hands.

Golf course superintendents historically have been the game's forgotten servants because they were hidden behind compost piles two miles from the clubhouse and wore old clothes.

If the clubhouse manager and the pro stopped showing up for work, the club members would be inconvenienced. But if the course superintendent and his staff go on strike, the game is over. In two weeks, you would have what's known as a "passive recreational park" with a lot of tall weeds.

The superintendent's relatively low station in life was mirrored by his income — traditionally lower than his colleagues, the clubhouse manager and the pro.

Superintendents are no longer hurting in the financial department. Their salaries soared during the 1980s. The national average for an 18-hole course is close to \$60,000, but salaries of \$100,000 are not uncommon, and the superstars of the trade earn \$125,000 and more.

And why not? The job has become increasingly technical and demanding. Annual maintenance budgets of \$500,000 are commonplace, and that figure doesn't include the cost of new equipment. The machines used to maintain a golf course are complicated. A fancy modern fairway unit costs as much as a Mercedes. And when it busts, you don't get a loaner.

The superintendent also is a personnel manager with a year-round staff of

10 or more, supplemented in the summer by college students who have to be watched continually lest they make a break for the beach.

Most superintendents are college-trained. Many have four-year degrees in agronomy from such universities as Penn State and the University of California at Davis. Others have two-year associate degrees from various state institutions. Still others train by taking two 10-week winter programs, a specialty of Rutgers University in New Jersey. Graduates usually start out as assistant superintendents. The better ones are running their own shows by their mid- to late 20s.

Despite the favorable trends, the maintenance of American golf courses continues to be beset with some basic flaws. Foremost among these is the tendency to overwater. Overwatering is a cop-out on the part of superintendents who know better but react to the pressure of golfers who want everything a rich green. (Joe Dey, former executive director of the USGA, once labeled this hue "cemetery green".)

Overwatering is a short-term fix and a long-range disaster. It weakens the root system of the grass, causes compaction, invites plant diseases and certainly encourages the spread of the annual bluegrass called *Poa annua* — which is okay for golf courses until it's subjected to high heat and humidity. Then it tends to die. When you see a brown golf course in the summer, you're looking at dead *Poa annua*.

Superintendents will also tell you they dump water on courses to achieve that phony green-look because televised golf tournaments push them in that direction. The look of the Augusta National GC during the Masters telecast has become the standard, not only in this country but throughout the world.

There is also increasing pressure to produce putting greens that are super-fast, like those at The Masters or at a U.S. Open. Golfers don't understand that those greens have been specially prepared for one week. They can't possibly be maintained at such speeds throughout the year.

Superintendents also have a problem with the high priests of modern golf course architecture. The complaint is that the sexiest looking courses, those built to attract attention when photographed from helicopters, are difficult and expensive to maintain because of their slopes and overall artificiality.

I heard a superintendent from Austin complain at a conference of his peers that he is expected to maintain an "agronomic zoo" because the architect, in a frenzy of false creativity, installed seven varieties of grass, only three of which made any sense in the middle of Texas.

The hot new topic among superintendents is the environment. People who take care of golf courses are, by their very nature, pro-environment. They wouldn't have gravitated toward their line of work if they were indifferent to the look and feel of the outdoors.

But they find themselves on the defensive and accused of being chemically careless. In a profession of 10,000, there are bound to be a few bad apples. But, by and large, superintendents — who have to be state-licensed to apply pesticides — are sensitive and careful. If they aren't, they can go to jail.

The superintendent tends to be invisible until something goes wrong. Then he becomes a celebrity. That's true in both recreational golf and on the Tour.

Take the case of Fred Klauk, the man in charge of the TPC Stadium Course at Ponte Vedra, Fla., where there was a monumental flap earlier this year because the greens were not up to snuff during The Players Championship.

All of a sudden, he became a media figure, including a live television interview. Coincidentally, I once conducted a USGA national championship at another Florida course with Klauk as the superintendent. He was sensational.

So his greens were a little thin and bumpy during the 1990 Players Championship. The world didn't come to an end. The fact is, when the temperature hit zero in the Jacksonville area last winter, it was ordained that the TPC greens were not going to be dense and smooth for a golf tournament in March.

Klauk kept his temper. He managed to restrain the impulse of saying, "Who the hell are these guys, who have never done a thing in their lives except hit golf balls, to criticize my work and my golf course?"

At a U.S. Open, I was once asked to name the single most important person on the premises. Without hesitation, I said it was the golf course superintendent. "If he fails, we all fail," I commented.

Think of that this month when you watch the PGA Championship telecast from Shoal Creek. That's in Birmingham, Alabama. Bentgrass greens in Alabama in August are like hand gre-

nades in an incinerator; they can blow up at any time. The superintendent at Shoal Creek, Jim Simmons, is experienced and cool. He also will be very glad when the week of the PGA Championship is over.

Superintendents get fired. As a rule of thumb, if the superintendent has two bad years in a row, even if the climate has produced nothing but fire and brimstone in that time, he's gone — and he goes without a golden parachute.

At private clubs, superintendents are subject to the whims of volunteer green committee chairmen, many of whom haven't the remotest idea what they want or why. A very successful and expensive lawyer said to me not long ago that his would be the best of all professions if only there weren't clients. Many golf course superintendents feel the same way. It would be a great job — if only there weren't golfers.

At resort courses, superintendents often take the hit for disappointing bottom lines. There is an inherent conflict between quality golf and the profit motive. That conflict is almost never resolved. That's why a place like Pebble Beach changes superintendents so often.

Still and all, the lot of the superintendent is to be envied — if he survives. The single most exhilarating experience in the game is to be on a golf course at dawn — alone.

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