

# Sabel's Education, Career All Wisconsin

By John Mielke

Growing up in Green Bay, Joe Sabel was a lot like most kids who live in a city recognized as Title Town by football fans the world over. Back in the 1960s, the Green Bay Packers ruled the National Football League and put this northeastern-Wisconsin city on the map. Most kids who grow up there are interested in sports and they cheer for the Packers.

Joe was interested in sports. That interest landed him a spot on his high school golf team and as a senior he helped his team reach the Wisconsin State High School Golf Tournament.

He planned to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison, study pre-med and someday become a doctor. That's a tall order for a young man raising a family. So Joe began looking for a career that didn't require at least eight years of education.

Enter Marc Davison, the superintendent at Green Bay Country Club and one of Joe's neighbors. Davison was well aware of Joe's interest in golf, so he suggested that Joe should study turfgrass management and become a golf course superintendent.

Joe liked the idea and set off to Madison with a new plan.

During his career at the UW - Madison, Joe worked at Nakoma Golf Club with superintendent Clark Rowles. After his junior year, he returned home to Green Bay for an internship with Davison.

This past May Joe graduated from the UW - Madison, and on hand to congratulate him were his wife, Holly, the couple's 3-year-old daughter, Madeline, and their one-year-old son, Matthew.

"It was a challenge," Joe said of his college years, "but it was a great challenge."

Armed with a good education and some solid training, Joe weighed the benefits of several job offers. He chose the first assistant's position at North Shore Golf Club near Menasha. Superintendent Scott Schaller became Joe's new mentor.

"Not too many young men and women come out of school ready to be a superintendent," Schaller said. "Some of the younger people in this business - and I was one of them - think they're farther along than they may be. Joe Sabel isn't like that. And that's one of the things I really, really like about him. He's very understanding of the fact that he has things to learn and he's going to challenge himself to go out and learn them."

"Some young people come in and think, 'I know how to do this, I know how to do that; I'm good at that,' and



**UW-Madison 2000 grad Joe Sabel, assistant superintendent at NSGC.**



**Scott Schaller, golf course superintendent at North Shore GC.**

maybe they are at some things. But they usually don't have the big picture. Joe isn't naive to that fact. He realizes he has a lot to learn. And (this realization) is only going to help him because it's going to accelerate the whole process of him becoming a golf course superintendent."

Joe agrees there is always room for improvement. It's something he said he learned from Michael Jordan.

"(Jordan) said that he was always trying to improve," Joe recalled. "This is MJ, the best basketball player in the world. I heard him say this when I was a kid and I was like, WOW, if he still needs improvement then just think of me."

And with Schaller as his coach, Joe has the opportunity to learn and improve.

"I want to hire (an assistant) who has a career goal of becoming a golf course superintendent," Schaller said. "I want the challenge of being able to work with someone, and then that person becomes as aggressive as I am in wanting to learn. Then the two of us try to maintain the golf course at a quality level for the membership."

"I told Joe that the day he graduated - OK, that's reality. Now he has to learn the big picture. He knows a lot from the technical end, but now he's going to learn how to manage people and how to put that all together to create his own program. He has to master our program at North Shore and then take the good points from that, the good points from Green Bay Country Club and the good points from Nakoma Golf Club and put together his own program."

When Joe applied for the job at North Shore, he told Schaller that he didn't think he had enough experience.

"I said, 'I'm not here to hire someone that has 10 years of experience.' I want to hire somebody that is motivat-



ed and willing to learn," Schaller said.

And so far, the learning process is going well.

"Scott hasn't thrown me into the fire, so to speak," Joe said. "I'm just trying to get my feet wet. I'm doing a little bit of everything so I can train properly. A couple years ago I was a little worried because I wasn't getting all the experience I thought I needed. Now I try to learn every little thing and master the daily routines."

Like most new assistant superintendents, learning the people side of the business may be the most difficult. Just after graduation, Joe attended a future turf managers seminar in Racine, hosted by Textron Golf and Turf. More than 30 university graduates from turfgrass management programs across the U.S. attend the seminar each spring. Tom Alex manages a multi-course operation as director of golf course maintenance at Grand Cypress Golf Club in Orlando, Florida. Alex told the group about the challenges of personnel management - especially for the new assistant.

"I have a few employees, and I know who they are, who will test any of my new assistants - right away," Alex said. "And you have to learn to deal with that. Because if you can't deal with it on the assistant level, how are you going to deal with it on the superintendent level?"

Mike Handrich, superintendent at Racine Country Club added something at the seminar that stuck in Joe's mind. "Mike said, 'Be humble and learn from the crew.' I may know a lot about the technical side of turf management," Joe said, "but the guys on the crew

know the course."

Schaller agrees that working with the crew is key to the development of any assistant superintendent.

"You have to earn (the crew's) respect and that comes with being a hard worker, because they're all hard workers," Schaller said. "If you earn their respect they'll do anything for you. But if you don't earn their respect, you're going to have a hard time. Joe's willing to do anything. Hey, if we've got to grab a weed eater to help someone finish something, he's the first guy to do it. And he doesn't think he's belittling himself because he's grabbing a weed eater."

Joe realizes that another key to earning respect is through communication. It's something he learned in personnel management classes he elected at the UW - Madison.

"There are so many experience levels and so many personalities (on the crew)," Joe said. "Some people are here because they want to learn; they want to be in the business. And some are here because it's a summer job. I need to learn how to communicate with each one of them. I have to vary my styles, get to know all these people. I watch Scott - he's great - how he deals differently with each of the employees. It's awesome."

Part of Schaller's personnel responsibilities include preparing Joe to be a superintendent. Along the way, Schaller will teach him the three steps to success.

"Someone once told me that if you do three things, you'll be successful," Schaller said. "Be productive, do quality work and be efficient doing it. If you do those three things, you'll excel."

In two or three years when Joe starts looking for a golf course where he can make a difference, chances are he'll remember a lot of what he learned from Schaller, Davison and Rowles.

"I like a lot of what Scott's doing and I respect Scott, Marc and Clark - and I'll definitely want to combine their philosophies," Joe said.

But chances are, somewhere in the back of Joe's mind, he'll also remember the words of MJ - Michael Jordan - who stressed continuous improvement.

"Whatever you do you should never stop trying to improve," Joe said. "If you do, I think you'll get bored and complacent. That's why I love this business; there's always something to learn and some way to improve."✍



"YOU KNOW... I KIND OF LIKE WATER HAZARDS THIS TIME OF YEAR."