

# TO BE OR NOT TO BE A GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENT

By Mike Lehrer MGCSA, Class D

Earlier this year I sent a questionnaire to all Class A Members of the Minnesota Golf Course Superintendents' Association. My objective was to obtain first hand information concerning the desirability of a career as a golf course superintendent. Generally, the responses were favorable.

The questions in the survey dealt with: Longevity and/or mobility; reasons for choosing this career; and whether or not, given the option, one would again choose this profession. Also covered were rewarding aspects associated with golf course maintenance and problems involved. Of the 88 questionnaires mailed, there were 23 replies.

## QUESTIONS AND SUMMARIES

### 1) HOW MANY YEARS HAVE YOU BEEN IN YOUR PRESENT POSITION?

Answers to this question ranged from 1 to 34 years. The mean number of years was 10.6, indicating a moderate degree of longevity. Fifteen superintendents fell below the mean and 8 exceeded it.

### 2) HOW MANY PREVIOUS SUPERINTENDENT'S POSITIONS HAVE YOU HELD AND HOW MANY YEARS WERE YOU AT EACH POSITION?

Surprisingly, only 6 superintendents indicated previous positions. Of these, 6 all had held just one other position and all for 3 to 4 years. These results seem to indicate limited mobility.

### 3) WHAT REASON DID YOU HAVE FOR CHOOSING A CAREER AS A GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENT?

Love of the outdoors and working on a golf course as a youth were the two most frequent responses. Appreciation for the game and the desirability of work variety were next. Influence of boss and influence of family followed in popularity. Also mentioned were: The aspiration to build and manage a golf course; the need for a summer job to combine with teaching; and the availability of an opening. One superintendent liked the challenge associated with the profession. Unexpectedly, only one person mentioned not having to work 12 months a year.

### 4) WHAT HAVE BEEN THE THREE MOST SEVERE PROBLEMS YOU HAVE ENCOUNTERED AS A GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENT? HOW DID YOU SOLVE THEM?

Dealing with the maintenance of Poa annua, on greens and elsewhere, was the most common response to this question. Disease and wilt due to summer heat and humidity and winter damage due to ice, low temperature, dessication, snow mold, etc., were noted. Several other problems were mentioned less frequently.

Solutions to problems resulting from summer stresses were varied. Communicating with other superintendents, reading books and attending educational meetings were indicated. Keeping a constant watch for the presence of disease and wilt symptoms and the judicious use of chemicals and syringing were mentioned. One person said he had no solution.

Protection from winter injury was dealt with, in one case, by building new greens. Two respondents now use cellulose mats to cover their greens. Three superintendents found no solutions.

Coping with worker competency seemed to be a common problem, and solutions appeared to be individualistic. Six methods were mentioned once each. Good pay and bonuses for

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punctuality and quality work; hiring older, more responsible people; and communication were noted. Firing incompetents and no solution were two responses. One superintendent said, "I find that college girls are the best qualified".

Satisfying critical members or as one superintendent related, "dealing with verbal sniping", was a common problem. It was handled by communication and education through verbal and written means. Two superintendents found no solutions.

Convincing the board of the need for an adequate budget was a problem shared by some. "I finally quit letting people talk me out of buying equipment I really needed", one superintendent asserted. Making the board more aware of a superintendent's problems was another response.

5) WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MOST REWARDING ASPECTS OF YOUR PROFESSION?

Satisfaction in meeting challenges through hard work and dedication was commonly cited. Seeing improvements, growth, change, positive results, metamorphosis, etc., were terms used.

Another frequent response was the self satisfaction in pleasing members as evidenced by their complimentary remarks and respect.

Friends made within the profession; the opportunity to work outside; the degree of independence; self growth; and prestige were also noted.

Surprisingly, one superintendent said money was his greatest reward, while another told of receiving a trophy from his membership for excellent work.

In a seemingly romantic mood, one respondent said, "One of my greatest rewards is seeing a beautifully maintained turf with sprinklers operating at sunset".

6) KNOWING WHAT YOU DO NOW, IF YOU HAD A CHANCE TO START YOUR CAREER OVER, WOULD YOU AGAIN CHOOSE THE GOLF COURSE PROFESSION? WHY?

Reactions to this question ranged from enthusiasm and satisfaction to frustration and total dissatisfaction. However, positive responses were much more frequent.

The most common reasons for answering yes to this question were: Associations with people who are always willing to help you out; having time off during the winter; and the freedom to use one's imagination and creativity.

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Some superintendents gave qualified responses. They would again choose the profession, but only if some conditions could be changed. Getting a formal education in turf management was mentioned as one prerequisite. The chance to work by choice, not need, seemed to concern one person. One superintendent explained, "This is not an ordinary job. You have to be dedicated to the course and have a staff that is also dedicated. You need to have your heart and soul in it to make it work".

Those who gave negative responses mentioned low salaries, daily frustrations and catering to golfers' whims.

As in most surveys the variables determining the degree of accuracy are numerous. Detracting from this survey is the fact that all Class A Superintendents did not reply. Also, the number of superintendents who have left the field is indeterminate. It is quite possible, too, that the superintendents who did respond are the ones who are the most satisfied with their careers. Of all the assumptions that could be made, however, the one that is most likely correct is that those who didn't respond had more important thoughts on their minds than filling out survey.

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### Making Employees Motivate Themselves

You can't motivate your employees, but you can change the work climate so employees motivate themselves. It's a matter of creating an effective work climate and making your managerial expectations clear.

Offer clear directions so that employees know what to aim for, rather than forcing them to guess and perhaps make poor decisions. If they know that personal attention is being given to their work, they will take more pride in it.

Show by example what you consider important because your workers will emulate your work patterns. If you come to work late every day, how can you expect your employees to report on time?

Reserve rewards only for performance beyond expectations and specify up front what performance is -- rather than deciding afterwards that a special effort was made.

Promise only what you can deliver. The promises will be remembered, but the contingencies won't.

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