

Internships Offer Invaluable Experience To Young Turf Professionals

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My internship at Whisper Creek Golf Club was probably the best experience I have had thus far in the golf industry. The club is an 18 hole, upscale, public golf course, located within Del Webb's Sun City of Huntley, IL. This is a middle-income retirement community in the far northwest suburbs of Chicago. The golf club also contains a five-star practice facility including a driving range, two putting greens and a chipping area.

I completed my internship at Whisper Creek during the summer between my junior and senior year (May - Aug 2004). Currently I am a senior at the University of Minnesota -Twin Cities and am expecting to graduate in May of 2005. My experience was excellent and I really couldn't have asked more from my superintendent, Bryan Stromme, and his assistant, Lucas Johnson.

An internship is one of the most important steps in the learning process of becoming a superintendent. Even though many people participating in golf maintenance have worked on a variety of courses, I believe that an internship is what really introduces you to the important aspects of the industry. This is why I feel strongly it is important for the intern and the superintendent to have an idea of what they want to get out of the internship. Whether learning general maintenance practices, management, pesticide application, irrigation or special projects such as drain tile installation, it is important for both of the parties to have an outline for the experience.

My personal plan for my internship was to learn as much as I could in various areas of golf maintenance. The things that I wanted to focus on in the program were irrigation, pesticide application, developing an eye for detail and the management of staff. These were all things that I had not been specifically trained for in previous work experiences, nor had I learned in school. Therefore, I made sure I aggressively pursued opportunities in these areas when they came up throughout the

summer.

I was one of the primary pesticide applicators at the course during my internship. Most often I assisted Bryan in the initial mixing and loading of the sprayers, and many times he observed my techniques as I sprayed on the golf course. If I had problems with an area, Bryan would join me on the sprayer and show

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me the best way to approach the area so that areas of turf would not be missed or over-sprayed. His "hands-on" teaching was very important.

Irrigation was a little different. When there was a repair to be made, my supervisor would help me find the leak, and then let me figure out what to do. After I reviewed the problem, I would suggest ideas for the fix. He would then approve them or suggest other ways to effectively repair the problem.

Detail was another aspect of turf management important at Whisper Creek. Developing an eye for detail, I believe, is one of the most difficult things to learn in golf maintenance. From picking up garbage to noticing that there are weeds growing in the native areas are things that are hard to catch on to when you are concerned about what your daily tasks are. Developing an "eye" is something that I tried to work on every day throughout the summer. As the summer went on, I began to feel more skilled at it.

It was very difficult at first to learn what was acceptable and what wasn't as far as detail goes. There are many things on the golf course that many superintendents and their staff cannot keep up with. It is hard to prioritize these things into what the customers would really notice and /or care about seeing. We had other

people besides the customer that we really needed to keep happy as well.

These were the residents who owned homes surrounding the course. Most of the holes of the golf course backed up to the back yards of the residential homes. Many of these residents had different ideas than the golfing clientele of what was needed and not needed on the golf course, and this made it very difficult for golf maintenance in that the players were demanding one thing and the residents would demand another.

Management of staff was also a very important part of the internship. Whisper Creek has a crew of thirteen Hispanic workers along with Bryan, the superintendent, and Luke, the assistant superintendent. We also had a full time mechanic, Rob, who was very helpful with the crew. Every morning we would arrive at work about a half-hour before the crew to get their equipment ready. All machines were checked before they were pulled out to make sure blades were sharp, set correctly, etc. I believed this helped cut down on machine breakdowns, scalped turf, leaks and etc.

After the crew arrived we would have a short meeting to discuss what was going to happen on the course for the day, and who was in charge of what. After the meeting we would go out with the crew and check mowers and make sure that everything was operating properly. Throughout the day we would periodically check back with the crew, and answer any questions that they would have and make sure that their equipment was working properly. Bryan and Luke made sure that I had a lot of experience with this.

As I stated earlier, I really couldn't have asked for more in my internship as far as an experience in the golf industry. A couple of areas where I would have liked to learn more about were the scheduling of irrigation, and the financing and budgeting of golf course maintenance, things that time did not allow for throughout the internship.

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Even though three months seems like a lot of time for an internship, it really isn't. There is so much to learn and all of these things take a lot of time. If it were possible, I would recommend an internship of six months. This way the intern could be present throughout the growing season and be involved in spring start-up and shutting the course down for the winter. Many students, especially from this area, do not get to experience these critical chores. This is due to the way our seasons run and the way semesters are set up at many universities.

From the perspective of an intern, I would advise superintendents to keep your interns interested in what they are doing by rotating them throughout the different areas of golf maintenance, and by giving them as much responsibility as they deserve. Both Bryan and Luke made sure of this and it really helped me through my internship. I have heard too many stories of interns that only changed cups or mowed greens every day followed by line trimming or hand watering. Even though these are important aspects of golf maintenance, it is not a way to learn the industry.

It is also important for the superintendent to keep track of how the intern is doing and letting the intern know what they

like and don't like about the intern's performance. Bryan and Luke did biweekly meetings of progress that that I found very useful. This helped me in knowing how I was doing and also gave me a chance for Bryan and Luke to express their feelings of my performance.

My advice to interns is to ask a lot of questions, and always be available at any time to work. Make sure that you are aggressive and available to work, even if you have worked for two weeks straight. You must be willing to do anything and everything you can to help your superintendent and your course, and help them make their deadlines and achieve their objectives.

It is also very important to be reliable. I believe the worst impression that an intern can make, or any employee for that matter, is to be late, or constantly asking for time off. An internship is not just a job, it is a learning process, and many times interns tend to forget that. Also, it is important to keep an open mind when you are learning. A negative attitude will get you nowhere in this industry. Finally, be proud of what you have accomplished, and be proud of your course.

In closing, I would like to thank all of the people that made this internship an excellent learning experience. These people include Bryan, Luke, Jim, Chad, Rob, Kevin, Chris, Gilbert and Jeff. This was an awesome experience, and I am grateful for the experiences you guys provided for me.

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