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Meeting The Challenges

by Bill Shirk, CGCS

After 28 years as a Golf Course Superintendent in the Mid-Atlantic region one word that best describes Golf Course Superintendents to me is--Challenges!

I started my professional career in the late 60's during high school at Sparrows Point Country Club (SPCC) under the guidance of Alex Watson CGCS, Dave Cammarota, and Bob Orazi CGCS. My first big challenge in this profession was to just survive that first summer. Hand raking traps for eight hours a day, five days week was not what I expected in this business. I had to ask myself many times, "Is this what I really want to do in life?" I did survive that summer thanks to my mom and dad who insisted I could not quit midway through a summer, and that if I started something I needed to finish the assignment. I often reflect on that summer and all the lessons and experiences I received from raking traps by hand. The following year, not long after the blisters had healed, I decided to go forward and accept more challenges in this profession. I continued to work at SPCC during the summers until I finished high school.

As we all know, the challenge of a college education can be overwhelming at times, but like all challenges that we complete, the rewards are very satisfying. I met that challenge and I am very proud of the fact that I graduated from Penn State in 1972 from their Turfgrass Management Program. After graduation I felt I was ready to take on any and all challenges the Golf Course Superintendent's profession could give me.

In May of 1972 I accepted a position as golf course superintendent at Seaford Golf & Country Club (SG&CC) in Seaford, Delaware. At that time the course was a 9-hole course with two flags in each green and two sets of tees to make it an 18-hole course. There were about 750 members at that time for a nine-hole course, quite a challenge. The next seven years really gave me strong experience in meeting challenges. This course would lose several greens each year in July or August. The fairways were below average at best. These were two huge challenges in overcoming these problems. After several years, the greens improved tremendously and were healthy all year round.

Ryegrass was becoming more common for fairway use. Thank God for Pennfine and Manhattan Ryegrass. These two varieties completely turned around the quality of those fairways. Being a Dupont course didn't hurt either. Chemicals such as Tersan SP, Tersan LSR, and 1991 were cheap for us and abundant to control all those diseases on ryegrass. Working at Seaford gave me the experience needed to deal with challenges and follow through with resolutions to completion.

In September of 1978, I was offered a position as golf course superintendent at Prospect Bay Country Club (PBCC). The challenge of finishing a new course that was under construction and moving to an 18-hole facility was all the enticement I needed to accept the position. Here again, were many challenges. The course was undeveloped for 3-4 years until a sewage plant could be built and there were greens that had Sweet Gum trees 10 to 12 feet tall. The sewage plant—what a challenge! This was built because the heavy clay soil wouldn't perk for the 322 homes to be constructed. The plan was for the sewage plant to treat the sewage from the homes and then use the reclaimed water on the course that had soil that didn't perk. Gerry Hasbargen has since solved that challenge. It was during my time at PBCC that I decided to take the challenge of becoming a certified golf course superintendent and accomplished that goal successfully.

The many challenges, small and large, I experienced at SPCC, SG&CC, and PBCC definitely prepared me for the greatest challenge of my superintendent's career. I was offered the position of golf course superintendent at Queenstown Harbor in August of 1990. The prospect of being involved in a project on a truly remarkable piece of property would be the challenge of a lifetime for me. The challenges have been tremendous at Queenstown. In short, being superintendent at Queenstown has been the experience I wish everyone could have in his or her career. After nine years as the superintendent at Queenstown I feel I left this profession at the top of my game and with great satisfaction knowing what I have accomplished in 28 years. It truly has been an honor and privilege to be the superintendent at Queenstown and to be able to continue working for the Birney family is the

best of all worlds. I have been fortunate to make some good career moves but meeting Lex and Charlie Birney was the greatest day of my career.

In November of 1999 I was approached by the Birneys and offered the position of Senior Vice-President for Atlantic Golf. The position empowered me to oversee the golf course maintenance operation for all three courses, Potomac Ridge, South River, and Queenstown Harbor. The three superintendents, John Stern, John Newcomb CGCS, and Tom Tokarski, would be my responsibility. At this time I felt I had accomplished and conquered all the challenges as a superintendent at Queenstown, as I had in the past twenty eight years as a superintendent. I felt this was an opportunity to accept new and different challenges.

In May of 2000 I was again approached by Lex and Charlie Birney and was asked if I would accept the position of President of Atlantic Golf. They felt it was time for them to spend more time in the office in DC; running the many other business aspects of their company Washington Brick & Terra Cotta. This would provide them the opportunity to have the time to devote to the operation of the company's other interests. This opportunity would offer me the challenge of running the complete business of Atlantic Golf. I knew I really wanted to accept this position and its many challenges, but certainly wanted to weigh all the options before accepting this position. I also knew this would draw my career of a golf course superintendent to a close. The timing was perfect. I felt the many years as a golf course superintendent were starting to affect me in ways I didn't realize until I left position, both in my health and spirit. The many years of challenges as a golf course superintendent have aided me tremendously in my new career as President of Atlantic Golf.

Being a superintendent is like no other profession with the many everyday challenges, large ones and small ones. Over the years we superintendents see endless challenges and they will probably never stop existing in this profession. Maybe that's what we are about in this profession-- Meeting the Challenges!