



The secrets to attracting top turf students

by RON HALL / Senior Editor

Today's turf students want more responsibility and broader on-the-job experience. It's up to you to provide that—if you want to keep the good ones coming back.

Competition for top turf students to work as "interns" on golf courses is growing. Superintendents who want these valuable seasonal employees will have to work harder to get them. That might mean offering higher wages or providing affordable housing or other perks like uniforms, meals, or playing privileges.

But what most students really want is better and more varied learning opportunities, believes certified golf course superintendent Jim Harris.

This Memphis native is one superintendent who has been successful in attracting interns to his golf course. "I don't think I've ever had a bad experience with one of these students," he says.

Harris, 11 years at Chickasaw Country Club before moving to Stonebridge Golf Club in Memphis in 1994, says he's used interns for the past six seasons. He says they're welcome additions to his regular crew.

But they're also a big responsibility.

"They're coming with this question on their minds: 'What am I going to learn?' So you've got an obligation to these people," says Harris. "If you're not going to help develop these students, don't hire them. Let them go somewhere where they can learn."

For his part, Harris developed a written, three-phase student training program. It outlines specific tasks to be mastered during the intern's stay which may be seasonal, or as long as six months.

As each student masters a specific duty or the operation of a particular piece of machinery, Harris says he records it on a checklist he's prepared.

"When students arrive, you (superintendent) have to be able to tell them what you expect out of them, and what they can expect out of you," says Harris. It should be in writing.

Getting involved...

Harris says he gives each student as much of his own time as he can, but his time, like all superintendents', is limited. Most of the training comes from his veteran workers at the course.

"The people on my regular crew are the best at what they do. They're the people with the experience and, usually, they take pride in training these students," he says.

Harris says students working at his course are expected to attend Memphis Area Golf Course Superintendents Association meetings, and to undertake a special project at the course.

Tony Mancuso of New Albany (Ohio) Country Club, says about 10 turf students will be working at his course this season.



At New Albany Country Club, turf interns work hand-in-hand with veterans, says Tony Mancuso.

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Mancuso, like Harris a certified superintendent, has a written training program in place. In fact, he used the former's program as a template and modified it to suit conditions at the New Albany course.

Mancuso, also like Harris, requires each student intern to be responsible for a special project. To date, the projects have involved seeding or sodding, disease and insect monitoring, or the club's on-going fairway fertilizer study.

University, trade school sources

Where do you find interns for your sports field or golf course? You find them at almost all universities with strong turf management programs, say Mancuso and Harris.

One hotbed for top sport and golf turf management interns is Mississippi State University in Starkville.

In the fall of 1993, that turf department mandated that all students in the four-year program gain one year of on-the-job work

experience to earn a degree. This includes two summers and one non-summer term. The students work through MSU's co-op department which acts as a liaison between potential employers and students.

"A Mississippi State student can start in mid-May and work all the way through December," says Scott Maynard, assistant director of MSU's cooperative education program. "This is a big advantage to employers. They've responded by giving the students more responsibility."

Although MSU felt that making the work requirement mandatory might reduce the number of turf students, the opposite occurred. In 1993, the turf department had about 70 students. There are 124 this year.

Even so, Maynard says he's had no trouble placing students at golf courses. Typically they earn between \$6.50 and \$7 per hour during their internships, and about 25 percent get free lodging, too.

But the real eye-opener, says Maynard, is that graduates with on-the-job experience start at salary levels \$4,000 to \$6,000 higher than turf graduates with no experience.

Last summer, Mississippi State's co-op program had students working in 36 different states. But other universities and trade schools, offering both two- and four-year turf programs, are also good sources of competent eager interns.

"Right now we've got four schools represented and maybe five," says Mancuso of the 1996 season at New Albany.

He says he makes annual trips to places like Penn State, Ohio State, the Agricultural Technical Institute (ATI, a two-year program in Wooster offered by Ohio State), and Mississippi State to participate in student career days and to speak to turf clubs.

Both Harris and Mancuso say that by being offering a structured learning environment, and by providing interns with challenging and varied tasks at their courses, they can continue to attract top seasonal employees.

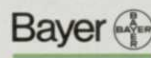
"Once a student comes and has a successful time at your course, it gets easier to attract more. They go back and tell other students," says Mancuso. □

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