

Two Perspectives On: “HELP WANTED — CAREER OPPORTUNITIES”

by JAMES F. MOORE
Director, Mid-Continent Region, USGA Green Section

GUIDELINES FOR THE SUPERINTENDENT

OKAY. You're about to be interviewed for a new job. You're thinking about changing not only your address but yours and your family's life-style as well. It is obvious you are about to make one of the most important decisions of your life, assuming you are offered the chance. Are you ready? If you are like most superintendents, you're not even close.

It is the sad truth that many superintendents put more effort into choosing a used car than in considering a career change. They are more concerned with how to land the new job than they are with whether or not the job is worth landing.

There is much to consider before making an intelligent decision of this magnitude. What follows is a checklist of sorts. Once this information is gathered, the superintendent will have a good picture of the new working environment.

Agronomic Factors

So many superintendents with formal education tend to think they can overcome any agronomic problem. This is a false and potentially dangerous assumption. As turf managers, we have the ability to influence nature, not control her. Much like a tugboat guiding an aircraft carrier, we can only help point things in the right direction. Careful consideration should be given to the agronomic challenges of the prospective course. The superintendent must also be realistic concerning his own ability. A balance must be achieved between willingness to accept new challenges and potential for failure.

To obtain a true picture of the agronomic factors at the new course, a superintendent should ask for the following items. He should also ask for time alone to examine the information.

1. *The most recent soil and water quality tests.* Pay particular attention to the levels of salt and sodium. These types of soil conditions are extremely difficult to overcome, even with the best of management.

2. *Pesticide records.* Look closely at the history of pesticide applications. This shows the stresses the course must endure. For example, repeated sprayings for a particular disease or insect indicates trouble ahead. Has the previous superintendent rotated his chemical applications to prevent the development of resistant types? Do the records indicate pest problems that cannot be overcome through routine turfgrass management, or problems with which you have little or no experience?

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GUIDELINES FOR THE CLUB

YOUR PRESENT superintendent is leaving soon, or has already taken another position. The job of finding a replacement has fallen upon you, and you are learning that it is not just a matter of running a help-wanted ad in the local newspaper. If that were the case, the ad would probably read as follows:

Wanted — College graduate with extensive knowledge and experience in the following fields: turfgrass management, horticulture, irrigation design and repair, construction, personnel management, budget development and implementation, mechanics, and public relations. You must be willing to work as many hours as necessary to get the job done, regardless of personal life. You must be willing to work for hundreds of bosses who will second guess every decision and program you propose. You will also be expected to forecast, compensate for, and budget for every whim of nature. You must be able to motivate underpaid employees to produce top-quality work on a daily basis. All these goals must be accomplished without interruption to play or inconvenience to the membership. Finally, you must be willing to work in a barn.

Although this is a reasonably accurate representation of the job opening you seek to fill, an ad like this would not be very effective.

How do you go about finding such an individual? What do you look for in a new superintendent? What can your club do to attract the best superintendents available?

How to Solicit Applications

One of the most effective means of gathering applicants is to contact the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. The GCSAA offers an employment referral service to their membership of more than 8,000. Notices of job opportunities are mailed to subscribing members every week. These notices include specific information about the course and the position offered. Over 1,000 of the 8,000 members subscribe to this service, so be prepared to receive a great deal of mail. To have your club listed will cost \$50.00 per week. Contact the GCSAA membership department at this address: Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, 1617 St. Andrews Dr., Lawrence, KS 66046, telephone (913) 841-2240.

Most professional superintendents are also members of state and local turfgrass associations. Many of these associ-

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3. *Past USGA Green Section reports.* In one sense, USGA Green Section agronomists act as club historians. Turf Advisory Service reports document clubs' efforts to improve their facilities. By the same token, these reports also document the lack of such actions. TAS reports detail the problems experienced by the clubs and the solutions offered.

4. *The club's long-range or master plan.* It is important to have an idea of what the membership expects in the golf course. This will allow you to match your career goals and expertise with the club's plans for the future. For example, if you are a superintendent who thrives on golf course construction projects, and the club you are considering does not have a master plan, or has recently finished major construction, you probably should look somewhere else.

Some agronomic information is best gathered through your own inspection. Take a soil probe or soil profile tool. Look at the construction of the greens and tees. Are the greens located in shady areas, surrounded by trees that restrict air movement, or too small to support the play they receive? Are there worn spots in the fairways or near the greens that indicate a lack of golf cart control? Does the architecture of the greens and tees allow traffic to be distributed over large areas? Are there indications the irrigation system is under-pressured or the design of the system is inadequate? If the course is composed of a mixture of cool- and warm-season turfs, does the irrigation system address the individual needs of both? Are there environmental factors that require constant pesticide applications to sustain the turf at a level demanded by the membership?

Make notes as you tour the course. Be prepared to submit a written summary of your observations to the committee, if it is requested.

Physical Plant

Regardless of the skill of the superintendent or the agronomic conditions, it takes good equipment and good working conditions to produce a consistently high-quality product. The maintenance building should provide a clean, comfortable environment for the golf course staff. There should be sufficient office space for the superintendent, his assistant, and the shop foreman or mechanic. Areas should be provided for the crew to eat, store their gear safely, and shower at the end of the day. Uniforms and safety equipment for the crew should be available. There should be separate and secure storage areas for pesticides, fertilizers, and equipment repair parts. The mechanic's area must be properly lighted and ventilated, and it should provide adequate room for equipment maintenance. It is a fair assumption that a club that does not provide these basic needs has a poor understanding of the demands of golf course maintenance.

Your evaluation of the physical plant must also consider the work habits of the previous superintendent. Has the equipment been well cared for, and has the maintenance performed been documented? Is the pumping plant clean, and has it been regularly serviced? Have things been patched up or properly repaired? Are the shop and maintenance yard well organized, or are they cluttered with junk? Once again, you can safely infer that a superintendent who is content to work in a sloppy shop is

likely to accept the same type of work from the crew.

Management Factors

The relationship of the superintendent to the membership and leadership of the club is perhaps the most important factor that must be examined in considering a job change. It is a sad fact that superintendents often lose jobs because of management problems, rather than agronomic failures. Today's superintendent cannot hide in the maintenance building and remain isolated from the membership. He must convey his ideas in a professional manner to see his programs are accepted. To accomplish this goal, he should have a clear understanding of the club management's style of leadership.

It is absolutely necessary for a potential employer to have a clearly defined organizational chart identifying to whom the superintendent is directly responsible, either a committee or an individual. Be extremely wary of clubs with fuzzy management structures.

Prospective superintendents too often base their decision on whether to accept a new job on salary alone. Be sure to examine the complete benefit package. Does the club encourage and support participation in local, state, and national turfgrass educational conferences? Does it offer medical and retirement plans? Is the superintendent included in the organization's insurance policy covering liability claims against the club?

The compensation package obviously will be important. However, salary is not the only factor that should be considered. Are the assistant, the mechanic, and the crew paid fairly? These are the

TABLE 1

CHECKLIST FOR THE SUPERINTENDENT

Agronomic Factors

- Soil tests
- Water quality test
- Water availability
- Pesticide records
- Local environmental conditions
- Annual maintenance budget
- Past Green Section reports
- Long-range or master plan
- Construction of greens and tees
- Amount of play course receives
- Turfgrass varieties used on course

Physical Plant

- Maintenance building
- Irrigation system
- Equipment

Management Factors

- Clear organizational chart
- Stability/tenure of management
- Salary/benefits comparable to area
- Working conditions for support staff
- Maintenance budget

TABLE 2

CHECKLIST FOR THE CLUB

- Experience
- Education
- References
- Tenure at previous jobs
- Positions held in industry and community
- Management skills
- Communication skills
- Continuing education efforts
- Licensed for pesticide applications
- Career goals

people you will have to depend on to carry out your programs. Low pay and poor benefits lead to constant turnover of the staff, which guarantees major problems for you in the future.

If it is possible, determine the stability of the club's leadership. Committees that change every year frequently demand complete changes in course management as well. Clubs with a revolving door policy of hiring and firing superintendents and managers are not likely to change just because of you. Many superintendents demand and get employment contracts before going to work for such clubs. Many a USGA Green Section report has been written encouraging continuity in the management of the golf course. This can only be accomplished when there is a continuity of club leadership as well.

Once the leadership and membership goals have been identified, one can determine if the maintenance budget is sufficient. Examine the budgets over the past three or four years. Have they tended toward reduction or growth? Is the budget comparable to other courses of similar stature in the same area? Are there major differences between what the previous superintendent has suggested and what finally was approved?

Be certain the budget figure presented to you represents only the care of the golf course. Many clubs include a wide variety of miscellaneous expenses under the catch-all heading of "Golf Course Budget." Some common examples include: the care and charging of the golf cart fleet, pro shop salaries and expenses, landscaping and maintenance of the club grounds, swimming pools, tennis courts, etc. Finally, look for budget items that are abnormally high. In some areas water and utility costs can turn what appears to be a large budget into one that is inadequate.

Conclusion

Obviously a great many factors should be considered before accepting a new position. There are few if any perfect jobs. If they exist, be assured the present superintendent will be in no hurry to leave. Therefore, you will have to make a few compromises when considering all the factors involved. Keep in mind, however, that top-notch superintendents are in greater demand than ever before. If you fall into this category, you can afford to be choosy.



(Top) Good working conditions for the superintendent.

(Above) Good working conditions for the crew inspire higher quality work on the course.

Guidelines for the Club *(continued from page 1)*

ations publish excellent monthly newsletters. Typically, they are eager to post job openings for the benefit of their members, and at a very reasonable cost. Any professional superintendent in your area should be able to provide you with the address and phone number of these associations.

You may also wish to contact the USGA Agronomist for your region. Each office receives frequent calls from superintendents and clubs looking for each other. The Green Section will not pick a superintendent for you. That is a decision that must be made by the

individual club. We will help put you in touch with three or more good superintendents locally or from around the country. The address and phone number of each regional office is listed inside the front cover of this publication.

Assuming you are offering a fair wage and decent working conditions, you will quickly accumulate a sizeable list of applicants. Telephone interviews should be conducted, and resume references checked to narrow your list to from four to 10 prospects. These individuals should be interviewed. Be prepared to pay their travel expenses.



What to Look for in a Superintendent

Now comes the hard part. You must evaluate each applicant to determine the best superintendent for your course. Some key areas to consider:

As it is in most technical fields, the combination of a formal education and practical experience is ideal. Most colleges do not stress the day-to-day management duties of a superintendent. These are skills that can best be acquired through apprenticeship as an assistant working for an experienced superintendent.

Colleges offer the educational background in physiology, pathology, entomology, soil physics, and irrigation design that a superintendent needs to evaluate new situations and make the proper decisions. In addition, a formal education should also allow the prospective superintendent to develop skills in communication and management that are invaluable in dealing with memberships.

Obviously a prospective superintendent whose resume includes degrees from a recognized university as well as the school of hard knocks should be strongly considered.

Clubs facing major construction projects (such as building greens or installing an irrigation system) often feel they should hire a superintendent with experience in such construction. Although this is certainly an asset, it should not be an overwhelming factor in choosing the new superintendent. A

professional superintendent knows help is available from many sources, and is willing to seek assistance when it is necessary. Choose your superintendent based on overall ability. The best superintendent is like the family doctor, someone skilled in many areas, rather than concentrating all his efforts into one specific aspect of the profession.

Today's superintendent must be able to communicate with the membership and leadership of the club as well as with the maintenance crew and technical representatives. Superintendents who lose their jobs lose them principally because they can't communicate with their employer in a professional manner.

An effort should be made during the interview process to evaluate each candidate's communication skills. One good method is to give each candidate time to tour the course on his own. They should be given access to pertinent records, then asked to submit a brief written summary of their observations. Recognize that what is important in evaluating these summaries is the candidate's ability to express his ideas, with secondary consideration given to the ideas themselves.

How to Attract the Best Superintendents

Most superintendents realize the best jobs are not necessarily those with the biggest budgets and the largest paychecks. Once again, many aspects of the

working environment must be considered. Pay close attention to the adjacent article discussing what a superintendent should look for in a club. Your club should meet these requirements. Too many clubs fail to take these steps, and they simply cannot keep a good superintendent. They soon develop the reputation that they are not a good club to work for.

Constant criticism of the superintendent's efforts, a poorly structured and fickle leadership, and unwillingness to provide good working conditions are recognizable characteristics. Like any industry, good management dictates fair and proper treatment of employees.

Our fictitious want ad might cause one to wonder why anyone in his right mind would want to be a golf course superintendent. There are a number of very good reasons.

- Few jobs provide greater challenge, diversity, or personal satisfaction.
- Salaries and benefit packages have become more commensurate with the requirements of the job.
- The superintendent works daily with two of the most unpredictable forces in existence — people and nature. While these forces are capable of occasionally making the superintendent's life miserable, these same forces have a much greater potential for providing the superintendent with the opportunity to excel in a game that is healthy and growing stronger.