



*More superintendents are relying on contractors to make bulk fertilizer applications. Their equipment is more accurate, the work is done at a minimal cost, and the job is completed ahead of morning golfers.*

## BRINGING IN THE HIRED GUNS

*Contract services can help streamline maintenance operations.*

by PAUL VERMEULEN

**I**N OLD WESTERN FILMS where unsavory bandits and cattle rustlers ruled the landscape, worried homesteaders payrolled hired guns to protect their farms and families. And like the vulnerable settlers of yesteryear, modern-day superintendents can also take advantage of hired help to complete atypical tasks on the course. Where services are available, employing a contractor may streamline a maintenance operation by reducing labor and equipment costs, providing substitutes for temporary laborers, decreasing the potential for personal injuries, and lessening employee training time. Superintendents may also become more popular around the ol' watering hole by hiring a contractor to get a few big jobs done ahead of morning play.

Like gunslingers who spent hours practicing their quick draw on desert cacti, contractors who specialize in non-routine tasks become more proficient, and can finish jobs in less time for a lower cost. A contractor's proficiency can be good justification to a superintendent to use their services,

allowing golf course personnel to spend their scheduled working hours accomplishing assigned duties and not be forced to catch up by working overtime.

Some superintendents can also reduce capital outlay for equipment by using a contractor to complete non-routine tasks. For example, superintendents in most areas of the country can hire a contractor to cultivate their greens with a specialized deep-tine or water-injection aerifier, thereby eliminating the need to add this expensive piece of equipment to their own inventory. In addition, courses benefit equipment-wise because contractors usually purchase the best, most efficient models and maintain them in good mechanical condition so that they can continue to earn a living. Saving on capital purchases by hiring a contractor assumes that the specialized equipment would not be useful on other areas of the course or during several different times of the growing season.

In northern regions contractors can help cope with temporary labor problems by completing tasks in the early

spring or late fall. This can give superintendents the opportunity to forego the hiring of seasonal employees until early summer and/or rely on them less during the fall when they need to return to other activities. A good example would be a superintendent who hires a contractor to make large-scale weed control applications in the spring to free up full-time employees to prepare the course for summer. This would delay the need to hire seasonal employees for several weeks, or until the quality of the labor pool improves.

No matter how careful employees try to be, work-related injuries are always a possibility at the golf course. As is often the case for non-routine tasks, employees must operate specialized, unfamiliar equipment and/or handle foreign materials. By using an experienced contractor to complete certain non-routine tasks, the potential for injury can be decreased because their workers are familiar with the machinery and procedures. Along the same line, the number of training hours to acquaint golf course personnel with atypical tasks can be lessened.

At times, work completed under a service agreement can be a direct benefit to the golfers if the contractor has the equipment and manpower to get a job done fast. In the Chicagoland area, a growing number of superintendents are relying on contractors to make bulk fertilizer applications, as they have large spreaders that can cover an entire course ahead of morning play. Furthermore, because of the advanced technology of bulk application equipment, both the calibration and actual application are more precise.

Western settlers rarely made hired guns permanent houseguests because sooner or later they would attract trouble of their own. Similarly, there are several reasons for not becoming overly dependent on contract services.

In regions with unpredictable weather conditions, contractors who specialize in a particular maintenance operation can fall behind schedule. This is especially true when they are overbooked. For superintendents who cannot set aside alternate days in the play schedule for a contractor to complete the work before the agronomic window of opportunity closes, this can be a genuine hardship.



*Using a contractor to make large-scale spray applications can help streamline a maintenance operation by reducing costs associated with special training, and storage and handling of special materials.*

About a year ago, I visited a course that was closed on a Tuesday. They had flagged all of the irrigation heads to accommodate a contractor who had agreed to aerify and clean up all of the fairways in one working day. When the

axle broke on the contractor's truck several miles out of town, it became clear that he was not going to be able to get the job done on time. It was nothing short of a nightmare for the new superintendent, who could not convince the owner to keep the course closed for another day. Having lost the only opportunity to aerify, the fairways had to wait until the next season.

Over-reliance on contract services can also make it difficult for assistant superintendents and college interns to acquire skills that will be of value to them later in their careers. By eliminating too many learning opportunities for key personnel, a course's management can find it more difficult to attract highly motivated employees who seek challenging positions. In the long run, this may even affect daily course conditioning.

Another point to consider when evaluating the services of a contractor is the quality of their service. In short, there are contractors who are sincerely dedicated to providing the highest possible level of customer service, and there are those who fail to fully appreciate that the superintendent is ultimately responsible for their actions. If the task requires minute attention to detail and the golfers have very high expectations, it may be best for a superintendent to complete the job in-house rather than take the risk of letting an unskilled contractor drop the proverbial bomb in their lap. No matter what the circumstances, the



*Hiring a contractor can reduce equipment costs when a product application requires specialized machinery.*

**Table 1**

**A Green Section staff survey of contract services that generally are available in large metropolitan areas.**

Aquatic management from A to Z.  
Clubhouse landscape maintenance.  
Course security.  
Golf course construction services.  
Deep-tine aerification of greens.  
Large-scale fertilizer application.  
Large-scale pest control application.  
Large-scale weed control application.  
Mower reel and bedknife sharpening.  
Restroom cleaning and maintenance.  
Specialized tree care.  
Small animal and rodent control.  
Traditional core aerification of fairways.  
Tree pruning and removal.  
Vertical mowing and core cultivation of fairways and rough.  
Water injection aerification of greens.

superintendent should always maintain decision-making powers over contractors and never allow them to work without close supervision.

Depending on the size of the metropolitan area, the range of readily available contract services can be quite extensive. In Table 1, a list of services compiled through a survey of the Green Section staff might leave one with the impression that all but the daily tasks of mowing and course setup can be hired out. Taken to the extreme, an owner or board of directors might even conclude that employing a well-trained, experienced superintendent would no longer be necessary, as only a skeleton crew would be required to take care of the course.

This extreme view is ridiculous. There are immediacy tasks, such as disease control applications, irrigation system repairs, etc., that cannot be hired out, since the time it would take for a contractor to receive a call and travel to the course might make the difference between success and failure. Furthermore, in the absence of an experienced superintendent, a course would become easy prey for unscrupulous contractors. Here I am reminded



*In northern regions, using a contractor to complete non-routine tasks in the fall can help superintendents cope with the early departure of seasonal employees.*



*A contractor's experience and reputation should be taken into consideration when reviewing contract bids. Ultimately, the superintendent shoulders the responsibility for all maintenance activities performed on the golf course.*

of the old adage "The only thing that happens fast in agriculture is crop failure."

In conclusion, bringing in the hired guns to streamline a maintenance operation has both advantages and disadvantages, depending on the circumstances at hand. Each course being different, superintendents must evaluate the cost of labor and equipment, the availability of staff, the contractor's proficiency with a given task, and the price for the service provided. And, since the responsibility for a contrac-

tor's actions rests heaviest on the shoulders of the superintendent, experience and reputation should be highly regarded while a watchful eye is always kept on their activities.

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