



So You Want to be a Golf Course Superintendent?

A turf student's perspective on the golf course manager career path.

BY TRAVIS JAMES MOORE

Assistant superintendent Nelson Coron demonstrates for intern Travis Moore the proper way to hand water greens. Internships provide students the opportunity to experience new places, management styles, and grasses. The golf course staff have the responsibility to not only show the interns how to properly accomplish maintenance tasks, but also to instruct them on the reasons why tasks are done a certain way.

Once you have made the decision to pursue the vocation of golf course superintendent, you had better be prepared to answer a few pointed questions from your unenlightened friends.

“What does a superintendent do? I thought the golf pro took care of the course.”

“Can you make any money doing that?”

“What do you do all winter?”

“You mean they have schools for that?”

From those who know more about the golf business, the questions will be quite a bit different.

“Are you sure you want to work that many hours?”

“You do know that job security is not all that great — right?”

“The competition for good jobs is fierce. Are you ready to study hard and get a good education?”

Ask superintendents what it takes, and they will quickly inform you that the profession requires years of hard work, dedication, long hours, and not always the highest wages. They go on to

explain that you must be willing to work holidays and weekends, and strive to meet golfers' expectations, no matter how demanding. And it is a given that some with a single-digit handicap will think they know a lot more about taking care of a golf course than you ever will.

Still interested?

In spite of these drawbacks, a career in golf course management is appealing to many of us because it combines a unique combination of skills. Few jobs require blending scientific knowledge, communication skills, a committed work ethic, leadership ability, and more on a daily basis. Since careers in golf course management can be found almost anywhere in the world, there is a chance to apply these skills in the most beautiful of environments. Finally, for many of us, the most appealing aspect of this industry is that it allows us to be intimately close to the game of golf.

There are many possible paths to becoming a golf course superintendent, ranging from working your way up from the maintenance crew to pursuing an advanced degree in agronomy or horti-

culture with a specialization in turfgrass management. So where do you start? The following steps are the most commonly followed.

STEP 1

While in high school, get a summer job on a golf course.

The first step is to gain experience as early as possible. Work experience is crucial for finding internships, relating classroom information to the real world, and most importantly, deciding if this is a career you want to pursue. When you apply, be sure to tell the superintendent you want to learn more about the profession. As with most jobs, you will start out at the bottom and have to earn your way to bigger and better things. Your first three friends on the golf course will most likely be the shovel, the rake, and the line trimmer. The longer you stay, the more you will learn about what it is like to work in golf course maintenance.

This experience will likely be your first exposure to the fact that grasses are seemingly under constant attack from weeds, insects, and disease organisms. You will also learn that attention to detail is extremely important in golf course management. Hopefully you will have the chance to work for a superintendent who loves the job and will inspire you to take the next step.

STEP 2

Formal education — two-year or four-year program?

Not too many years ago there were very few choices for studying turf management, and almost none specifically focused on golf course management. In most cases, you studied agronomy or horticulture and took just a couple of classes that related directly to the profession. Today there are many options, ranging from two-year programs all the way up to advanced degrees from top universities throughout the world. In fact, there are so many good choices you might have a hard time deciding where and what to study.

For those who are certain their long-term future will be to manage individual golf courses, there are many good two-year programs that take more of a vocational approach to your education. Many successful superintendents obtained their associate degrees from these programs. Fortunately, almost every state now has institutions offering this course of study. Also, the cost of your education will be much less and you will be able to start earning a paycheck more quickly.

On the other hand, four-year universities offer much broader and more in-depth curricula. Here you will study, in much greater detail, science-based subjects such as plant physiology, plant pathology, chemistry, taxonomy, entomology, and so on. In addition, you will have the opportunity to take valuable courses in business, engineering, English, and many other subjects that will serve you well regardless of your career path. Such an education is obviously more expensive and takes more time and effort on your part. However, you are prepared for a wider range of professions and will have more options once you graduate. Plus, you might decide to go on to graduate school.

There are also those who have combined all of these options. Some have joined the maintenance crew right out of high school and attended either a junior college or a vocational school part-time. Once they were certain of their goals, they eventually decided to pursue their four-year degree.

STEP 3

The internship.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of your educational experience will be the internship. The importance and benefit of internships cannot be overstated. Interns experience new places, management styles, and different grasses; become more familiar with irrigation and chemical applications; and are involved with special projects, tournament preparation, and more. As an intern you have the opportunity to learn on some of the country's top courses and from first-rate superintendents and assistants. Many courses have

Superintendent David Stone demonstrates to intern Brooks Riddle how to operate the irrigation system.



multiple interns and provide housing, competitive wages, and possibly even golfing privileges. The hours are very long and you will likely work harder than you thought possible. You probably will be too tired to play a lot of golf. But when you return to school, you will have a much expanded view of the industry and profession and will be able to better tailor the remainder of your education to meet your future needs.

WHEN AND WHERE DO I START?

The key to finding a great internship is to start looking early. Keep in mind that the top jobs are competitive and will go quickly. I have talked to several interns who had their summer internships finalized in early to mid-fall. Many students are able to complete as many as three or four internships while attending a four-year institution. Students who plan on completing more than one internship should try to work in different parts of the country and in significantly different climates. Such broad experience will prove invaluable when competing for jobs after graduation.

Student advisors will often maintain good connections to industry and former students and will be able to help you with your search. Many state turfgrass associations will post such opportunities on their Web sites. Be sure to contact the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (www.gcsaa.org) and ask for their help. While you're at it, it is a good idea to join GCSAA and your state chapter since this will provide many additional avenues to make contacts in the industry.

You also should contact the USGA agronomist in your area (www.usga.org/turf) since during their travels they often come across courses with good internship programs. The USGA also provides the opportunity for multiple students to travel with members of the Green Section staff on Turf Advisory Service visits for one week during the summer. The goal of the internship program is to provide students with a broader view of the golf course industry and to provide the opportunity to learn about golf course maintenance from the perspective of Green Section agronomists. State and national turf conferences offer the opportunity to find information and to meet new people in the industry.

When speaking with a particular golf course superintendent, don't hesitate to ask questions regarding your duties as an intern, and be sure to stress your desire to learn as much about the

profession as possible. As mentioned earlier, hard work and long hours are part of the package, but there also should be opportunities to learn more about the management side of the industry as well.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS WHEN LOOKING FOR INTERNSHIPS

- **Communicate professionally.** As with any job search, you need to communicate in a professional manner to be successful. If you use e-mail, make sure to use correct English and leave out the text message abbreviations you might be used to using. When contacting the course superintendent, don't rely just on e-mail and phone calls. Put together a good resume and have someone at school take a look at it to be sure it is professional looking and well written. Write a personal letter to the superintendent and stress your desire to learn and become a part of the profession. Don't underestimate the power of written communication. It is good to have something that can sit on top of your potential employer's desk.
- **Keep an open mind.** There are many opportunities across the country and even internationally. Do not be afraid to travel away from home and experience new places.
- **Begin your search early.** This point cannot be stressed enough.
- **Know the course.** Before you interview for an internship, take the time to do a little research about the course. For example, knowledge of the history of the course and which grasses are used will demonstrate your willingness to learn and your desire to be a contributing member of the maintenance team.
- **Know the game.** Knowledge of the game of golf will make you a much more valuable asset to your employer. You also should be able to play the game with a reasonable amount of skill. Having a love for the game positively influences the quality of your work.
- **Behave professionally.** The contacts you make while interning will almost certainly be crucial later on as you search for your first post-school position. Be certain they will be able to give you nothing but the best of references.
- **Take pictures.** The importance of documenting your experiences with pictures cannot be overstated. Photograph projects you work on and maintenance procedures such as topdressing, aeration, etc.



STEP 4

Assistant Superintendent.

In most cases, the first job you will search for after graduation will be as a second or first assistant. As an assistant, you will gain much more experience with many of the tasks that you were introduced to as an intern, such as: supervisory skills, budgeting, chemical and pesticide applications, special projects, tournament preparation, and more. The length of time that one spends as an assistant varies depending on many factors. Be prepared to move a few times, since this is often the best way to build your experience and prepare yourself for your first job as the “head” superintendent.

CONCLUSION

The road to becoming a golf course superintendent is longer and more difficult than many realize. Those willing to put this much time and effort into their education and work experience could likely find more lucrative vocations in other industries. But for those of us who want to work with nature and be close to the game, the road is well worth traveling. If you decide to pursue a career in this industry, keep in mind these words of advice from Superintendent David Stone of

The Honors Course in Tennessee. Stone states that in order for one to be truly competitive and successful as a golf course superintendent, one must not only possess a committed work ethic and the desire to continually learn, but one must also have an undying love for the game — both as a player and as a golf course manager.

Good luck!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the staff at The Honors Course, including assistant superintendents Nelson Coron and Chris Dill, and head superintendent David Stone for their input and advice. Brooks Riddle, a senior at North Carolina State University, and Will Misenhimer, a recent graduate of Mississippi State University, contributed to this article by sharing their experiences. They have completed numerous internships and will soon be seeking employment as assistant golf course superintendents.

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Internships should provide a chance to learn new things. At The Honors Course, interns evaluate the effectiveness of new fertilizer products on the fairways.