

# Grow Your Career Beyond Growing Turf

Why superintendents should be prepared when opportunity knocks.

BY JARED VIARENGO



Applebrook Golf Club is a golf and dining facility only. A country club with more amenities may provide a greater challenge to fulfill the duties of superintendent and general manager.

Advancing your career, as with just about everything in life, is all about being prepared. In the fall of 2008, when the board members at Applebrook Golf Club, a private, 18-hole course, approached me with an offer to take on the dual role of general manager and golf course superintendent, I was ready to wear both hats.

During my early career in this industry, I was fortunate to have worked for two of the best golf course superintendents who were on top of

their games, Robert U. Alonzi and Paul R. Latshaw. The opportunity to work with such highly experienced superintendents may be more likely an exception to the norm in that the business of being a golf course superintendent is made up mostly of younger people. If you look at the ages of superintendents, the number of superintendents declines as age increases (Figure 1). The two aforementioned superintendents for whom I worked stayed on top by working hard and continually learning and improving, which is

something I have kept in mind as I have advanced in my own career.

One thing that has kept me motivated is to consider what my options are for progressing in my career and expanding my responsibilities. Having the opportunity to be a director of golf, run a multi-course facility, or be a regional agronomist were some possibilities — all of which would require strong management abilities. Something to keep in mind is the trend to move away from multiple high-paying positions and have just one top



As both superintendent and general manager, communications with other staff take on an even greater role. What may have been a casual conversation in the past is now filled with important information regarding daily operations at the clubhouse — in this case, clubhouse manager Bill Phillips.

position, which may as well be filled by you — the golf course superintendent. It has been said that it is easier for a superintendent to learn the other top jobs at a club than it is for people in the other positions to learn the technical knowledge necessary to be a superintendent. As superintendents, we have the ability to be successful managing the largest budgets and the most valuable source of revenue at most courses.

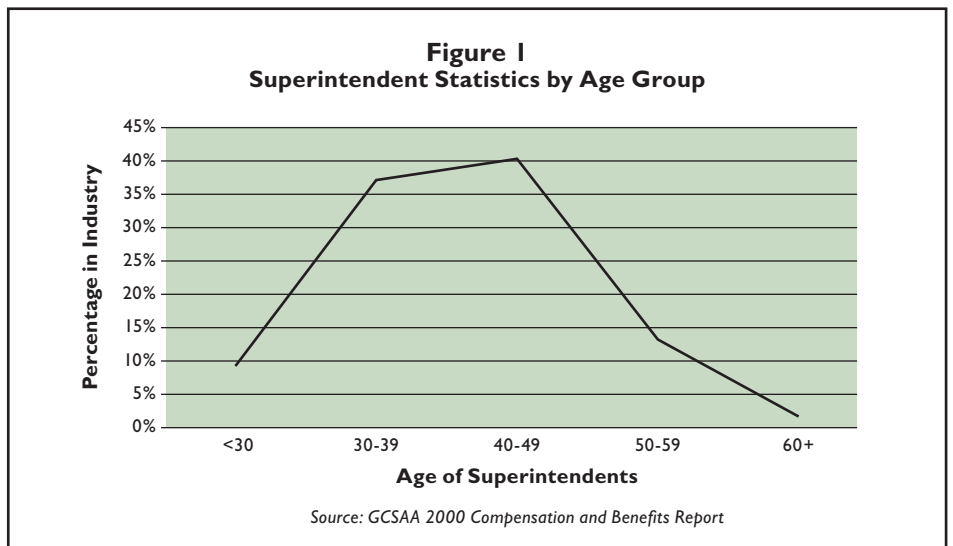
I believe I have gotten to where I am today in my career by always being ready for opportunities whenever they present themselves. My career at Applebrook Golf Club began almost ten years ago when I was hired as the grow-in superintendent for this Gil Hanse-designed golf course. It didn't take long after the golf course opened for play in 2001 that I began contemplating how to expand my role beyond the daily maintenance and management of the golf course grounds. While working on my GCSAA Certification, I considered additional ways to improve my management skills, and I began taking courses to earn a Master of Science degree in Management from the University of Maryland University College (UMUC). I took courses

whenever my schedule allowed, which meant no summer classes and few, if any, fall classes. Although it took seven years, perseverance paid off when I obtained my degree. Adding to my education at UMUC, I incorporated seminars offered at the Golf Industry Show, which focused not only on turf management, but also on human resources and clubhouse management.

In early 2008, when Applebrook's head golf professional, who also held the position of general manager, left for another job, I jumped at the opportunity to take on some of the respon-

sibilities that the general manager had with regard to maintenance of the clubhouse. I believe it is important for superintendents to be visible in this regard and express their desire to be in these types of positions without being threatening to others within the organization who may also be vying for them. It is not as uncommon as one might think for a superintendent to be the general manager, too.

In mid-2008, the board at Applebrook approached me about taking a larger leadership role with regard to responsibilities of the general manager. I began by holding monthly meetings with department heads, including the head golf professional, the clubhouse manager, and the controller. The minutes of these meetings were forwarded to the board prior to their monthly meetings in order to provide insight on what was going on in the daily operations of the various departments. After several months, the board moved forward with a formal offer for me to be both the golf course superintendent and the general manager. I accepted the challenge beginning in January 2009. This opportunity has provided an interesting perspective into both ends of the golf management business — wearing both hats. Viewing the jobs from the other side of the fence can certainly be both demanding and rewarding.



There can be variations in which superintendents handle the role of general manager. In my situation, I allocate about 75% of my time as the golf course superintendent and 25% as the general manager. This decision should be based on the nature of the individual club and its needs. Applebrook is a modestly sized facility with 300 golf members, who play about 12,000 rounds a year, and 120 social members. Dividing my time between the responsibilities of both roles has meant changing the way I manage.

Being a general manager has actually made me a better superintendent. I now have a more thorough understanding of the entire operation and I am able to communicate better with all the staff and the department heads. I also interact and communicate more often with the members and the board. Just as with a superintendent needing to be seen out on the golf course, a general manager also needs to make sure he has face time with the membership.

Allocating time to be seen in that environment as the general manager is just as important as making time to be out on the golf course in the superintendent role.

Prior to my taking on the general manager position, I was prone to micromanaging. Now, being forced to delegate many of my duties, I realize the importance of having a good support staff. Since I can't be in two places at once, when I am dealing with clubhouse administrative duties, my assistants are running the operation on the golf course. We stay in touch by cell phone and, most days, meet early in the day to discuss the day's maintenance priorities. I make sure to inform them of my schedule and when I will be unavailable because of meetings. It takes much more organization and time management to ensure that both positions are being executed properly. Overall, the number of hours I put in each week has not increased. As a superintendent, I already had put in a

lot of hours — so rather than add hours to my work day, I simply reallocated time to my new responsibilities. The schedule of hours, however, is different, with more late-afternoon and early-evening meetings that I am required to attend, as well as evening functions at the club.

As the general manager, I oversee the department heads of clubhouse manager and golf professional, and I work closely with the controller. Because I only allocate 25% of my time as the general manager, it is very important for our club to have excellent professionals in these positions so they can operate independently without close monitoring. Superintendents who become general managers must also become better listeners. The golf professional and the clubhouse manager are still the experts in their respective fields, and I realized I needed to listen to them carefully before telling them how to do their jobs. I tend to think of myself more as a facilitator —



(Left) Applebrook's equipment technician, Mike Gerety, not only maintains the equipment, but he also manages the shop and aids in passing along job assignments while the course assistants are on the course. (Right) General manager responsibilities in the clubhouse begin much later in the day, which affords the opportunity to meet with the green maintenance staff in the early morning to coordinate maintenance on the golf course before addressing responsibilities outside of golf course maintenance. Pictured with Jared are assistants (from left) Richard Gillispie, E. J. May, and Mat Lipinski.



An efficient administrative assistant, Christine Viarengo is crucial for supporting the roles of general manager and superintendent. Invoices, outing contracts, and other paperwork must be created and reviewed on a regular basis.

I know what I want and they know how to get it.

In viewing the club operation from the other side of the fence, my perspective has changed dramatically. As the general manager, I have become much more apt to allow carts out after a heavy rainstorm and not take such a hard line, knowing that my decision as a superintendent to not allow carts would limit the enjoyment of the club's membership. I also understand why the golf calendar is the way it is . . . if we have a chance to get an outside outing on a closed day, I am less likely to object now that I understand how the revenue will help the bottom line.

In boiling it down to what I have learned in both roles, it comes down to a few very important things. The need for good assistant superintendents is essential — they must have a full understanding of the operation and the ability to run things independently. I have learned the importance of a good administrative assistant. In my situation, the greens department administrative assistant took on the additional needs of my general manager position — which meant additional scheduling

and correspondence, an increased number of phone calls, attendance at more meetings, and, overall, a larger workload.

In wearing dual hats, I also have learned to look more critically at the greens department's budget. Now that I am more intimate with the entire operation, I understand how the superintendent's budget affects the club as a whole. Acting as a general manager also can make you much more exposed; you are no longer judged only by your ability to maintain the golf course, and you open yourself up to much more scrutiny. Everything you do and say in your role as the general manager has an effect on your position as superintendent, and vice versa — you can't approach the positions as though they are mutually exclusive.

No matter what position you hold, dressing the part, literally, has an impact — you need to always be aware of how you present yourself with regard to appearance. The need to wear a business suit is much more common when serving as general manager, and you also are more intimately involved with the members — you interact

with them on a much more personal level. This can be trying, especially during these economic times when members can be insecure about their memberships.

In the future, I believe there will be more opportunities for superintendents to expand their role to include positions such as general manager, chief financial officer, or director of golf. I am hearing about more superintendents who are interested in these types of positions. The key is being prepared, planning ahead, and expanding on your current knowledge base beyond turfgrass management so that you are qualified when the opportunity presents itself. These positions should be seen as an opportunity for superintendents to both extend their careers in the golf industry and add value to their respective clubs, especially in this era of tight budgets and membership challenges for private clubs.

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