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Superintendents Speak Their Mind on the Profession's Shaky Job Security

By: Gerry Finn, Contributing Editor; GCSANE

(The following appeared in the CGSA of New England's Newsletter; December 2000)

The dilemma persists. In fact, it's picking up steam. Golf course superintendents, those once thought to be cemented to their present places of employment, are losing their jobs at an alarming rate. They are not fly-by-night superintendents, either. They are the pick, the pride of the profession. Yet, they are being tossed to the wind as a new wave of country club presidents, green chairmen, board members, and course owners cut through the ranks with a wild, out of control sword.

"If it could happen to someone like Don Hearn, no one is safe now...."

One superintendent, insisting on anonymity as did all contributors to this project, epitomized the anxiety spreading like the plague among the older generation of the profession in reference to the recent dismissal of Don Hearn. Hearn is an icon among nationally recognized superintendents, but his release from Weston Golf Club proves even icons can fall out of favor. "If it can happen to someone like Don Hearn, no one is safe now," was the dramatic conclusion.

Part of the dilemma defies logic, because most of the dismissals aren't related to performance. Those with the power to discharge a superintendent at a moment's notice equate the act with the job life expectancy of the times. It almost has become sport for people to change jobs four, five, or six times in a lifetime and that kind of mentality underlines the precarious position of superintendents who have earned a form of permanence at their club or course.

Are they becoming an endangered species?

"I foresee the end of retirement from a long-serving position," warned another superintendent who is closing in on the magic cutoff number of 25 years at one club. "Eventually, most of us with a lot of time served on one job will be pushed out. Oh, there'll probably be opportunity to resign so that your resume still looks squeaky clean. However, in reality, it'll be nothing but a put-on."

The squeeze on veteran superintendents often begins as a matter of personality preference by those in charge. "It's happened more than once," a disgusted superintendent noted. "Two or three people on the board don't like you and the next thing you know, you're gone. It's like you have to be perfect. You have to have a personality that bubbles all the time.

"I think if I could, I'd find a public relations course I could take over and over again. That's what you have to be on the job now ... a public relations expert with yourself as your only client. Which means you have to know how to throw the bull and butter up people. That's not what this profession was all about when I started. And it wasn't that long ago."

How about the superintendent who slips up on the course, perhaps presents playing grounds that don't live up to expectations? Does he have a chance to make amends in time to avoid the stroke of the dispatcher's ax? Or does he just

(Continued on page 3)

In this issue.....

- *Avoid Training Mistakes*
- *2001 Committee Chairman*
- *Making Reviews Valuable*



President's Message.....

Recently, a survey was sent to all qualified PTGA/GCSAA class A & B voting members concerning a PDI issue that was voted on at the GCSAA Convention last week in Dallas. The survey was sent with simple directions and even a self addressed stamped envelope.

With 60 surveys going out, returns were about 50%!! Of the 50% received three were disqualified for not being completed properly. Bringing our response percentage to less than 45%!!

This specific PDI issue passed on a national level at 77%. Whereas, with the association, our survey responses reflected a split up the middle.

In an effort to best represent PTGA, I would hope that when surveys are sent, every respondent would please take some time to let us know how they feel. It is important to the Board of Directors and myself that we hear from as many of the members as possible. Getting a large return back from any survey will help us represent this Association better in the future.

I feel that surveys are a valuable means of communication, and we will continue to survey the membership on various topics. I hope that in the future, we as members care more to share our opinions and take a more involved position in our association.

Gene Huelster



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From the Editor's Desk.....

As the winter winds down, we all look forward to a new season. Along with a new season comes spring and new life. I just returned from Dallas and am ready to start getting back out on the golf course to implement the new and improved strategies that were under review all winter, along with some brought to my attention while at the GCSAA Conference and Show. Just a couple thoughts on Dallas; It was another outstanding effort from GCSAA, the Board and staff to organize an event we all can be proud of. However the city of Dallas was not real conducive to the convention business. Don't get me wrong; Dallas, Texas, is a great city. I just believe the convention in Orlando or New Orleans spoils us. Plus, 6 out of 7 rainy days did not help.

On the thought of new and refreshing, I'd like to thank the people who have contacted me recently to help out with *Chips & Putts*. As everyone knows, I do need a lot of help and input. Also, for the people who have not helped, your phone may ring one day. It will be me asking for assistance. As we've always stated "This Association is here for the membership," and will remain that way. It would be a pleasure to hear from you before I have to call.

As stated in previous editions *Chips & Putts* went through some off-season revamping of its own. Starting with the February/March edition, the committee, including myself, are dedicated to bringing you a quality publication which will include: timely delivery, new concepts/old concepts, non-turf related articles, original material and thought provoking information that we all can use. If you have something that you believe is newsworthy, pass it along to one of the committee members listed below or to me.

Ron Garrison; CGCS, Fox Hill C.C. Jeff Koch, Glenmaura National G.C.
Eric Reed, Valley C.C. Jim MacLaren, Simplot Partners

As always your comments are welcome, see you at the winter/spring meetings & seminars and thank you for reading!!

Darrin Batsky



(Continued from page 1)

pack his bags and wait to get the official word?

"That's easy to answer," another voice is heard. "What we have now are the second and third generations of members taking over for the original people or the ones who hired us. They're all experts, at least they think they are. With them, one mistake, however small, and you're out.

"It seems I've hit the one definitive chord in the problem. The people who were in charge, say 30 years ago, are either gone to their final reward or too detached from the mainstream of the club to make a difference in personnel matters. To them, you're either history or about to become history."

The new kids on the governing block, so to speak, appear hard to please. They feel no sense of loyalty when it comes to assessing the worth and future of a superintendent who might have been on the job even before they were born.

"I worry about my situation," another member of the 25-year club offered. "I'm worried because I'm in the dark about my bosses. I don't know what they want from me, and I'm not sure they even know themselves. Even perfection isn't that good if they are thinking of making a change. Right now I know my job's in jeopardy but I can't tell you why."

Another superintendent, visibly upset over the outbreak of dismissals of colleagues in his age and experience bracket, has two views on the situation.

"I think the people now in charge at clubs and courses are products of a microwave society," he explained. "They're only interested in instant results. If you have a project that was scheduled to be completed tomorrow, they insist it be done yesterday. So, they have unrealistic expectations and make unrealistic demands. How do you deal with that kind of mentality?

"In line with that, those same people want to do business with employees closer to their age and perspective. So, they zero in on the young golf course superintendent to do the job. In turn, the young superintendents are hanging around like leeches ready to cling to any opportunity to advance their careers. Personally, I'm convinced they couldn't feel better about what's happening.

Wow! It sounds as if a battle of age-based groups is about to break out in the profession, especially in New England, where older superintendents are being pink-slipped out of their workplaces with frightening regularity. Is that attitude, the proposal labeling young superintendents as insensitive bloodsuckers, for real, or just a wild accusation?

This project dipped into the ranks of superintendents waiting for the chance to take a giant step forward in their careers. There was a voice in the group that didn't mind being heard. Fittingly, it is also a candid voice, one laced with sincerity.

"I can't deny that a lot of movement in the profession is good for the young guys in it. Guys like me," an admittedly ambitious sprout sized up the situation. "And I am one of those people with my ear to the wind, looking for something better. But I should point out that we don't control the job market. We're not vultures. Older superintendents aren't losing their jobs because of us.

"In fact, while we're excited about the opportunities surfacing, we're also concerned about superintendents being let go, fired is the

(Continued on page 4)



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(Continued from page 3)

word, without valid reason or just because they were born on or before a certain date. In every development there's a right and wrong component. Many of the firings are not right. Then, too, we know that down the road the same thing could happen to us. We are the patriarchs of tomorrow. So, no, we're not cheering for the bad guys in this one."

The faction clash, or possible infighting of superintendents according to age group, brought another interesting reaction from the aforementioned young Turk.

"Generally, I think there is good rapport between the two age groups, if you want to break it down that way," he proposed. "But it's only natural that you feel more comfortable with people your own age. We, the young guys, usually sit together at meetings, but why not? We speak the same language. We have similar interests."

"That doesn't mean one side of the room is made up of superintendents 35 years or younger and the other loaded with those over 35. I have friends in both age groups. I also respect experience, accomplishment, intelligence, and whatever goes into the making on an established superintendent. It's just like life. For example, you aren't invited when there's a party thrown by young people in your neighborhood, are you?"

Hmmm. I really don't know. I'd better check my mailbox around New Year's Eve (my birthday, by the way).

Another victim of this scourge that looks upon elder employees as easy prey is the superintendent who moves up to a management position and takes heat for more responsibilities than he signed on for.

"I wish I'd never taken that big step up, intoned our man who had spent 30 years on the same course. He contemplated a lawsuit when he was terminated. "I don't know why I did it. I was very happy just concentrating on grooming the golf course. Then one day, out of the blue, they said, 'Here's your walking papers. What a jolt! The big boss even sent someone else to do his dirty work.

"I hired a lawyer to pursue a lawsuit. The only thing to come out of that was a curt rejoinder from my former employer. It said they were eliminating my position. When my lawyer said the suit would be endless and very expensive, I had no choice but to drop it and try to redirect my life. I'm 56 years old. That's a dubious age when you're looking for a job."

There is another side to rejection of the superintendent who sees the handwriting on the wall and decides not to renew his contract. He is a reluctant defector, though. In many cases, being in one place 25 years constitutes a career in itself. Yet, he throws his possibilities on a risk-versus-reward scale and decides his future at that one place is doomed.

"Yes, I could have stayed," he disclosed. "But my concern was the long-term developments waiting at the end of another contract. Right now, people who run golf courses are looked on as a disposable breed and my fear was that I'd be too old to be thrown to the wolves three or four

years down the road.

"Strange, I think we (superintendents) are our own worst enemies. We've turned the business of conditioning a golf course into an art, a science. We've reached a point where our employees think, 'anybody can do it. It follows that they decide it's easy to replace us and get the same results. We're turning out too many good people. The marketplace is overpopulated with them. It could be our demise."

Now, there's a switch. The superintendents too good for their own good? Amazing?

Finally, here is a view through the eyes and proven perspective of the golf course superintendent who made it to retirement from his last base of operations. He had spent 36 years there. His retirement, breaking away from the profession, was a pleasant experience. Yet, he is not without cutting observations of the present state of affairs.

"Getting the ax goes with any kind of work you're doing," he opened his diatribe. "We're living in an age of young hotshots who talk about things like being stressed out and change jobs simply for a change of scenery. The sad part of their involvement in golf is that they're the ones running the country clubs and courses. Some of them are into double figures in the matter of changing jobs. That's the situation the superintendent has to deal with.

"Lifestyles are different today. The older superintendent has to adjust to it or he becomes a casualty. He has to know who his enemies are and win them over to his side. That's a communications situation. They can't sit back and let the 'yuppies' make the first move. If they do, the first time an issue is raised they'll get the zing. I guess what I'm trying to say is you comply or you're cut out of the action."

So, from all the sounds heard here, there isn't one single indisputable solution to the long-term golf course superintendents' dilemma, as one by one, they continue to walk the plank. And, horror of horrors, if they are too good for their own good, as suggested by one of their own, maybe they're painting themselves out of golf's big picture.

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Avoid These Training Mistakes

In their eagerness to show support for the team concept, management often spends substantial time and money on training. Unfortunately, training dollars and opportunities are often ultimately wasted because leaders make the following mistakes:

Failing to assess team needs. Are you teaching people skills they already have? Many managers think, "Even if they know this stuff, it won't hurt them to get a refresher." *Wrong.* Team members don't need training just for the sake of training. *Solution:* Before launching a training program, conduct a needs assessment. Establish an extensive list of team members' current skills. Then you'll discover what they already know and what they need (and want) to learn.

Thinking that training sessions will eliminate conflict. While team training should help people learn to get along, too often training sessions overemphasize teamwork rather than team effectiveness. All team efforts must be task and relationship oriented. When team training sessions concentrate too much on relationship building, many members won't take them seriously (or worse, they'll see them as glorified brainwashing sessions aimed at eliminating complaints). *Solution:* Make sure members know conflict is an important part of the team process. Without it, the result is mediocrity, because the opposite of conflict is apathy, not peace and harmony.

Treating team building as a program rather than a process. Teams are sometimes sent to a two-, three-, or even five-day training program, and the organization expects years of habit to be changed forever. Research shows that shorter sessions, spread across time, result in more long-term retention of learning than massed practices do. *Solution:* For training to work, insights gained must quickly be translated into actions -- actions that are reinforced by the team leader. Real development is never completed.

Tools For Team Excellence, Gregory E. Huszczo. Davies-Black Publishing, 3803 E. Bayshore Rd., Palo Alto, CA 94303.

Making Reviews Valuable



Use the following tips to add value to your team members' performance reviews:

1. Schedule regular "mini-reviews" throughout the year.

A mini-review should be exactly like it sounds quick and to the point. It can take fewer than five minutes. Keep good notes so you'll be prepared for more formal reviews.

2. Don't schedule raises at the same time as evaluations.

Or, make sure that if you give an above-average review, you give an above-average raise. Team leaders tend to say only *good* things about a team member, then give what's perceived as an *average* raise. This sends inconsistent messages and leaves the team member feeling slighted.

3. Avoid the terms "average" and "satisfactory" — they've got negative connotations.

Better: Use phrases such as "fully meets the job requirements with work of good quality." This accurately defines the member's performance.

4. Set clear performance standards.

Keep these questions in mind:

- ✓ Does the team member agree with me on the wording and meaning of each standard?
- ✓ Are the standards specific so nothing is left to interpretation?
- ✓ Are they realistic and attainable?
- ✓ Will each of us know when a standard is met?

Managing People, Bob Adams et al. Adams Media Corporation, 260 Center St., Holbrook, MA 02343.



2001 PTGA Committee Chairman

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All committees are looking for volunteers. Please contact the respective chairman if you would like to participate on a PTGA committee for 2001!

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A message from your golf course superintendent and GCSAA



Seminar

The Lake Wallenpaupack Watershed Management District and F. X. Browne, Inc. are presenting a seminar on Environmentally Sustainable Golf Course Management on April 18, 2001 at Woodloch Springs in Hawley. This seminar is geared toward golf course superintendents and managers in the Lake Wallenpaupack watershed and surrounding area. It is GCSAA sponsored, and you will be able to earn 0.35 points towards re-certification. The cost is \$12.00, which includes continental breakfast and lunch. The seminar is followed by a round of golf at Woodloch Springs Golf Club in the afternoon. If you are interested in attending this seminar and would like more information, please contact Rebecca L. Buerkett at F. X. Browne, Inc., telephone number 518-891-1410 or you can e-mail her at rbuerkett@fxbrowne.com.

Reminder

The 2001 PTGA Dues invoices have been mailed out. Deadline for returns is April 1, 2001. If for some reason you have not received your invoice, please call Melinda at 570-388-2167 and let her know. She will send one out to you. Don't wait until the last minute – get your check out today!



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POCONO ROUNDUP

NEWS AND VIEWS FROM THE POCONO
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In Sympathy

Our sympathy goes out to Aaron Kramer, Windsor Heights G. C. His mother was killed in an automobile accident January 25.

Paul Weiss's lovely wife, Jean, fell and broke her shoulder. We hope she has a quick recovery.

REMINDER

Pocono Turfgrass Association meeting in conjunction with
Simplot Partners 2001 Customer Meeting
Thursday, March 8, 2001
Split Rock Lodge

Things Learned in Dallas, Texas, at the GCSAA Convention:

When you hear:

The engine's runnin', but
ain't nobody driving.

As welcome as a skunk at
a lawn party.

Tighter than the bark on
a tree.

Big hat, no cattle.

We've howdied, but
ain't shook.

He thinks the sun comes
up just to hear him crow.

She got a tongue for 10
rows of teeth.

It really means:

Not too smart!

Self explanatory

Cheap!

All show, no go.

Haven't been introduced
yet.

He likes himself too
much!

She can talk.



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