

The Mission of Today's Superintendent



Perhaps it would be easier to answer the question "What doesn't a golf course superintendent do?"

The profession of golf course superintendent is constantly evolving and today's superintendents are facing more challenges than ever before. While golf as a game has roots back to the early 1400's, "the greenkeeper" did not arrive on the scene until sometime later when greens became part of the game and special attention was paid to those areas. In the beginning, the task of greenkeeping was often blended with all other associated jobs. Old Tom Morris of St Andrews filled the jobs of greenkeeper, club maker, ball maker and found time in between to win four British opens!

The 21st century superintendents find themselves having to master many skills to survive. Simply put, the ultimate mission of a superintendent is pristine playing conditions and an absolutely beautiful environment in which to play. However, as with most things in life, achieving those goals is often the result of a balance of many variables.

Environmental Stewardship

Today's Superintendents are acutely aware of their responsibility towards the environment. A positive spin off of the attention that the agricultural/horticultural community has received in the media regarding pesticide use and other contaminants (gas, oil, paint, etc...) has been the ever-increasing skill that superintendents are showing in this area. Superintendents are proud of their accomplishments towards making the golf industry a sustainable form of horticulture that can co-exist with nature.

Financial management

Throughout North-America operational budgets have been steadily increasing. This often requires that superintendents manage the distribution of large sums of money. Superintendents have to be purchasing agents as well as budget managers to ensure that their companies stay competitive. While the final financial decisions often rest in the hands of others in the company (Managers, Board of directors, Owners...) the recommendations of the superintendent are taken highly in regard.

Public Relations

Superintendents are regularly in contact with the public and as such must possess skills in the area of communications. Superintendents must always present a positive image for their club and be able to respond to public questions and concerns at any time both inside and outside of work. However Superintendent's are wise enough to defer any concerns to which they do not have the answers to the proper individuals. In short superintendents are representatives for their clubs at all times.

Personnel management

Accurate staffing is just as important in the golf industry as it in any other industry. Superintendents are committed to equal opportunity employment, respect of the individual and ensuring that all tasks are completed in a professional and timely fashion throughout the year.

Materials management

Golf courses use on average many hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of materials per year. Many of this is consumable in that it is an annual expense to maintain an optimum condition of the course and much of the rest could be considered capital expenses that add value to the course. Thus Superintendents are forced to have a very good knowledge of the materials that they work with, be it sand, stone, soil, wood, machinery or anything else from fertilizer to plant materials to paper cups at the water coolers. Proper purchasing requires familiarity with of a vast array of products.

Agronomic expertise

Inarguably the top requirement of a superintendent is agronomic expertise. Knowledge of soils, diseases, insects, weeds as well as all grass species in use (not to mention secondary plants i.e. trees, shrubs, annuals, perennials...) is absolutely essential. Everyday of the week superintendents are faced with making decisions that could literally make or break a company.

"Greenkeeping"

Even with all of the aforementioned talents, great superintendents still need one more - greenkeeping. Greenkeeping is a difficult skill to explain and it is truly more of an art than a technical ability. To truly understand it, one usually has to have spent a fair part of their lives on a golf course at 6:00 am with nothing but the sounds of birds, small animals and the light humming of mowers in the background. Greenkeeping is knowing when "just a little more topdress" will be perfect. It's knowing that they are as green as they are going to get and "not to push any harder". It's knowing immediately when walking out of your home in the morning that "today we're going to have trouble" just by the humidity and the smell of the air. It's knowing "the perfect cup change" when you see it. It is the compilation of many skills that are only learned from the lessons of those who came before and our own experience. It's knowing instinctively that there is something wrong just by the look and the feel of the plant and it is knowing the terrible feeling of watching your turf fail. And truth be known, it's what keeps most superintendents in the business. It's the adrenaline rush that accompanies the first cut of the year and the smell that it brings.

The Superintendent is an integral part of the heart of any golf course and the pride that they feel in accomplishing their mission is one of the best assurances of success that any club could ever have.