

# Profiles of Professional Golf Course Superintendents

*There's more than one way to build a successful career!*

by PATRICK M. O'BRIEN

**W**HAT TYPE of training does it take today to become a successful golf course superintendent? Many people believe that to become a great golf course superintendent requires plenty of luck or favorable politics. After almost 20 years of consulting with superintendents, I have found there is no single blueprint. Every individual is different, and there are many ways to acquire the skills needed to become a successful superintendent.

The purpose of this article is to provide several models for the most popular career paths superintendents have followed. By describing the backgrounds of several successful superintendents, it is my hope that the next generation can gain some insight about how to shape their careers. Also, advice from these professionals regarding their secrets for success will be offered.

## Model #1: A Man of Tradition

Being a caddie and working on the golf course maintenance staff can provide a young person with many opportunities. Bill Anderson is living proof. Bill was awarded the prestigious Evans Caddie Scholarship sponsored by the Western Golf Association as a result of caddying at Point O' Woods at Benton Harbor, Michigan. "Caddying was the only job I qualified for when I was 14



Bill Anderson

years old," says Bill. Bill used the Evans Scholarship to attend Michigan State University, where he earned a BS Degree in Crop Science under noted turfgrass Professors James Beard, Paul Rieke, and Joe Vargas.

"Once I could drive, I began working on the maintenance staff for Norm Kramer," recalled Bill. Norm was President of the GCSAA and one of the most respected superintendents in Michigan. Based on Norm Kramer's example, Bill knew he wanted to become a successful superintendent, too.

After graduating from Michigan State, Bill went to work for John Moreland at Carmel Country Club, Charlotte, N.C. After two years as an assistant, Bill accepted the superintendent position after John retired. Bill's been on the job for 25 years now. Bill is a blueprint for today's traditional superintendent profile.

## Model #2: The Old-Fashioned Way

You don't always need a college degree to reach the top of your profession. Bill Womac is an example of success obtained by hard work and commitment to self-development. Bill grew up on a dairy farm in Athens, Tennessee, and learned at an early age how to work the soil and operate and maintain machinery. Normal working hours were sunup to sundown. Bill went to school in the same building for 13 years and "never missed a day of school."

After graduating from high school, Bill worked for General Motors in Atlanta, but after only three days a car model change forced Bill to be laid off temporarily. Bill needed another job. The landlord of the apartment building where Bill was living suggested Bill ask another tenant, who was building a golf course, for a job. The construction superintendent hired Bill to pick up rocks and later drive a tractor. "I liked outside work and I needed the money," said Bill.



Bill Womac

Each summer during model changes, Bill would return to golf course work. After the third summer, Bill was offered an assistant position at Atlanta Country Club, working for George Burgin, who became Bill's mentor. Bill accepted his first superintendent position at Chestuee Country Club, in his home town, after only one season as an assistant. "George said I could handle the job, so I took it," recalls Bill. After three years, Bill returned to Atlanta and accepted the superintendent position at Dunwoody Country Club, where he has remained for the last 25 years. "I have no regrets about the path my career has taken. If I could do it again, I would do it the same way. All I wanted was a chance, just one chance to show I could manage a course." In many ways, Bill found out later in life that his family farm experience helped him with his career. Most importantly, he used his work ethic to master the latest techniques, participate actively in the superintendents association, and develop professional relationships with course officials and committees.

## Model #3: Changing Lifestyles

Randy Mangum grew up in a house located on a nine-hole course in Anniston, Alabama. A typical summer day included picking up range balls, washing golf carts, and even playing



Randy Mangum

golf with his brothers and parents. Randy later worked on the maintenance staff, helping with the irrigation and driving a tractor. However, working on a golf course was really only a matter of convenience while growing up, and after high school Randy got a job with a construction company and studied welding at a technical school in the evenings.

Randy's older brother Ken was a golf course superintendent. Randy often visited Ken, and after 12 years of construction realized that he didn't want to stay in this business for a lifetime. During those years, Randy and Ken kept talking and thinking how it would be great to be in the same industry. At age 30, it was time to either make the change or stop thinking about it. With a wife and two children, Randy quit his construction job and went to Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC) on a partial scholarship from the Georgia State Golf Association. His family lived off the profits from the sale of their home for the next two years. In the summer months, Randy worked as an intern for his brother Ken at the Atlanta Athletic Club.

Upon graduating with his turf management degree from ABAC, Randy sent out resumes and was hired as the second assistant of the Riverside Course at the Atlanta Athletic Club. After three years as an assistant, Randy was promoted to superintendent at the Riverside Course. "I finally reached my goal of becoming a superintendent," recalled Randy. "I credit my wife for being so understanding during my career change, and my brother Ken for helping me to get started in the business." Randy now is the superintendent at Stonebridge Golf Course in Rome, Georgia. He has shown it is possible to switch careers and become a successful superintendent.

#### Model #4: A Family Affair

The Maples family tree has its roots in the golf business all the way back to Old Tom Morris through Donald Ross. It would seem only natural that Palmer Maples, Jr., whose father was golf professional and superintendent at Benvenue Country Club, Rocky Mount, North Carolina, would also enter the business. While growing up, Palmer helped his dad on the golf course daily and admired his lifestyle.

After high school, Palmer attended Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC), where he completed a two-year degree in turf management. During the summer months, Palmer assisted Dr. Glenn Burton with his bermudagrass research plots. Palmer sharpened the mowers, mowed, top-dressed, and overseeded the plots. Tifgreen bermudagrass was released from this plot work. After ABAC, Palmer was drafted into the Army and later graduated from the University of Georgia with a B.S. degree in agronomy.



Palmer Maples

While finishing his college degree at the University of Georgia, Palmer helped the Charlotte Country Club convert its putting greens to Tifgreen bermudagrass. After graduation, Palmer returned to Charlotte as assistant and was later promoted to superintendent in 1959. This was the beginning of Palmer's 38-year career as a golf course superintendent. "My goal every day was to set up the course so the golfers could play by the Rules of Golf," said Palmer. "I've had a beautiful career as a superintendent. I couldn't have scripted it any better." Palmer is a blueprint for the man born to be a superintendent.

#### Tips for Success from the Pros

Golf course maintenance is a big business today. A successful golf course superintendent must possess much more than just technical ability. He or she must be an agronomist, financial and personnel manager, and much more. The superintendents profiled in this article have experienced firsthand the challenges a superintendent faces each day and have shared a few tips to help others stay on the road to success.

1. *Work for a superintendent who is as good a manager of people as he is of turf — someone who could be a mentor.* Mentors are needed to teach new people in the industry the integrity and the tradition of the game and the cooperative spirit that exists among many superintendents. It is the sharing of information and the willingness to rely on each other that makes the industry so strong and a pleasure to work in. Many turf managers have regretted not spending enough time working as an assistant to an excellent superintendent prior to taking a job as a superintendent. Working for successful superintendents who take an interest in your development will benefit you for the rest of your career.

2. *Work as an assistant superintendent before putting your job career on the line as a golf superintendent.* There is much more to becoming a successful superintendent than knowing how to manage the turf. As an assistant, you will be able to observe how a superintendent works through the challenges of managing a crew, dealing with a Green Committee, and working with representatives who market turf-care products. Most assistant superintendents improve their technical knowledge of the job and are given more responsibility for decision making as their tenure at the course increases. Avoid the temptation to jump at the first job offer. You and the superintendent should be able to evaluate whether you are ready for the challenges of being a superintendent.

3. *Understand club politics. It is essential to understand that the individuals monitoring the golf course maintenance program come from varied backgrounds.* At most private courses, the Board of Directors and Green Committee change frequently — sometimes annually. At municipal and privately owned facilities, a more stable environment usually exists. Successful superintendents get to know their new Green Chairman and gain a perspec-



*A successful superintendent develops and hires good talent for the staff. One way to keep the staff up to date is to let them participate in educational opportunities. Occasionally, superintendents will ask the USGA agronomist to meet with the maintenance staff during Turf Advisory Service visits to answer questions and talk about course conditions.*

tive of that person's goals. The superintendent takes the initiative to develop a good relationship and understands the Chairman's expectations. There may be times when you just can't get along, but the successful superintendent knows how to be flexible, outlasting this individual's term without making an enemy.

**4. Develop and hire good talent for your staff.** With the demands on today's superintendents being what they are, it is essential to hire talented individuals for the maintenance staff. Irrigation and spray technicians, first and second assistants, mechanics, horticulturists, special project foremen, secretaries, and support staff are vital for success today. It is impossible to do it all by yourself.

**5. Avoid taking risks that could cause a major disaster.** Everyone has seen this in the business. A superin-

tendent will mix a "witch's brew" of products and apply these to the greens. Why do it? Even if it works out perfectly, what benefit could equal that risk just taken? With today's high golfer expectations, unacceptable turf conditions at even one green are not tolerable.

**6. Keep golfers informed.** Newsletters are an excellent communication tool to keep members informed about golf course projects and routine operations. Provide tentative dates for aerification and other disruptive practices, and avoid saying a project will be done by a specific date. If a date must be used, be sure to emphasize the unpredictability of working with nature and that such dates represent only a best estimate. Report information and avoid promises.

**7. Develop a budget.** It is imperative that the superintendent is in-

involved with the development of the course operational budget. Avoid having the course owner or Board of Directors be the ones in charge of developing the budget, but seek their input. Always seek guidance and work with the General Manager on this important task. Regardless of the size of the budget, the superintendent determines how the funds are spent, based upon maintenance objectives.

**8. Take on as much responsibility as you can handle.** Additional responsibility helps both politically and financially. This may require hiring more staff, but you will benefit in the long run. With the swimming pools, clubhouse grounds, golf carts, and tennis courts at most golf facilities today, many opportunities are available to expand your areas of responsibility. If the clubhouse grounds look either good or bad with upkeep by a con-

tractor, there is no sign to let the membership know who gets the credit. It is not easy accepting more responsibility, but it can mean higher salaries and the perception of a more valuable employee.

**9. Dress like a manager.** It is important to dress appropriately when attending professional seminars and conferences. In most instances, when on the golf course, dress as a golfer. Obviously, you have to get dirty on the job from time to time, but always have a change of clothes for the expected or unexpected meeting at the clubhouse with the Green Committee or general manager.

**10. Avoid challenging the members.** If a scheduling mistake happens, minimize the impact by accepting responsibility or resolving the problem. For example, a superintendent could be correct with the agronomic benefits of fairway aeration, but if it is performed before the club championship, problems can arise. Instead, try to schedule the aerification at another time and do not jeopardize your image with the golfers at the club. It could take years to overcome this mistake. Both the golf professional and superintendent need to work together on a compromise between the golf calendar and maintenance schedules, especially at courses that are open daily.

**11. Find the proper balance between the needs of the turf and the needs of the golfers.** To provide golfers with the high-quality playing surfaces they desire and deserve, occasionally they will have to yield to vital maintenance practices. For example, wilting putting greens on a hot afternoon need to be tended to, and course workers must have the chance to apply the needed water. Although every effort must be made to minimize disruptions during play, they cannot be avoided completely. Newsletters, posters, and taking time to visit with golfers on the course provide excellent opportunities for education and increased golfer understanding of maintenance needs.

**12. Maintain a professional relationship with the members.** It is important to know the club members or golfers, but the goal should not be to become best friends with them. At the same time, a superintendent should not consider himself a second-class citizen. Experience will enable you to determine when to be sociable with the members. Superintendents should be made welcome at the clubhouse, teeing it up occasionally with members or

course officials, and representing the club at area and membership events. Active participation in community affairs is an excellent means of demonstrating that you have much to offer in addition to knowing a lot about golf course maintenance.

**13. Play the golf course.** Make the time to play the golf course. After all, you and your staff have the greatest influence on the game, and you must know how your agronomic programs are affecting play. You will be in a much better position to respond to questions about the playability of the course if you play regularly. Do not displace a member during heavy play times, and stay on the alternate list for club events, always giving members preference. It also is important to study the Rules and traditions of the game.

**14. Attend turf conferences, USGA Green Section Conferences, and annual training workshops.** Never stop learning and asking questions. Most clubs will encourage and pay for their superintendent's continuing education. Know your limitations,

and see where you need additional training. Education is a lifelong process. Become involved with the GCSAA and the local superintendents' organizations.

**15. Do not spend too many hours at the golf course.** When the job demands the time, be there! Most golf course operations are run from 7:00 AM to 4:30 PM. What is a superintendent doing who stays until 8:00 PM each evening? Is this person doing jobs that didn't get done in the day, or is it job insecurity? In many instances, better scheduling can avoid this work overload, as can adding more staff or supervisors. Courses with lower budgets need to set limits on expectations if these solutions aren't possible. Avoid staying late unless something has to get done. Nobody but the superintendent himself can make his job pleasurable. It is not the responsibility of the Board of Directors or Green Committee to ensure your happiness. Be sure to make time for your family and other activities to help ensure you continue to like your work.



Do your homework so you're prepared for potential questions from the golfers. This preparation includes studying the Rules of Golf and the traditions of the game.



*Student interns gain valuable experience working on the golf course crew. Working for a successful superintendent can provide a rewarding experience.*

**16. Accept constructive criticism.** No one likes criticism, but it can happen even at courses with excellent playing conditions. Criticism can come from just about anyone, including employees, golfers, employer, or spouse. Politicians are the best at never seeming to take criticism personally. Superintendents need to have the same philosophy. One golfer complaining about the “fluffy” bunker sand may become very irritating, but it is the bunker sand and not you that is the source of the irritation. Superintendents need to separate the complaint from the complainer, leave personal feelings back at their desk, and evaluate the validity of the complaint.

**17. Pay attention to small details.** Many superintendents spend the majority of their time dealing with large issues, and in the process overlook the importance of the little details. Everybody sees the big picture, but the little details seem to multiply. Move the big rock and thousands of small rocks appear! It has been said many times by golf course architects that a golf course is judged 80% on its visual appearance. How does a golf course look to the golfer each day? One noted superintendent always rides the golf course regularly with his wife, who has a keen eye for small details.

**18. Remember that there are members at most clubs who do not play golf.** Many clubs have social memberships for non-golfers. Find ways to contribute to these members' enjoyment of the club, such as the care of the clubhouse grounds, the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program, fire-

wood, home-lawn articles in the newsletter, tree planting programs, jogging paths, etc.

**19. Be a leader and a manager with the maintenance staff.** Provide leadership for these employees based on ethical, moral, and professional goals, not through threats, berating, or badgering. Maintain a supervisory position with your employees. You can be their friend, but not their buddy. Make sure you communicate one on one with employees and not just through memos. Always seek to raise the standards of the employees by your own daily activities, such as being on time. Strive to have patience with employees, even after mistakes, such as mowing down your recent wildflower planting. Respect your employees, their differences, and their pursuit of happiness.

Your staff usually can sense attitude changes. If you slow down, it provides your employees the same opportunity, and problems will occur during the golf season. When this happens, take time to devise a plan. By taking charge with a plan and priorities, a successful superintendent will get the ship back on course. Most employees want someone to provide direction, especially during tougher times.

**20. Learn effective maintenance scheduling.** As much as possible, avoid scheduling maintenance work when it could interfere with play. Scheduling maintenance around play will avoid disrupting golfers and will allow employees to work more efficiently. Most superintendents know how long it takes to complete the various tasks

on the course. Always know where the employees are, and set time limits for completion of daily chores to enhance productivity. Always say bunkers will be raked by 10:00 AM and not “let’s rake the bunkers today.”

**21. Take advantage of the latest technology.** Technology can make your job easier and help produce a higher-quality result. Always strive to raise the club standards daily.

**22. Build your resume to ensure your value because the superintendent field is so competitive today.** Choose turf schools very carefully, and work with experienced superintendents. A strong educational background is a current market trend. Today more than 88% of all superintendents have some sort of formal college training, and 67% have completed a two- or four-year degree program. A good education that includes training in business and environmental science is going to become increasingly helpful to remain competitive. Be sure to document regular participation in educational programs for your resume.

**23. Hire other professional talent for assistance with projects or problems.** During a renovation, a successful project is the result of a team effort between the superintendent, builder, golf course architect, and club leadership. For new landscaping, hire a landscaper to help with the design. Hire arborists to assist with long-range tree-care plans. Consult with the USGA agronomist annually to find out the latest information about turfgrass management, new products, and trends. The USGA Green Section also can help a superintendent assemble the ideal team of experts and materials for new courses and renovations with the new Construction Education Program.

## Conclusion

Being a golf course superintendent is a great career today. The job is very rewarding and requires many skills to master. There are many different career pathways to become a golf superintendent, and successful superintendents can come down any road. Overall, the successful superintendents work smart and always seeks better ideas and methods to make themselves and their jobs even more successful.

---

PATRICK O'BRIEN is director of the USGA Green Section's Southeastern Region, visiting golf courses throughout his six-state region. His USGA Green Section career began in 1979.