

# “Once You Get ’em, You Gotta Keep ’em”

*Obtaining and then keeping labor to the end of the season can be challenging.*

by DAVID A. OATIS

FOR THE PAST several years, the economy has been strong and golf has enjoyed a terrific boom. Lots of new courses have been built and many more are on the drawing board. Our existing courses are enjoying increased popularity, too, and money in the form of capital improvement programs is flowing into our courses at an unprecedented pace. Renovation and maintenance budgets have increased across the board, and many courses are finding themselves in the enviable position of being able to tackle expensive improvement projects that once were thought impossible. Life is good in the game of golf, and for those in the business this has been a very interesting period. It would seem that there could be little to complain about during this golf boom.

Despite these obvious positives, I still hear golfers and course superintendents occasionally complain. Golfer complaints don't seem to vary much over the years, and perhaps the same can be said of superintendents. Unquestionably, the single most common complaint in recent years has been

labor, or rather the lack or quality of it. The story is the same at just about every course I visit: no one seems to have enough labor, and everyone is having difficulty keeping good staff. In fact, this problem is also affecting many other industries, and laborers can now afford to pick and choose among various employment opportunities. This year's Turf Tip may help you solve part of that problem.

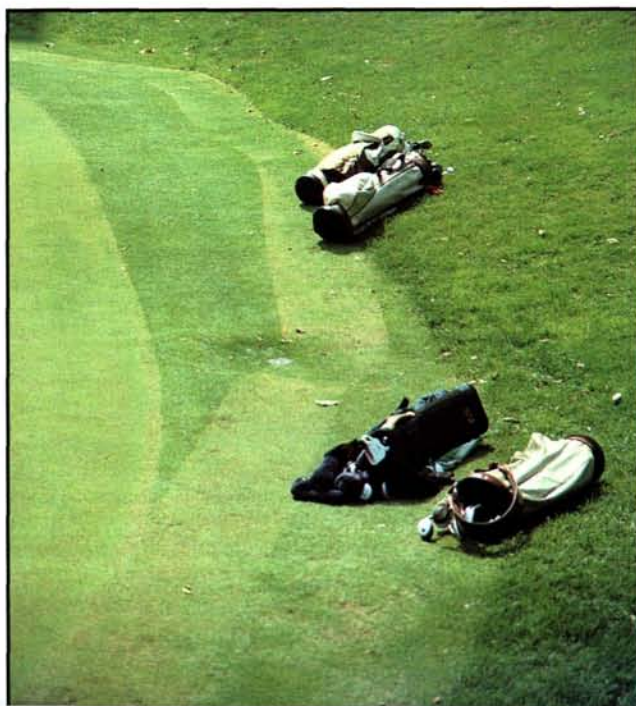
It comes from Chris Boyle of The Mendham Golf and Tennis Club in Mendham, N.J. Student laborers, mostly from college, have long been a valuable labor source for golf course maintenance programs. Once trained, they can provide reasonably cost-effective labor, which can be utilized to accomplish many of the required daily maintenance chores. But indeed it is a dark day, one dreaded by all superintendents and full-time staff members, when the “college kids” head back to school. The abrupt loss of labor often comes when the turf is weak, the workload heavy, and staff energy levels and morale are at seasonal lows. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of their

departure is when the college students leave a week or two before their agreed-upon termination dates. This can completely derail vital renovation programs. But who can blame them? After a summer of long hours and hard work, the prospect of going straight back to school without a vacation isn't very appealing. Thus, it is not surprising that many students decide, at the last minute, to leave a week or two early to cram in some carefree fun.

Superintendent Boyle has a simple and cost-effective method of eliminating, or at least greatly diminishing, this early departure problem. In researching this Turf Tip, I actually found it to be a common practice in some areas of the country, while completely unheard of in others. In fact, Mr. Boyle actually brought this idea to Mendham from another course where he was the assistant superintendent under Ed Walsh, CGCS.

In any event, the solution is to offer a bonus system based on the number of hours worked and the agreed-upon departure date. The course banks a small sum of money per hour worked (25-50 cents or perhaps one dollar should be sufficient) that is payable to the employee as a year-end bonus, *if the employee stays and works to the agreed-upon date*. Students leaving early forfeit the bonus. Assuming a 40-hour week and a total of 13 weeks, this amounts to a bonus of \$130 to \$520 paid in a lump sum, a welcome windfall for most students heading off to college. Chris reports it is usually sufficient to entice students to stay on and complete the terms of their employment agreement. So, if you are having trouble keeping your student labor force, give this idea a try. After all, “once you get ’em, you gotta keep ’em!”

*In the blink of an eye, even the lowliest person on the maintenance staff can bring the best maintenance program to its knees. Keeping an experienced labor staff until the end of the season will be worth the effort.*



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