

What I Didn't Learn in School

Diligent studying in the classroom provided a sound foundation for my career in golf course management, but my B.S. and M.S. degrees never completely prepared me for all the issues and challenges of the profession.

BY JAKE SCHNEIDER

After six-and-a-half years at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, it is hard to imagine any classes that I did not have the opportunity to take in preparation to enter the golf course management industry. In hindsight, wiser decisions when choosing electives might have been made, but thanks to some questionable class selection my knowledge of dinosaurs and gems is greater than it might otherwise be. Yet, there are probably other turf management professionals who have substantially more classroom knowledge than I do of all things pterodactyls or diamonds.

Such is the nature of a profession where so much is learned on the job. Don't get me wrong; I would not trade my formal education for anything, but chances are you know of a highly successful superintendent or assistant superintendent who has no college education or pursued a major totally unrelated to golf course management. Still, despite my bias, I believe the best foundation for a career in this industry is gained through earning a degree in a traditional turf management field.

I recently completed my fourth year as the assistant superintendent at Blackhawk Country Club in Madison, Wisconsin, and there is no doubt that numerous classes in soil science, horticulture, plant pathology, and entomology have helped me to grow better turf. Since entering the real world, I realize the supplemental classes I took in written communication, human resource management, native vegetation/ecology, and accounting are just as important and equally useful as my basic turf science studies. However, I now know that growing grass is only half the battle to achieve success as a golf course supervisor. The classroom never prepared me for the challenge of just keeping turf alive



Agronomy classes helped me understand the importance of a sound aeration and topdressing program for putting greens. However, the classroom never prepared me for the difficult task of convincing golfers that sometimes causing temporary disruption to the putting surfaces is necessary to sustain a healthy, consistent playing surface.

to meet the golfers' need for perfection or the frustration of allocating considerable time and labor to keep non-grass areas of the course, such as bunkers, in pristine condition.

I recall being chosen as the 2004 USGA Green Section intern for the North-Central Region during my first season as a student intern at Blackhawk Country Club. During a week with Bob Vavrek, USGA agronomist, we toured a wide variety of golf courses that included elite upscale layouts as well as economical and fun "mom and pop" type courses — perhaps the kind of course that provided summer employment during high school and the early inspiration for many superin-

tendents to pursue a career in turf management. When my week as a junior agronomist was over, Monroe Miller, former superintendent at Blackhawk Country Club for 36 years, 2004 USGA Green Section Award winner, and current executive director of the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association, asked me to write an article about the experience for *The Grass Roots*, the publication of the Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association.

How could I refuse my boss and editor of *The Grass Roots*? In that article, I wrote, "With a relatively easy summer throughout most of southern Wisconsin, many of the problems that were discussed had nothing to do with



Accounting classes were helpful regarding the basic preparation of a budget for golf course maintenance operations. Never did a class prepare me for the shock of how much of a golf course budget would be spent for maintaining bunkers, deep roughs, woods, and other areas of the course that are meant to be avoided.

agronomic issues or with turfgrass at all. It should come as no surprise to most of you that shrinking budgets and political dealings were frequent topics of conversation.” Sound familiar? Political issues haven’t changed much in the past seven years, but at least agronomy has been a more frequent topic of conversation than it was in 2004, due to the stressful weather of 2010 and 2011. I was fortunate enough to have received an excellent education while pursuing my degrees, but the following are several of the more important things that could not be learned in the classroom.

POLITICS AND COMMUNICATION

No, I’m not talking about Republicans versus Democrats. Trust me, with the election and recall cycles in Wisconsin, that is the last thing that I want to talk about. Rather, I am referring to the politics of dealing with golfing and

non-golfing members, owners, general managers, neighbors, and your employees. Besides duties such as being an agronomist, electrician, mechanic, plumber, arborist, human resource manager, accountant, and landscaper, a successful superintendent must supervise and educate a diverse group of people every day

With rare exceptions, turf managers do not own the properties they maintain, and decisions regarding course conditions are often made by individuals or committees that have little or no agronomic knowledge. It is easy to assume some degree of ownership when spending so much time and effort on 200-plus acres of land. Yet, it is sometimes difficult to remember that it is still their course and not my course. The ultimate goal is to make golfers happy and to sustain healthy turf. This requires educating decision makers so they can make sound decisions or to the point where they

allow us to manage the course without interference. The difficulty of this task can increase exponentially when turnover of committee members occurs frequently.

One must be an outstanding communicator to survive course politics. Very few people outside of the turf industry understand exactly what our jobs entail, and even fewer realize the agronomic sacrifices that are often required to produce desirable golf course conditioning. Nonetheless, with accurate and timely communication, these barriers can be broken.

In light of universal access to smart phones and computers, there is really no excuse for your golfers and supervisors to not have timely access to course conditions and maintenance operations that affect play. At Blackhawk C.C., we developed a maintenance blog (view it at <http://blackhawkgrounds.blogspot.com/>). It is updated weekly with information

about activities on the course and in the maintenance facility. No technical jargon, just current information about “what” we are doing as well as “why” and “how.” I am not sure how many of our members read the blog, but I do know that some read it regularly and they pass on some of the information to those who do not. By communicating effectively, you may be able to improve the course in ways that otherwise would not have been possible.

My suspicions are that it would be difficult to learn the dynamics of country club politics in a classroom. Instead, these skills are learned over time through your own experiences and by picking the brains of industry veterans. After all, superintendents who cannot handle the politics and the associated communication demands will rarely survive to become veterans.

Yet, the fundamentals for both oral and written communication skills can be acquired in the classroom. I was so nervous during one of my first college speeches that I was uncontrollably shaking the paper I was holding. There is no doubt that it was embarrassing, but from that point forward I vowed to explore every available opportunity to improve my public speaking. My commitment to improvement paid off, because later, in graduate school, I won the oral presentation competition at the International Crop Science Society meetings. Although I still do not particularly enjoy speaking to large crowds, I no longer convulse while doing so.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH VENDORS

Don't get me wrong, vendors are not an unruly, unlikable group. In fact, the opposite seems to be true, which makes saying “no” to them difficult.

There are a host of honest, dependable suppliers of equipment, plant protectants, etc., and they all want your business. There are so many issues to address. Do we go with agency or off-patent? How many distributors should get our business? Should we bid out each individual product? Should we schedule time for salesmen



My classroom experience could not prepare me for the frustration and helpless feeling of taking the blame for what Mother Nature occasionally does to the golf course. A good example is winter injury to a putting green, especially when cool spring weather hinders the rate of turf recovery.

to visit, even with no intention of buying from them? For the most part, I have yet to come up with a good answer to these questions, but I believe that one should remain open and courteous with all vendors. Just like you, they are trying to make a living.

REGULATIONS 101

Right or wrong, the number of federal, state, and local rules and regulations that affect our golf course increases every year. Between labor laws, required postings, pesticide/fertilizer restrictions, recordkeeping, water-use recordkeeping, restrictions, and building codes, it is an understatement to say there is more documentation necessary than I ever imagined. It was never mentioned in class that silica sand was a reportable hazardous

material, but now I am going to be looking into personal protection equipment (PPE) requirements for topdressing greens.

BALANCING WORK AND HOME

I did not fully appreciate the unpredictable work schedule and long hours that are required to keep the course in peak condition until I became the assistant superintendent. I do not believe that 80-hour work weeks are healthy or productive, but even 50 to 60 hours during the heat of the summer can be incredibly draining. The profession becomes extra demanding when you are held accountable for yourself, the maintenance staff, and Mother Nature, so it is just not easy to leave work.

Coming from college, where you are only worried about balancing partying with getting passing grades, it takes a while to find the ideal balance between time at work and time at home. If not already married, be sure to date someone

while working for at least two summers when putting in long hours at the golf course before getting down on one knee. When my new bride said, “I’ve come to not expect you to be around very much in summer,” I realized that she fully knew what she was getting herself into.

There you have it — several concepts I wish I could have learned in school to succeed in the golf course management industry. Maybe if I go to school for another six-and-a-half years the list might be eliminated, but probably not. It is hard to fit 200-plus acres of turf and everyone associated with it into a classroom.

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