

Paying the Price for Success

An open letter to aspiring turfgrass professionals.

by Jim Simmons,
CGCS

Dear Aspiring Turfgrass Professionals,

My name is Jim Simmons and I have been working on golf courses for almost 40 years. I have been the golf course superintendent at the Shoal Creek Club, in Birmingham, Alabama, since 1977. When I made up my mind to become a golf course superintendent, I had a goal to become the best superintendent in the business at the best course in the country. Throughout my career I have been fortunate to be in the right place at the right time to advance my career, but any success I have achieved has not come without hard work, long hours, and working for demanding employers. I have seen all sides of the business during my career, and I would like to share with you the traits that I believe are necessary to be successful in this business.



Today's students have access to more information, but the competitive nature of the business may mean more years of experience are needed before becoming a golf course superintendent.

A CAREER IS LAUNCHED

I began working on my hometown course in 1966. Two of my friends and I were hired for what would turn out to be the job of a lifetime, at least for a hometown boy.

I enjoyed the work and being on a golf course. My father, who was not known for the art of conversation, made a single comment to me, "Why don't you consider going to turf school?" From that point on, my career began.

I enrolled at Michigan State University in their new two-year turfgrass management program. I was fortunate to be taught by professors such as James Beard, John King, Al Turgeon, Ken Payne, Paul Rieke, and Joe Vargas. Their interest and enthusiasm really motivated many of us in the class, and some of us needed motivating at that age.

My placement training or internship was done under Jack Hart at the NCR Country Club in Kettering, Ohio. The year was 1969 and the club would host the PGA Championship that same year. Student interns were unheard of at that time.

Although Jack Hart was forthcoming with helpful information, many of his assistant superintendents and foremen were skeptical of college students. Most assistants and foremen were not turf educated and in many cases did not finish any formal education. Needless to say, it was difficult to gain the confidence of the assistant superintendents and foremen.

During my internship at NCR, I worked hard and gained valuable insight into the career of a golf course superintendent. Jack Hart told me something as I was leaving that has stayed with me my whole career: "Once you feel you do not have to get down on your hands and knees to evaluate your golf course, you will be thrown out of this business." To this day, this statement is the truth.

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Student interns who demonstrate hard work, self-discipline, dedication, and patience are developing the skills necessary to be a successful golf course superintendent.

CLIMBING THE LADDER

Upon graduating, I went back to my hometown and worked a year as a so-called superintendent. My two friends and I made up the entire maintenance crew. It was hard work, the budget was low, and I earned \$2.25 per hour. I thought I was doing well. The course owners were businessmen who built the course out of love for the game. They gambled most of their wealth on this course, and they wanted every cent spent to be productive, to say the least.

A good friend of my family, Jack Welch, became the self-appointed guardian angel over my career. He brought information back from national meetings to me. He even piqued my interest in joining the Central Ohio Superintendents Association. At one meeting I got up the nerve to speak with Walter Fuchs, superintendent at Scioto C.C., one of the premier golf courses in the country. He invited me to Scioto to show me his operation. During the tour, I was so impressed that I asked if he knew of anyone looking for an assistant. He mentioned a young guy who had just become the superintendent at Brookside C.C. in Worthington, Ohio. I sent this superintendent, Ed Etchells, my resume, was asked to interview, and was soon hired. This move really jump-started my career. Ed Etchells was demanding not only of himself, but of his employees as well. When I arrived at Brookside, it was

considered the third-best course in the Columbus area. After renovating fairways and tees and generally improving the grooming of the course, it was considered right up there with Scioto C.C. All this work was done in a short period of time. I learned in a hurry to be self-disciplined, efficient, and organized when going about my jobs. Ed Etchells lived his life this way, and if one paid attention and wanted to progress, he would be wise to do the same.

BECOMING A SUPERINTENDENT

My father, an employee of Scotts, had a meeting with Jack Nicklaus years before my start in the business. Jack was interested in building a golf course in Dublin, Ohio, and he wanted Scotts to use the course as a proving ground for their products. Though the relationship never developed, I never forgot the message of that meeting -- Jack Nicklaus wanted to build a golf course. Eventually Nicklaus's course, Muirfield Village Golf Club, was built and Ed Etchells became the superintendent. I was hired as the assistant superintendent. Now I had two demanding individuals to answer to. Many of the skills I learned from my two previous courses paid off as I worked to prove my worth. Over the four years I worked at Muirfield, I continued to learn many valuable lessons and, although I did



A mentor once told me, "Once you feel you don't have to get down on your hands and knees to evaluate our golf course, you will be thrown out in this business"; To this day, this statement is true.

not know it at the time, I was laying the foundation for the next challenge in my life. The harder I worked and the more responsibility I was willing to shoulder, the

more trust both Ed and Jack put in me. I did not sit around talking about what I could or could not do. Instead, I patiently showed them I was able to handle any situation on the golf course.

After Muirfield Village was completed, Jack started designing his own courses and Ed Etchells began providing agronomic consulting on all of Nicklaus's courses. Shoal Creek was Jack Nicklaus's first course he designed by himself in the United States. The story goes that the owner of the course, Hall Thompson, asked Jack during one of his site visits, "What type of grass are we planning for on the putting greens?" Without flinching, Jack said, "Bentgrass." In the next breath he mentioned he had this young man at Muirfield Village who was knowledgeable and ready to grow bentgrass. This is the reason I was hired at Shoal Creek.

BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL SUPERINTENDENT

To be hired as a superintendent, I had proven that I was capable of working long hours, organizing and planning schedules, and managing employees. I had to deliver the results my employers desired, and I earned the respect of my employers not by telling them what I was capable of, but by working and providing a result they could relate to.

I can say that the careers of the students who work for me are enhanced tremendously when they work for an entire year on the golf course. They see everything from the early season pre-emergence herbicide applications to the end-of-the-season overseeding. Many students have not even worked an entire year on the golf course, but they believe they are ready for an assistant position or higher. Taking the time to learn all the on-course jobs and the changes that occur on the course throughout the year builds a foundation necessary for success.

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New challenges provide anyone from course worker to assistant to superintendent with an opportunity to develop new skills and show their employer that they can handle the job.

It took me nearly ten years to reach my goals. I progressed from worker to assistant superintendent to superintendent. Today, there are many more graduates from turf schools and the job market has never been more competitive. It may take a person going from worker to intern to spray tech to assistant in training to assistant before being hired as a superintendent. No matter what the timeline is, however, there is a common thread I see in successful individuals -- hard work, sacrifice, self-discipline, patience, and a positive attitude. Maybe more important than all these other traits is setting a goal to work toward. Do you have a goal?



Perfecting all the jobs on the golf course helps lay the foundation for future success as a superintendent.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Jim Simmons has more than 30 years of experience as a golf course superintendent. Over that time, he estimates that he has provided internships for more than 150 individuals, many of whom are still in the business. Although the faces of interns, crew members, and assistants change, Jim is asked the same questions over and over again. Below are a few of these questions along with Jim's responses.

What type of experience can I gain from an internship under you?

Your internship will begin with learning to master the shovel and rake. As I observe your attitude and your ability to do excellent work, you will move up and learn additional jobs. If all goes well, you will have learned how work is done at Shoal Creek and you will be skilled at many different tasks.

Why am I initially assigned the lowest jobs as an intern?

Interns start at the bottom for two reasons. First, I am able to get comfortable with you, your attitude, and your work. Second, if your training follows a progression and I am in a pinch for a crew member, I have a good feel for whether you are up to the task or not.

What traits do you look for when hiring an assistant superintendent?

At Shoal Creek, traditionally assistant superintendents are hired from within the staff. Over time, I am able to observe the work ethic, attitude, and skills of individuals who will be considered for assistant superintendent positions.

How long can I expect to be an assistant superintendent?

At Shoal Creek, an assistant superintendent is expected to remain on staff for approximately three years before seeking a superintendent's position. This time frame seems to work well for both sides. The club has invested a substantial amount training the assistant and reaps the reward of an experienced assistant for three years. The assistant has the benefit of three years as an assistant superintendent.

I have interviewed at several courses and I do not seem to ever get to the final interview. I always end up second or third. What is happening?

You might be looking at the wrong type of course. Take a good look at yourself, your work ethic, and desires and seek a course that fits your profile.

When asked in an interview, "What kind of money are you looking for?" the interview seems to lose its intensity. How should I handle this question in an interview?

You may be asking for too much money for your first position. Very few assistants leave their present position and land that "gold mine" salary. There are too many people applying for the same position. While some may have the experience to justify a high salary, others will have to prove themselves.

Jim Simmons is the only superintendent in the history of Shoal Creek. He has prepared Shoal Creek for two PGA Championships and the U.S. Amateur, and he has been a mentor to many interns and assistant superintendents.