

2002 RUTGERS Turfgrass Proceedings



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This publication includes lecture notes of papers presented at the 2002 New Jersey Turfgrass Expo. Publication of these lectures provides a readily available source of information covering a wide range of topics and includes technical and popular presentations of importance to the turfgrass industry.

This proceedings also includes research papers that contain original research findings and reviews of selected subjects in turfgrass science. These papers are presented primarily to facilitate the timely dissemination of original turfgrass research for use by the turfgrass industry.

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WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU'VE BEEN FIRED!

Peter L. McCormick¹

You have heard the saying, "There are superintendents who have lost grass — and those who will." Given the direction our industry has taken in recent years, a 2002 version of that maxim might read, "There are superintendents who have been fired — and those who will." With the accelerating demands for perfection on the golf course, and the lengths the industry will go to achieve them, both adages will likely be truer in the 21st Century than in the last.

Ironically, in many situations, a golf course superintendent getting fired has little or nothing to do with losing grass, although it rarely happens without some underlying reason. There is no doubt we have created a monster of spiraling expectation, where superintendents lose their jobs and families get uprooted over thousandths of an inch in height of cut, inches of ball roll, or minor imperfections of color. Playing conditions peaked for tournaments only several years ago are now demanded on a daily basis. We are testing the limits of Mother Nature, a concept of which many golfers have no understanding, and She usually wins.

Who am I to address this subject? I have never been a superintendent. I am not a PhD psychologist or career counselor, hardly a financial advisor, and certainly not a priest. I am, however, a two-time survivor of the experience who took advantage of both events to redirect my life toward something better. In the years since, I have spent many, many moments of reflection and retrospection on those defining moments and the situations leading up to them. And from the chair in which I have been sitting for the past 9 years as commander-in-chief and maestro of TurfNet, I have seen way too many good superintendents, good people and good friends of mine, lose their jobs, many times through no fault of their own, or at least, no blatant miscue, screw-up or failing.

It's refreshing and healthy to see this topic, long discussed only in whispered, closed door, backroom conversations, brought out of the closet and onto the table. Job loss is receiving more and more attention from the mainstream trade press, and has even been acknowledged by GCSAA. But rather than the usual cursory overview with a case study or two and a suggestion to contact GCSAA's career development people, we're going to get into it right here. We will take a look at the "job killers," the warning signs, the emotional trauma, financial considerations, and then picking up the pieces and moving on.

This is not intended as a lesson in the mechanics of finding a new job. It's meant to be a practical guide to avoiding the situation in the first place, and once it happens, getting through the process with your soul intact.

The scope of the problem...

For a historical perspective, where did the phrase "being fired" come from, anyway? According to Paul Hawken (founder of the Smith & Hawken garden store chain) in his book "Growing Your Business," when a group or village back in medieval times wanted to ostracize a member, the townspeople went to the offender's home and burned it to the ground, along with all and everything inside. Relations were severed by firing. Thankfully we are not quite so barbaric any more.

Even though this situation has become alarmingly visible in recent years due to the speed and reach of the Internet, the actual numbers are fairly small. For lack of any real statistics, let's use 5% as a round figure. That means in a room of 100 golf course superintendents, five will lose their jobs this year. The actual number may be slightly more or less, but 5% is

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reasonably close (7% was the figure GCSAA cited recently in *Superintendent News*).

Admittedly, that's not exactly cause for panic. But it also means that, at least statistically, everyone will have their turn once every 20 years. If you're one of the few who survive an entire career as a superintendent, statistically speaking you'll be fired twice during your career. Of course, some superintendents may get fired twice or three times every 20 years and others won't at all. But it never hurts to be aware, be on guard, be prepared, and have Plan B in mind at all times.

This trend is certainly not unique to the golf course industry, for we are just a microcosm of society at large. Due in part to email, FedEx, next-day-this or second-day-that, our society today demands instant and immediate gratification. We want it now, with no excuses. "Don't tell me about the labor pains, show me the baby!" Our golfing clientele is no exception. It's all about "What have you done for me lately?"

Compounding the fragility of job tenure is the rate of change in our society, which has accelerated to warp speed. Companies are acquired and others merge or go out of business. Here today, gone tomorrow. Technology improves, obsolescence follows. Demographics shift. Stuff happens.

As a result, career positions are becoming a dying breed, across all industries. Just ask any pro football coach, ex-Enron employee, or any of the 25- or 30-year veteran superintendents who have been terminated within the last year. Age and experience have become liabilities. Youth, energy, and a lower price tag are attractive. And there is another new crop of young graduates every year who would love to have your job for half your going rate.

My father-in-law got up and went to work in the same factory building every day for 45 years before retiring about 15 years ago. Today, the company he worked for no longer exists. Unlike our parents' generation, which could often count on a career-long tenure with one company, some say it is foolish for us today to plan past the next five years in any job, in any industry. Others say you can't realistically look beyond the next two or three years.

One of our TurfNet members (and a good friend of mine) received his walking papers recently after 25 years at his club. Some gold watch. Located in the greater NYC area, the club had turned over about

one-third of the membership due to the economic slump after 9/11. All of a sudden, when greeting golfers around the first tee, he realized that he no longer knew many of them. Obviously, the new members had no emotional attachment to him, either. Things beyond our control can and do change, often very quickly.

Adding fuel to the fire is the escalation of salaries among superintendents in recent years, particularly in the major metropolitan areas. While that is undeniably a positive trend, unfortunately, as the stakes get higher, the fuse of owners, green committees, and others in the club hierarchy tends to get shorter, requires less to light it.

The Job Killers

I did a casual survey on TurfNet.com to compile a list of "job killers" that have been known to hasten the superintendent's exit out the door. Let's take a look at a few...

- **Poor communication is a death knell.** Good communication is regular and ongoing: upward to club management, downward to your staff, and outward to your members or golfing public. Avoid surprises. Keep the right people informed (particularly when problems arise) as to reasons, cost, and timelines for recovery. Without it, they have no idea of the methodology behind your madness, especially as it affects playability, appearance, or budget.
- **"The Next Level."** Whatever that is, a lot of clubs want it and are eager to replace their superintendent in search of it.
- **The crossfire of club politics.** We've all heard the saying that being a golf course superintendent is "90% politics and 10% agronomy." Communication, public relations and many other factors (including "don't burn bridges" and "don't tick off that turkey who may someday become club president") are intertwined here. On the other hand, it's easy to blame club politics when other shortcomings are really at the root of the matter.
- **"My" golf course.** Folks, if you don't own it, it isn't yours. Period. There is usually a higher power to answer to, and nine times out of ten, they have the last laugh.

- **General managers run amok.** You've all seen it. Ego, power plays, politics, and wanting to make a name for themselves all play into it, often at your expense.
- **Blinders and tunnel vision.** Not seeing the forest for the trees. Focusing on the triple-cut while the water coolers remain empty, or planting killer annuals around the tee box while ignoring the broken ball washer nearby. Many a new hire has come into a golf course, taken care of the simple, little things and looked like a hero, while the ex-superintendent who neglected them walks down the road, hanging his head like a dog.
- **Complacency and boredom.** Boredom arises from routine. Keep motivated by setting new goals, integrating new technologies, tackling new projects. Hire a stable of young people to learn from and keep you on your toes. Change or improve something in the maintenance facility every year to avoid stagnation, even if it's just a coat of paint. Be aware of the 7-Year Itch.
- **Invisibility.** Don't hide in your office or eat lunch in your truck. When in the office, use the computer as a tool rather than as entertainment. Work the first tee like a politician on the stump, particularly on weekend mornings. Don't fall into the trap of disappearing when stressed or when things aren't going right. It's easy to do.
- **In-season special projects.** To call maximum attention to yourself, it's hard to beat a flagrant mistake. Limit your focus during peak season to routine maintenance. Do what you're paid to do: produce great golfing conditions. This greatly reduces the opportunity for highly visible, costly mistakes or disruptions, while you give full attention to getting your turf through the season intact.
- **Employee mismanagement or abuse.** Many a superintendent has been shown the door with a knife in his back, often wielded by a disgruntled employee. Mixed-gender crews open up further opportunities for abuse. Be careful, and be aware.
- **Mismanagement of resources, including borrowing or lending club property, or worse.** Those side landscape or seed jobs have also brought more than one superintendent down.
- **Alcohol and drug abuse.** As upstanding as we like to think our industry is, we are not Superman. Golf course superintendents have pressures and work long hours like many others do. Some handle it better than others.
- **Bad attitude.** A catch-all, perhaps, but many great grass growers with a stubborn, "my way is the only way" attitude have found themselves on the outside looking in, while less talented superintendents with a cooperative, go-get-'em attitude continue to survive the cut.
- **Conflicts with other departments.** This can often be combined with the "own agenda" and "bad attitude" job killers. Avoiding this situation in many cases boils down to choosing which battles you need to fight, and when you can give ground to accommodate others. Consider the full scope of the potential consequences when deciding whether or not to dig in your heels.
- **Running for GCSAA President.** Enough said.

Of course, there are agronomic job killers as well, including repeated turf loss, bad chemical applications, poor housekeeping, and the "greener grass down the street" syndrome.

The warning signs...

Warning signs are everywhere, but often come to light only with the benefit of hindsight. When the communication stops — on anyone's part, in either direction — beware. That's usually a foreshadowing of an unpleasant event. If meetings are held without you, chances are your input isn't valued very much or they are planning your exit strategy for you. When decisions are made without your input, particularly as they affect your areas of direct responsibility, start packing your stuff. If the time for scheduled pay raises or bonuses comes and goes with no explanation, update your resume. If they bring in a consultant (other than a scheduled USGA visit), more often than not you're out of luck.

On your part, if you find yourself not wanting to get out of bed in the morning, or getting to work late or leaving early, those are pretty good indicators that you have lost the fire in the belly. If you find yourself making decisions on your own and circumventing proper channels of authority, you might soon discover those meetings being held without you.

When I look back at my own situations, virtually all of the above warning signs were there. But a great deal of retrospection has led me to one conclusion: it was me, more than anything else. In both instances I was ready for a change, ready to move on, ready for the next challenge — and that affected relationships enough to get me fired, both times. The fire in my belly had gone out and I knew it, but didn't act on it.

You can't predict. You can only prepare.

The best defense is a good offense. Proactively managing your career is the best way to avoid sudden job loss. That involves periodically assessing both your enthusiasm for your job and your standing among those around you. Know when you need to make a change in advance of others making it for you. Many superintendents have stayed one step ahead of the sheriff throughout their careers simply by keeping their ears to the ground and taking their internal temperature on a regular basis.

There's another saying: "The best time to find a new job is when you don't need one." You can make your own choices, on your own terms. All it takes is the savvy to realize the need and the guts to pull the plug and move on.

In today's climate, establishing a safety net or fine-tuning a Plan B should be constant and ongoing. Golf course superintendents have a wide range of skills, from permitting and environmental compliance to plumbing, electrical, mechanical, surveying, and earth moving. Hone your skills to the point of making them marketable. Become an expert in something, as a potential alternate career path at some point in the future.

I bought my first personal computer back in 1992, at age 38, and taught myself how to use it. Why? Because I sensed the water swirling in the bowl, and knew that if I had to go back into the job market without PC skills, I didn't stand a chance. Eighteen months later, there I was. And I had developed my computer skills enough by that point to start a new business. One thing does prepare you for the next.

Perhaps the most critical proactive element in career security is establishing a network. Involve yourself and stay active in the industry. Meet as many people as you can, across all disciplines, including golf course architects, irrigation designers, and builders. Stay on good terms with everyone, including club members. These are key to establishing and main-

taining your network, which has rescued many an unemployed superintendent from the bread line.

Prepare yourself financially

The emotional trauma of losing your job is bad enough without having to worry about how you're going to feed your family. As with skill development and network building, this must be started early and continued on an ongoing basis. At particular risk are those who live in club housing and/or drive club vehicles. You think it's bad to lose your job? How about losing your home and transportation as well? If you have housing provided as part of your compensation package, find a way to buy a vacation home or rental property to build equity and as a hedge against becoming homeless. Homeless? You bet. How's that for a reality check?

One of our TurfNet members told me one day, "If I were to lose my job, all we would have is a U-Haul behind my wife's minivan." That's a pretty sobering thought. So he took it upon himself to build a vacation home for his family's use during the summer and to build financial security over the years. The majority of the net worth of most people today has likely come from appreciation of real estate more than anything else. Don't be left out.

Beyond owning a home, it's critical to put some money aside, although this can be very difficult to do. The more we make, the more we tend to spend. Money in the bank is the best cushion for a soft landing should you lose your job. Three months' take-home pay in the bank is a good goal, but six would be better. If you are living paycheck to paycheck with nothing saved, re-assess your lifestyle and make some changes.

Another TurfNet member, a very conservative person to start with, mentioned to me that he's not afraid of losing his job. Why? "Because I spend a lot less than I make, and there's plenty there to tide me over. I would just get another job or find something else to do..." How many of us can say that?

When planning for the future, keep in mind that, just like professional athletes, it's very likely you won't wind up your career in this industry at peak income.

OK, so you get the news. What now?

Right out of the gate, get your financial house in order. Negotiate proper severance — something you

and your employer will likely disagree on, but a week or two per year of service is pretty standard. Obviously, this is best done in advance.

If you don't get another job by the time your severance runs out, swallow your pride and apply for unemployment benefits (another reality check). Remember the bar scene from the original Star Wars, with all those mutants and cretins hanging around? That's what the unemployment line is like. Believe me, it's a humbling experience.

Hunker down and put the brakes on all discretionary spending. It's amazing how much money you can NOT spend when you put your mind to it. Talk to your creditors if need be. Somehow you'll get through it.

Regardless of how it happens, losing your job can be emotionally devastating, to both you and your family. Why? Because our society defines us as individuals more by what we do in life than by who we are. When someone meets us for the first time, one of the first identifiers they seek out is what we do for a living, not that we like to play the guitar or cook or coach a soccer team. When we lose our job, we lose a core component of our persona. We are viewed by many, often including ourselves, as no longer whole.

What should you expect when you suddenly find yourself unemployed? Expect your relationships to change, or at least your casual ones. Your real friends will stand by and support you, but your fair weather friends will likely duck you like the plague. I call this the "Leprosy Syndrome." People feel an awkwardness talking to you or even being around you. They don't know what to say, so they just avoid you. My own brother-in-law didn't speak to me for 3 months after my last "event" because he didn't know what to say.

There is a lesson there for all of us. I have been guilty in the past of avoiding acquaintances who were out of work, or who might have gotten a bad diagnosis, due to that same awkwardness. Don't fall into that trap when it happens to a friend or neighbor or the superintendent down the street. Call him or send him an email to see how he's doing. Stop by, stick out your hand, and offer a smile and a friendly word. "How are you doing?" is all that's necessary.

Taking that a step further, while walking the aisles at the trade shows, don't look the other way when

you see a "jobless" guy approaching. Be certain he feels weirder than you do, just being there. Say hey, look him in the eye, offer a word of encouragement, and ask how the search is going. Show that you care. He will appreciate that, and remember.

If you should lose your job, be prepared to become the scapegoat among your former co-workers. You will be blamed for all that ails the golf course. Don't let it bother you. It's an unfortunate part of human nature.

While you're looking for your next job, be aware of the symptoms of clinical depression, a treatable physical illness sometimes triggered by an event like job loss. Running at full tilt for years and then hitting the wall can screw up your internal chemistry. Symptoms of depression can include feelings of sadness, guilt, or hopelessness; irritability; fatigue or restlessness; loss of interest in favorite activities; irregular sleeping habits; or changes in weight or appetite. If you find yourself experiencing more than several of these symptoms, swallow your pride and see your doctor. It's not a sign of weakness.

Your job loss can be even more difficult for your family than yourself because they might not understand all that led up to it like you do. All they know is that now you're at home, and the paychecks will soon stop. I had barely walked in the door after receiving the news the last time when one of my daughters, who was 8 years old at the time, asked me, "Daddy, are we going to be poor now?" That was almost rock bottom for me, but I'll get back to that in a moment.

Looking at the brighter side, this situation can be a good opportunity for you to be a role model for your kids, depending upon their ages. One of my greatest satisfactions was to involve my family in the starting of a new business and have them watch me rise above the fear and the doubt to grow a successful business from little more than an idea.

Get comfortable with it...

The sooner you get comfortable with your new status, the faster you will be able to move on. Just like the first step in dealing with alcoholism, we have to accept it, come to grips with it, and embrace it before we can move on with the rest of our lives. We need to say it out loud. "I GOT FIRED!" Then say it again. You are not the first, and you are not alone. There is no reason for shame. Hold your head high.

And don't hide behind the false cloak of "resignation," "early retirement," or "pursuing other interests." That's bologna, and everyone knows it.

Talk about it. Talk to anyone who will listen, until you get it out of your system. Or write about it in a journal, if only for your own eyes. Both are therapeutic. That's another critical step in moving forward. Writing this is therapeutic for me, almost 10 years later.

Give yourself quiet time to think. That's a luxury our lifestyles don't allow us enough of. Turn off the TV, the car radio, your cell phone. I do my best thinking while asleep, in the shower, in the car, or mowing the lawn. As a matter of fact, I literally "dreamed up" the TurfNet concept while asleep, about 4:00 AM. Sat bolt upright in bed. The human subconscious is an amazing thing, and necessity can indeed be the Mother of Invention.

Get away. Take a walk or a short vacation if your finances allow. You'll look back in with a clearer mind, and be better able to assess the big picture.

A favorite quotation that I cited years ago in an editorial is this:

"Every now and then go away,
have a little relaxation,
for when you come back to your work
your judgment will be surer,
since to remain constantly at work
will cause you to lose power of judgment.

Go some distance away
because the work appears smaller
and more of it
can be taken in at a glance,
and a lack of harmony or proportion
is more readily seen."

That applies equally if you are employed and embroiled in your daily tasks, or if your job is searching for your next one. The author of that quotation, by the way, was Leonardo DaVinci, so it's not an entirely new concept.

An examination of your strengths and weaknesses can provide insight into which direction to take. You need not always follow the same path, particularly if the fun had stopped. Everyone is not cut out of superintendent cloth. Don't let tunnel vision blind you

to new (and perhaps different) opportunities. What do you REALLY want to do?

Many people go through their entire lives with closet dreams and ambitions that they never realize, simply because they could never take that step out of the comfort zone. Well, guess what? Once you have lost your job, you're out of it. There's no more standing at the end of the diving board trying to gather the courage to jump in. You're in, and in deep water.

If this is the case, take advantage of the opportunity. Go back to school, start a business, teach... if the spirit moves you. Of course, this is much easier if you have planned ahead and have some money in the bank to fall back on.

You may simply reaffirm in your mind that you want to be the best golf course superintendent you can possibly be. If so, great! Go at it with renewed vigor and energy.

Hitting rock bottom

It's often valuable, albeit unpleasant, to realize when you have hit rock bottom, because from that point there is only one way to go. My own brush with the bottom went like this...

I was fired two days after Christmas, and my company vehicle went with it. Soon after the New Year, my kids were in school and my wife was teaching part time. I was home alone with the dog. About 10:00 that morning, I opened the refrigerator and saw my older daughter's lunch bag sitting there. "Oh, I'll just take it over to school," I thought. Uhh... no transportation. I suppose I could have asked my neighbor to borrow her car, but no, I wasn't going to do that. Too proud.

Walking wasn't really practical since it was about 15 degrees outside and the school was 2 miles from home. So what did I do? I got out an old bicycle from the garage, pumped up the tires, and started peddling. After dropping off my daughter's lunch, I started for home, into the wind this time. As I peddled furiously, the tears streamed down my face, partly due to the cold wind, but mostly due to sheer, utter rage at the situation I was in. That was rock bottom for me. I decided right then that I was going to be the captain of my own destiny, the master of my own fate, during the next stage of my life.

As you clear your head and focus your vision, look forward and don't dwell on the past. You can't change what happened, but you can learn from it. Things often happen for a reason that is not always clear at the time.

My grandmother used to say that things work out for the best in the end. She was right, at least in my

experience. I have become a firm believer that good ultimately prevails over bad, and that every event in our lives is part of a bigger plan. The universe unfolds as it should. Be tough, stand tall, and move on with your life. One door closes, and another will open, but sometimes we have to twist the knob ourselves.