



Behind the Green

A day in the life of New Jersey's hard-working course superintendents | By Anthony Pioppi

The sight of a well-maintained golf course that plays as good as it looks can be heaven for those that enjoy the game.

What goes into producing such a result is understood by few outside the golf turf maintenance field, since the work is done, for the most part, out of sight. The job entails more than just applying fertilizer and water, then mowing. Factors such as humidity, temperature, air flow and the makeup of the soil all play into how the turf must be treated to reach the optimal conditions.

The task of maintaining a golf course is usually more difficult at municipal or affordable daily fee layouts than a private facility. Crews are invariably smaller, equipment has to last years longer, and tee times start earlier, with less time between each one.

At Shark River Golf Course in Neptune, which is owned by Monmouth County, it is up to



Rich Lane, golf course superintendent at Hackensack GC.

superintendent Glenn Miller to orchestrate the maintenance regime, one made more difficult on weekends and holidays during the long days of summer, when tee times start as early as 6 a.m. The 18-hole groups head off the first tee and at 6:05, nine-hole play goes off the 10th, making basic tasks a challenge.

A crew of four is on the course no later than 5:30 a.m., before the sun is even up, for what is known as the "mow and go."

Miller's crew mow greens and tees, move tee markers, change hole locations and rake bunkers. All the equipment has lights so they can work in the dark. Unlike most facilities, the jobs of emptying trash refilling and putting new towels on ball washers, as well as replenishing water coolers, are done by the pro shop staff.

"The hardest part is in July and August, when it's hot and you have to water [as well]," Miller said.

It can get worse if a pesticide application has to take place on a weekend. "We try to avoid it, but



ABOVE: Hackensack's crew works to restore the back bunker on the par 3 12th hole, the Redan.

weather has an impact on what we do," Miller said.

Fortunately, Shark River's layout is conducive to efficient travel. Work starts on holes 1-3, then moves over to the practice green, holes 10-13, then back to the fourth.

Even though his crew is usually off the course in three-and-a-half hours, golfers often times catch up to them on 16, 17 or 18.

"Sometimes they play greens that haven't been mowed yet, but they know that," Miller said.

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While it is true that weather has an effect on nearly every job performed on a golf course, for nearly seven months out of the year, what weather occurs at Hackensack Golf Club has more of an impact than the other five. From October to April, superintendent Rich Lane and his crew have dual roles. In addition to the normal off-season jobs, such as tree work and repairing and painting

equipment, they also become a construction company tasked with restoring the course, usually one hole a season.

Hackensack's layout, a Charles Banks design, opened in 1928. In the late 1990s, the club discovered the original Banks plans and began restoring the course to the architect's intent. The process has been going on for nearly 15 years. Even after all that time, Lane said he still is asked by members, "So, what do you guys do during the winter?"

The work can entail reconfiguring existing bunkers, restoring lost ones and eliminating ones added years after the course opened, as well as regrading and grassing of greens. A fair amount of his crew has been with Lane since he took over as superintendent in 1996 and are skilled at rebuilding golf holes, as well as dealing with the elements such as rain and snow.

"You're battling the weather all the time," Lane said. "It's tough to shape mud."

When the conditions are so bad that work cannot be done, his crew heads inside for the normal winter jobs such equipment repair. Although that may be a break for the staff, it means fewer days to get the course back in shape for the spring. In order to get the work done, Lane keeps twelve staff on board through the winter months, a larger crew than if construction was not taking place.

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At Westlake Golf and Country Club in Jackson, where Jennifer Torres has been superintendent since October of 2019, her issues are ones that probably don't cross the minds of those who play golf.

Westlake's layout is the centerpiece of a 55-and-over gated community with 1,400 homes. Some holes on the course are completely surrounded by the dwellings. Add to that the fact that the homes are often separated from the golf course by trees, and the result is an environment not



ABOVE: Laying sod at Morris County GC.

conductive to healthy turf.

"Trying to get airflow is a little difficult," Torres said. "Having a lush rough is difficult."

Tree removal has been taking place and will continue, but there are still plenty of areas where cultivating healthy grass is not a breeze.

But that's not all. One of the other problems is another topic few golfers think about: the quality of the property below the grass.

"The soil is atrocious, severe compaction," Torres said.

Compacted soil and thatch, a naturally-occurring organic layer at the base of the grass plant, prevents nutrients, water and air from getting down to the roots. Thatch results in weak turf that is susceptible to wear, drought and disease.

This year an outside firm was brought in to aerify fairways — a good start. Cores are pulled from the soil and the holes filled with sand. Torres said plans are in the works for the club

to obtain their own fairway aerifier.

"I have a wonderful green committee," she said.

Torres took an unusual route to becoming a superintendent. She and her family moved to New Jersey over 20 years ago, when her husband, a federal corrections officer, was transferred. She ran a home daycare business but didn't like it. A neighbor was an assistant superintendent and Torres commented that his job looked like fun. He said it was, and suggested she go to work on a course.

Torres started at Fountain Green Golf Course (part of Fort Dix) and enjoyed it so much that she earned a two-year certificate from the Rutgers University Professional Golf Turf Management School. She was then hired as assistant superintendent at Indian Springs Country Club in Marlton, eventually becoming the superintendent.

According to Torres, her husband took her decision in stride. "It didn't

surprise him — I grew up on a farm in upstate New York," she said.

For Torres, one of the only female superintendents in New Jersey, course maintenance is a family affair. All three of her children — Kayla, Cheyenne and Ricardo, Jr., as well as her granddaughter, Jordin — have worked with her. Ricardo Jr., is on her current crew and hopes to attend Rutgers turf school when the COVID pandemic is over.

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If you've been on a golf course in the summer, you've probably seen a course maintenance worker applying a spray to the golf course. That person has passed a rigorous course to earn a pesticide applicator license, and what is being applied is most likely an herbicide, insecticide, fungicide, or some combination of the three. New Jersey superintendents are in a constant battle against diseases



ABOVE: Westlake G&CC superintendent Jennifer Torres.

with names like brown patch, dollar spot, Pythium and anthracnose, as well as the larvae of insects such as the Japanese beetle.

The timing of when turf gets treated and for what ailment is one of the talents a superintendent must have. Also, a disease that strikes greens may not be an issue on fairways and tees.

"We treat every surface differently," said Jonathan Heywood, in his sixth year as superintendent at the Morris County GC in Morristown. Heywood said anticipating problems is key and that every course has its own issues, which a superintendent must deduce when he or she takes on a new job.

"What worked at the old course, might not work at the new place," he said.

When it comes to turf diseases, Heywood's approach is to attack the pathogen before it strikes. "The majority of our sprays are preventative because that allows us, in my opinion, to spray less," he said.

It also reduces the chance of damaged or dead turf, and once a disease has taken hold, preventing curatively is more of a challenge and may not be successful.

Most of the issues Heywood and other supers face come with hot and humid weather. The daytime temperature is less a of a concern than nighttime temps. If the mercury stays at 70 or above once the sun sets, the grass suffers because it does not have a chance to rest, according to Heywood.

The onset of a problem can occur in a relatively short period of time. "From May to October I'm checking

the humidity and the 15-day forecast two dozen times a day," he said.

Even with disease nearly always on their doorstep, superintendents want to spray as little as possible, chiefly to reduce chemical inputs in the soil, but also to save money. One fairway application can run upwards of \$5,000.

Another product that is put down by a sprayer is plant growth regulator, which slows down the turf's ability to grow, which results in the plant requiring fewer nutrients and less water. Superintendents don't want a vigorous plant growth.

"We're maintaining a playing surface. We're not growing a crop," Heywood said.

A common misperception both within and outside of the golf community is that all the chemicals used to fight turf problems are highly toxic. That is far from the truth. Science has not only come up with less dangerous chemical formulas but also ones that are applied at a lighter rate than in the past.

"A lot of our products have just a "caution" label, some don't have any warnings at all," Heywood said. "Nine out of 10 times household cleaners are more toxic."

While sitting on the clubhouse patio or standing on the first tee, it may seem like a simple endeavor to maintain a golf course, but it is more than growing and mowing. The time, effort, talent and knowledge it takes to keep a course in the type of condition that those who play the game have come to expect is no easy task. Appreciation for the effort of superintendents — and all course maintenance workers — is well-deserved. 🌱



ABOVE: A 1904 photo shows Shark River's original architect, Joseph "Scotty" L'Anson, second from left.