

The Role of the Turf Equipment Manager

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HISTORY

Lake City Community College (FL) started its Turf Equipment Management Program in 1973. From the beginning, the turf equipment program was unique because it dealt with mechanics as it pertained to the specialized turf care equipment at golf courses. There were, and still are, very few such programs. Lake City Community College initiated its program as a result of feedback from golf course superintendents who indicated a desire to hire mechanics with specialized knowledge of turf care equipment repair, preventive maintenance (PM), and reel grinding skill.

In the mid-1970s, the turf equipment manager was still commonly referred to as the mechanic or perhaps the golf course equipment mechanic. The mechanic at that time was usually someone who had a good mechanical background, possibly from automotive mechanics or from the military,

and who was very good at fixing equipment and doing basic welding. Reel mower maintenance was learned on the job, and the good mechanics learned quickly. Many of these mechanics were weak in implementing shop design and shop organization, reading equipment manuals, establishing PM procedures, setting up a parts room, and keeping a proper parts inventory. Mechanics from the military were desirable as they usually had strong organizational skills and a PM background.

Most golf courses and sports facilities got along satisfactorily with these early mechanics because they were very good at keeping the equipment running and at fixing anything that broke, and that is mainly what they were asked to do. After all, the equipment was stored in the barn where the mechanic worked, and there was not strong emphasis on shop organization, neatness, and PM.

From the mid- to late 1970s, golf on television grew more popular and as a result, millions of people saw highly manicured turf. This created a desire in many golfers to have their home courses more closely groomed. This desire translated into pressure on golf course superintendents to initiate higher levels of turf management. Even though new turf varieties, fertilizer products, pesticides, etc., were all involved in this movement toward highly refined turf management, it was the mowing and renovation equipment that had the most immediate impact, and the turf equipment manufacturers responded to the needs of the superintendent.

The turf equipment became more sophisticated; more hydraulics, electrical components, and eventually computerized parts became standard features, requiring a technician with more technical knowledge to be able to read and understand the maintenance manuals. Almost overnight, it seemed, golf course superintendents began requesting skilled turf equipment technicians to maintain the newer, more technical equipment.

This was the beginning of the turf equipment technician shortage. Demand for properly trained technicians was up, but there was no new supply coming into the market. The few turf equipment students that Lake City Community College graduated were readily hired by golf course superintendents. With direct input from turf equipment manufacturers and others in the golf industry, the Lake City curriculum was developed to include not only welding and mechanics, but also shop design, shop organization, hydraulics and electrical systems, parts inventory management, PM concepts, reel technology, and computers. These were the skills and training the golf course superintendents wanted in a technician, and a serious student could be satisfactorily trained in less than a year.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, the demand for turf equipment technicians continued to grow, and the supply of graduates from programs remained low with a resultant increase in salaries. Instructors and administrators at the few turf equipment programs that did exist were all trying to increase student numbers, which proved difficult. It would seem logical that with high industry demand and good, increasing salaries, it would be easy to recruit students for the programs. This was not the case, primarily because of total lack of career awareness. Nobody knew what a turf equipment technician did, and most people had no idea that a golf course even needed a mechanical person who could manage a shop with a million dollars or more in turf care equipment. How would people know? Who would tell them? Even golfers and green committee members had little knowledge of what went on in a turf maintenance facility.

The inability to attract students to turf equipment programs forced some programs to close. This was unfortunate as the faculty and staff at schools were trying to meet an industry demand and trying to interest students into a lucrative career. More programs were needed, so it was

especially harmful when programs had to close because of low enrollment.

Lack of career awareness, low enrollment in turf equipment programs, and high industry demand for technicians still plague the golf and sports turf industries today. The equipment continues to get more sophisticated and expensive, and demand is growing for a turf equipment manager, not just an equipment technician. Salaries are very good, and jobs are plentiful. At Lake City Community College, it is common for the school to receive 30–50 job offers for 10–15 turf equipment graduates. The starting salaries offered range from \$23,000 to \$40,000, with career potential for \$50,000 to more than \$70,000.

THE MANAGEMENT TEAM

The golf course management team used to be the golf course superintendent and the assistant golf course superintendent, but now the turf equipment manager is included as an integral team member. In fact, most golf course superintendents will quickly declare that the turf equipment manager is their critical team member. It takes a huge load off the superintendent and the assistant to have a mechanical, management-oriented equipment manager who keeps the shop neat, clean, and organized, and who can implement a PM program for all the equipment so that everything runs properly. This allows the superintendent and the assistant to concentrate on agronomic practices, leaving the equipment and shop management to the turf equipment manager.

The team approach to management is important, as it takes various talents to run an effective turf management program, and everyone must be appreciated for his or her contribution. This is certainly true with the turf equipment manager.

The days of treating the equipment manager as “just the mechanic” are long gone. The equipment manager can keep the shop safe and efficient, save the maintenance budget thousands of dollars through proper inventory control and PM, and maintain high equipment trade-in value through proper maintenance practices.

THE TURF EQUIPMENT MANAGER AS THE TEAM PSYCHOLOGIST

A clean, organized maintenance facility has an impact on the psyche of the crew. It is common for people to act according to the condition of the space within which they live or work. If people work in a pigpen, they usually act like pigs, but if their work space is clean and neat, they will again act accordingly. So the way the equipment manager keeps the shop area affects the attitude and behavior of the crew; thus, the label of “team psychologist” for the equipment manager.

In a well-run facility, the entrance road is paved and leads to a neatly paved crew parking area complete with lined parking spaces. The outside of the building is kept painted and clean and is finished with appropriate landscaping. The interior spaces are all kept clean and organized from the reception area to the hallways, to the offices, to the crew lounge, to the bathrooms and locker areas, and to the shop. This neatness sends a definite signal of pride and respect for all who work there. For a prospective employee coming for an interview, a strong statement is made without a word being spoken.

Compare the previous situation to a maintenance facility where the entrance road is a dirt road riddled with potholes that leads to a dirt or dirt and gravel area where people can park as they see fit. The outside of the facility needs paint and is dirty, and the interior spaces are not well organized

and are not kept very clean. The bathrooms and locker areas are not clean, and the shop area has a dirty floor, is poorly lit, and is unorganized. If you were coming for an interview, would you want to work here? What if you interview at the clean, organized facility and here, and the superintendent of the dirty facility offers more per hour; would it be worth it? Maybe some would opt for the higher starting wage, but one wonders how long the new hire would last.

Thus, the team psychologist, the turf equipment manager, can affect who wants to interview and crew turnover just by helping the superintendent keep the facility clean, neat, and organized. This is another way that a management-oriented equipment manager can save money. Most people want to work in an area where they feel good and where they sense that management really cares about their well-being. The turf equipment manager, working with the superintendent, can create this positive work environment.

FUTURE ROLES

It is difficult for an individual golf course superintendent to locate a skilled technician for an 18-hole course, but there is increasing demand for technicians to move into more management-only roles at multicourse facilities and with golf management companies that oversee many golf courses. This has occurred as a natural progression in the golf industry.

Multicourse facilities might have four or more technicians, creating an obvious need for a lead technician or a head turf equipment manager. There is a need for one person to be in charge of the shop area, to communicate with the golf course superintendent, and to train and supervise the other technicians. The titles *head equipment technician* and *turf equipment manager* are used interchangeably in the industry and

both are respectable titles; however, *turf equipment manager* usually more clearly conveys a management-level position to those who do not really understand the job.

Job descriptions written by golf course superintendents state “head equipment technician” or “turf equipment manager” when they are looking for a lead person to take on the responsibility of overall equipment and shop management. This person needs to know how to design a shop, organize a shop, set up a parts room, order parts properly and keep a proper parts inventory, read all the equipment manuals to set up proper preventive maintenance schedules that follow the manufacturers’ guidelines, use a computer and equipment management software, implement PM and repair procedures, and train new technicians. It is definitely a management role, and it is a difficult position to fill. A person with some formal mechanical education and training, years of experience with turf equipment, and some management experience is ideal for the turf equipment manager position. That is easy to say, but such a person is difficult to find.

With the growth of management companies overseeing the entire turf management at various golf courses under contract, demand is being created for a management-only turf equipment manager. If a company has ten golf courses under management, for example, a need will quickly develop for someone to supervise all the shops and coordinate turf equipment operations. Companies increasingly recognize that there would be cost savings and better management control if equipment, parts, and supplies purchasing were centralized; if the shops under contract were all organized in a similar layout; if PM procedures were standardized; and if common forms were used for all reporting. This type of coordinator developed on the agronomic side, but it took a while for the need for standard operating procedures for equipment and shop management to be recognized.

At first, some management companies let the golf course superintendent and the turf equipment manager operate the shop as a separate entity at each course. After all, that is what happens at individual golf courses. However, once the need for standard operating procedures was realized, this created a demand for a person who was an experienced turf equipment technician with a strong management background. This is a management position that requires the person to do hands-on mechanics only to help train someone at a site.

This multicourse turf equipment manager is another management step up from the head technician or turf equipment manager at an individual 18-hole or multicourse facility. This is an even harder person to find than the equipment manager at a golf course. The source for such managers is practicing equipment managers who have excellent mechanical and organizational skills, who are good communicators, and who deal well with a corporate structure. Because of the low supply of such specialists, salaries are very negotiable.

Future roles of the turf equipment manager will require stronger communication and management skills in combination with mechanics. Understanding budgets, handling personnel management, and developing standard operating procedures that make the shop a neat, clean, safe, and efficient operation will be increasingly important. Some golf course superintendents have had to use the titles *head equipment technician* and *second golf course superintendent* to justify higher pay for the equipment manager to upper management in order to attract qualified applicants. Through education on the management role that the turf equipment manager plays in the overall operation of a golf course, this dual title should no longer be necessary in the future. The title *turf equipment manager* should clearly indicate a management-level position requiring an appropriate pay scale.

SPORTS TURF FACILITIES

The previous examples in this chapter refer to golf courses, but sports turf facilities are in a similar situation. Most of the turf care equipment used in the sports turf industry and at golf courses is the same, and there is a similar need to have neat, organized, efficient shops.

Not all sports turf facilities have an equipment technician who works on equipment only. Many sports turf equipment technicians also do field operations or are irrigation technicians as well. Budgets commonly dictate the role of the equipment technician in sports turf, but increasing equipment costs and the need for cost-effective shop operations will continue to put more focus on the role of the equipment technician.

The information on golf course turf maintenance facilities and on the role of the golf course turf equipment manager adapts easily to the sports turf industry. The authors believe there is relevance in this chapter and throughout the book for the sports turf manager.

