

Training Yourself and Your Crews to the Top of the Field

Dr. Gil Landry

Your job is more than a master "To Do" list of things to accomplish on a daily, weekly, and monthly schedule. Just as you try new fertilizers and herbicides, retrofit an existing irrigation system, or expand the memory of your computer, you need to upgrade your own capabilities and those of your teammates. Reaching the top of your field — as a manager, crew leader or worker — means constantly improving through education and training.

Yes, there are reasonable excuses. The daily demands are too great. You don't have time. Yet, in the reality of today's rapidly changing world, you can't afford not to keep learning.

Where do you want to be professionally next year, or ten years from now? What must you do to get there? Explore the opportunities.

Education

Education could include going back to college to complete your undergraduate degree or move up to an advanced degree. Formal education creates greater career opportunities. Many positions in sports turf management

now require a technical school or college degree. Try to identify your weakest area and take steps to strengthen yourself.

Strengthen your weak areas or raise your overall knowledge level through specific courses, taken in the classroom or through correspondence. Do you know as much about the behavior of soils as you should? Maybe you need a communications course to improve your writing or speaking skills to handle the public relations aspect of your job, an accounting course to help you prepare your annual budget, or a computer course to assist in your record-keeping responsibilities.

The discipline of structured learning may be as important to your future as the information you acquire. Knowing where and how to find information and how to process it never becomes outdated.

Another important career step is acquiring the education and training necessary to complete a certification program. This might include studying the manual and working with your supervisor or equipment-supplier rep-

resentatives to prepare for pesticide applicator certification. It might entail reviewing the preliminary aspects of the Sports Turf Managers Association's certification program currently in the developmental stages, or talking with one of the Certification Committee members, to determine some of the steps you can begin now to work toward achieving certification.

Take advantage of career-specific educational opportunities. Review the programs of STMA's annual conference, your regional turfgrass conference and your STMA chapter meetings.

Take as many staff members to these programs as your budget will allow. Interaction among peers is a major learning tool of industry-specific conferences, meetings, and field days. Encourage your staff members to renew old acquaintances and meet new people at these events, and do so yourself.

Talk with the speakers. Introduce yourself to another attendee who asked a question or made a comment that pertained to your own job situation. Ask for input on current problems



Members of the Iowa STMA meet for hands-on demonstrations and up-close viewing of field conditions at Muscatine Soccer Complex, winner of the 1996 Soccer Field of the Year Award.

or pending decisions. Exchange cards for later follow-up by phone, fax or e-mail. Information shared during this informal discussion with your peers often pays for the entire cost of the trip.

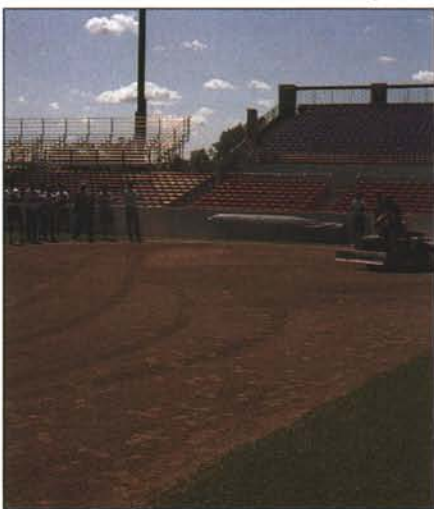
Make the most of each event's program. Squeeze in a few minutes before these events to jot down important questions you'd like to have answered in these sessions. When multiple sessions are offered during the same time period on a conference program, determine which personnel will attend which sessions.

Be an active participant in round-table discussions. Direct staff members to summarize presentations in an informal staff meeting and discuss how that information might impact your situation.

Read! Read all the industry-related information you can in books, magazines and newsletters. Be prepared to make use of those extra minutes scattered throughout each day. Keep a file on your desk, and a folder in your car or truck, of articles you want to read. Set up an "idea" file in which you can place items for later review. Scan the Internet while phone tag puts you on hold.

Training

There's always a way to do it faster, do it better, do it more efficiently. It's



Iowa STMA members learn the various elements of baseball field maintenance at Sec Taylor Stadium, home of the AAA Iowa Cubs.

your job to find out how.

Take part in the demonstrations and hands-on learning sessions of conferences and meetings. There will be a group intent on learning more. Join them. Get involved in the flow of questions and answers. See how others handle a specific task and find out why they do some elements of it in ways different from the steps you use. Take the risk of operating a machine or tackling a procedure in front of the group, and ask to be critiqued on your performance.

Study training manuals and videos, not only before undertaking a new procedure, but as a review to improve your current performance of a familiar task.

Take advantage of supplier training programs on equipment, irrigation systems, computers and new products. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Take notes. Find out why specific changes have been made in equipment and products and what those changes should mean on the job. If you've had a problem with a piece of equipment or a product in the past, explain it to the training personnel, find out if others have experienced the same problem and, if so, what they did to overcome it. Share your wish list of the features you'd like to see introduced and why you think they would be beneficial.

Check out seed test plots and university research plots. Talk with those running the testing and those handling the day-to-day maintenance. Discuss the techniques being used, the inputs that are controlled and the variable conditions. Ask about the results they are getting and how those match or vary from the results they expected. Seek their explanations of the results and any unexpected elements of the testing.

Visit other facilities. Observe all you can. Ask questions during your tour of the fields, shops and office. If you have information that could be helpful, share it. Establish on-going relationships with those in positions similar to your own with idea and information sharing the goal.

Bring your boss along as often as possible. The more he or she knows about your job, the easier it should be to enlist support.

Obviously, experience is a great



STMA's Annual Conference and Exhibition is a mix of classroom-style presentations, panel discussions, round-table discussions, demonstrations and trade show all blended with the opportunity to meet and discuss important issues with peers.

teacher, and often you can learn very effectively by conducting your own research. For example, if you are trying to solve a problem by using some product or cultural practice, leave a small untreated "check" to compare. If you are putting out a granular fertilizer or spraying a product, drop a two-foot square of non-porous material on the ground to exclude the product. Track the results. If you don't see a response above or below the soil surface, was the treatment needed?

There are many ways to get started in this learning process, but you need to start today. In addition to the above ideas, a good resource might be the *Turfgrass Management Information Directory*, from Ann Arbor Press Inc., P.O. Box 310, Chelsea, MI 48118.

Sports turf management is a vital, challenging, growing, changing industry. Take the steps you need to insure you will be a valuable part of it. □

As extension turfgrass specialist with the University of Georgia, Dr. Gil Landry provides leadership in the development of statewide educational programs in turfgrass management. He's a past president of the national Sports Turf Managers Association, co-chair of the Public Relations Committee, and recipient of STMA's highest award, the Harry C. Gill Memorial Award: STMA Groundskeeper of the Year.