



**By doing your own hiring it gives you more credibility with your supervisors and relieves some of their burden.**

## Good sports turf help is hard to find

THIS IS THE TIME OF YEAR, for many of us in the northern climates, when we start to get excited about the upcoming season especially when many of us have just traveled to a warmer climate to attend the STMA Conference. This year was no different for me when I traveled to San Jose, especially where it was the warmest part of the country during the week.

As I caught up with friends and colleagues, especially persons in warm climates, I found myself looking forward to getting back into the swing of things back home in Maine. What made this difficult was the obvious reason that here in the Northeast we have snow on the ground with more on the way until mid-March, if we're lucky.

I have always treated conference as a way to recharge my batteries, given the 2 months without any outdoor activities, and start to gear up for the upcoming season in 8-10 weeks. Tasks that are routinely done are servicing equipment, taking inventory and ordering of materials, start laying out use schedules and other small projects that always seem to be talked about when the season is upon us but haven't the time to start or complete them. With that being said; the hardest task that I face every year is the hiring of seasonal employees through the months of April and November.

Hiring employees, whether full or part time can be a difficult and tiresome process. It is especially hard to try to find qualified individuals to work a fulltime schedule and only be a part time employee for \$10-\$11 per hour. More times than not you end up hiring persons that are not knowledgeable of what it takes to maintain sports fields at the level we expect.

This can result into some much unneeded stress for you as the turf manager. You find yourself constantly training the individual and explaining the why's and how's of the job and end up feeling that you are taking steps backwards instead of moving forward. We all want to hit the ground running in the spring but that is not always the case and is dependent on the quality of the employees in your crew.

*Continued on page 18*

Another situation that I have encountered, which you see in a lot of park and recreation departments, is one in which the park supervisor or superintendent is responsible for the hiring of seasonal employees. In this instance they may become consumed with the idea of getting bodies in to do general park maintenance tasks instead of identifying the needs of each crew. As the sports turf manager this notion does not always help and makes things more difficult for you as user groups are knocking on the door to get out and use the fields. Let's face it though we are not going to the moon, but we still need able individuals to get the work done and understand the goals of the crew throughout the season.

The most important thing you can do as the sports turf manager, if you are not doing so now, is to lobby for yourself and let your supervisors allow you to hire your own seasonal crew. This is important because you actually get to meet the individual instead of getting a description from your supervisor. You know what you are looking for in an employee and this allows you to directly relay to them what your expectations are as the sports turf manager. You are going to be able to share your passion and ask them specific questions that may or may not be asked by your supervisor, who is hiring for the whole department instead of for your crew.

By doing your own hiring it gives you more credibility with your supervisor(s) and takes some of the burden off of them, especially in the spring when everything seems to happen at once. I guarantee they will appreciate your helping them in this process, especially when you are going to have work with this individual closely for the next 7-8 months. This process is also a great training aide for if and when you step into a supervisory position.

Being that good help is hard to find, the next question you have to ask yourself is who do I hire? I personally struggled with this early in my beginnings as a sports turf manager and eventually learned from my mistakes. I have found that former athletes often have a greater appreciation for what you are trying to put out for a product day after day. Even though they may not have played a sport on the field or fields you maintain but they understand the tendencies of athletes in respect to each sport.

For example, someone who may have played football but not baseball will have the understanding of why clay surfaces need to be maintained a certain way because of the footing action in pitching or running on a skinned area, just as a football player likes a tight turf-grass field for good firm footing to make quick cuts



The hiring of seasonal or temporary labor can be a tremendous benefit if managed properly. The employment of seasonal labor can save considerable funds while filling many labor shortage problems. It also provides the opportunity for employees to gain experience and be evaluated for future promotion to full time status.

The City of Bowie Parks Department had hired seasonal labor for many years but has only recently used this important employment tool to maximize its benefits. When this program was begun many years ago, it was mainly to provide summer employment for the City's youth. And since it employed unskilled labor the pay scale was minimum wage. This approach was changed 10 years ago because of a decline in interested applicants and the need to have employees later in the season. We created a two tiered pay system, one for summer help and one for temporary labor. We currently employ eight to ten seasonal workers.

The summer help employees work from June through August and are typically high school kids. The best of these are then recruited to return, and many work through college. They get an increase in pay every year they return. The temporary workers start in April and work through mid-December and are paid at the same rate as an entry level Parks employee but without benefits. Since we have changed our hiring procedures, we have had many more qualified applicants than positions. The program has worked so well that the current full time staff of 32 has seen half of the employees make the transition from seasonal or temporary labor to full time. And when a vacancy does occur, it is almost always filled by a temporary staff member negating the need to go through the outside hiring process.

Summer help crews work with various crews doing line trimming, refuse pick up, painting, planting flowers, and miscellaneous labor. Most of this work is performed by those that have never worked before and are learning what manual labor is all about. The work performed by temporary laborers would also consist of working with an assigned crew operating mowers, line trimming, working in and around storm water management ponds and channels, ball field maintenance, and the bulk leaf program. These individuals typically are more mature and have worked for our department for more than one season or have an employment history in grounds maintenance.

We have had excellent success hiring retired individuals who are looking for employment in the milder weather months. They tend to have excellent work habits and can bring a wealth of knowledge and skills from their respective former careers that can have a very positive influence on younger staff members. It has never been more important than the current time to maximize the efficient use of labor of any type and the use of seasonal employee's can give a grounds maintenance operation the required labor force to complete the many numerous and labor intense projects. ■

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during a game. The concept is the same even though they are two different surfaces and maintained entirely differently.

Having this understanding eliminates any communication barriers between you and the employee and allows you to have a conversation about playing conditions without physically being on same site as the employee. This also gives the employee an opportunity to trust their instincts in regards to what is a safe playable field, which brings me into my last point.

Last summer an individual asked what I do for a living and then asked what I do exactly. My answer seemed a bit bizarre even to me. I proceeded to tell them what I don't do, which was mow, paint lines, drag skinned areas, or clay work; in other words what I like to call the "glory" stuff that the user groups and fans see. I labeled myself of more of a behind the scenes person, i.e. fixing irrigation problems, cultivation practices, trimming fence lines, and hand mowing. This individual thought I was crazy because I was the one doing the "grunt work" while my crew was out doing the fun stuff.

Maybe he was right but there is a method to my madness. As each employee in a crew becomes familiar and comfortable with any task they begin to take ownership in that task especially when they start getting compliments, and not just from the sports turf manager. That is when you see the pride and passion

begin as the season moves on and soon after that they start calling it their mower or infield groomer and you're left doing the behind the scenes tasks. This allows you, however, to focus on the big picture of your facility and to plan projects and upgrades that you may want to do knowing that the daily tasks are getting done to your standards. This helps you become a better manager and provides the skills necessary to become an effective manager.

Hopefully most of you are doing a lot of these but for those who are not you need to get out and pound the pavement some and be an advocate for your facility and start early. [Ed's note: Rick was expecting this to run in the March issue, not April!] We have enough to worry about as it is, we don't need to add to the chaos by procrastinating the process of finding good help.

Lastly, to reiterate one point made earlier, let your crew members take part in the glory tasks as to allow yourself to plan and manage your facility. Remember, you can always tell who the sports turf manager is because he or she is the one watering the skinned area; that is one job my crew will never take away from me. ■

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