



A self-made man

There's no telling what opportunities Chris Calcaterra, CSFM, will make out of the year ahead

The act of initiative began at a young age for Chris Calcaterra, CSFM, CPRP, sports facilities manager for the city of Peoria, AZ who took the reins as president of the Sports Turf Managers Association last month at the 21st Annual Conference & Exhibition in Orlando.

At age 13, Calcaterra worked as a self-professed cart cabana boy at Whitewater Creek Country Club in Fayetteville, GA just 2 miles away from the house he grew up in, when he carved out his own opportunity, a habit that he would repeat over and over again during his two-decade-long career.

When the course underwent a sodding project around the

golf shop, Calcaterra opted to stay late and helped lay some sod. The superintendent at Whitewater Creek back then, Rob Roy, took notice, and “the rest was history,” Calcaterra says. “At the

age of 13 once I laid my first piece of sod, I knew what I wanted to do. (Roy) put me under his wing and was my mentor in the turf industry.”

Since then, one could say that Calcaterra has fashioned his own path, making opportunities appear in front of him, deciding on a particular job that he desires and then simply doing it.

That's the way, at least, that Calcaterra got a stint working for the University of Georgia's athletic department during his first year as a student there.

“I pounded on the door, and created an internship program,” he says, as though it were that simple.

THE FRUIT OF HIS LABOR

Looking at Calcaterra's beginnings, you could understand how he got into the business. He grew up on a 12-acre farm in south Georgia, where he helped out with gardening and other odd chores, gaining a love for the outdoors and working with the earth. Though his upbringing didn't inspire him to be a row crop farmer, he says that lifestyle is responsible for his work ethic and other qualities imperative to getting him to where he is today. “My parents instilled good traits in me,” he says. “They don't make them like that anymore.”

He may have been destined in more ways than one to go into turf management—his last name



» Chris Calcaterra gives his daughter, Sarah, some tips on watering infield skin.

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Quick to break out into his own territory after graduating from high school, Calcaterra went away to a 2-year agricultural college for a semester before coming back home and starting school at a community college. From there he had a revelation that led him to the University of Georgia.

“I realized if I wanted to go anywhere, I wanted to get a 4-year degree,” Calcaterra says.

Working for the Athens, GA-based university athletic program sparked an interest that would last a lifetime.

“That’s where I got exposed to athletics,” Calcaterra says. “The beauty of athletics at a college is you have multiple sports, intramurals, indoor and outdoor arenas. It definitely got me hooked on the athletics of stadiums and the turf practices. I was learning a lot just by being there.”

He also attributes his success to the fact that his mentor Roy insisted that he gain a variety of experiences in the profession.

“He was instrumental in my not working for the same person,” he says of the period between attending the 2-year college and coming back home to go to community college. “He helped me get jobs with other superintendents around town. I experienced

the management of turf, how they manage employees, mechanics and the shop. I worked for four different folks in a span of 3 or 4 years, and I networked. I didn’t even know I was doing it.”

LAND OF THE BRAVES

As a senior about to graduate with a degree in agriculture with specializations in turf and horticulture, Calcaterra hadn’t exactly figured out what he wanted to do next, go into golf or stay in sports. And he once again took the initiative and manufactured his own opportunity.

“I made a decision to go to the Atlanta Braves and introduce myself to their groundskeeper, Ed Mangan, who’s been there for some time and is very well respected,” he says. “I told him I was about to graduate and wanted to get into the sports industry and maintaining a stadium, so he put me on as a gamer.”

And so his senior year of college, Calcaterra repeatedly made the 2½-hour drive between Athens and Atlanta to work at the stadium. It paid off.

An assistant at the stadium left, and Calcaterra was selected to take his place. He spent five years at the Atlanta Braves as the assistant field director, gaining experiences such as hosting the 1996 Olympic Games and the construction of a new, modernized stadium. “And the Braves were playing well, so that didn’t hurt,” he adds.

But on top of the long hours, Calcaterra felt limited by the upward mobility available with the job.

“There are very few positions at that level because there are so few pro teams,” he says. “I wasn’t going to move up unless someone died or left. That’s when I left to go into management.”

WESTWARD MOBILITY

In 1998, Calcaterra applied for a handful of positions, and the city of Peoria in Arizona came calling. Starting off as a grounds supervisor for the city (whose population is 130,000 according to the latest census data but Calcaterra estimates is closer today to about 170,000 people) he was promoted to a facility manager about 6 years ago, moving from the turf side to the facility side.

Since then, Calcaterra has been in charge

Calcaterra manages a **\$5.4 million operating budget**, a **vehicle maintenance asset budget of \$1 million** and **capital improvement projects** such as facility improvements and renovations.

of operations, marketing and grounds for the city's sports facilities, which includes the Peoria Sports Complex, a 15-field, 145-acre Major League Baseball spring training facility for two teams, the Seattle Mariners and the San Diego Padres. That 120,000-square-foot facility boasts two 40,000 square foot team clubhouses, an 11,000-seat stadium and 20 hitting cages. Also under his responsibility is the 54-acre Rio Vista Community Sports Park, which Calcaterra says "is built to bring in people from 15 miles out. It's not just a swing set. It's a sports facility as well with seven softball fields, four full-sized soccer fields, a lake, a recreation center, picnic pavilions and a skate park."

He additionally manages a \$5.4 million operating budget, a vehicle maintenance asset budget of \$1 million and such capital improvement projects for the complex as bridge construction and stadium painting. With a staff of 25 full-time employees and 12 full-time equivalent positions, Calcaterra manages four direct reports.

But with all of these responsibilities, he says the biggest challenge of his day-to-day duties is dealing with the sheer breadth of the uses and purposes of the services he oversees.

"It's the multi-faceted user groups we have, and all the different hats we wear," he says. "I could be talking to a team coach one minute and literally get a phone call from a citizen the next. And that's for anyone in our group. It's great because it keeps you focused and active and maintaining your edge. The bottom line is communication. It's more valuable than any turfgrass class I ever had."

His ability to manage multiple groups of users at once helped to prepare Calcaterra for the duties of STMA leadership, says STMA's immediate past president, Abby McNeal, CSFM, the turfgrass manager for Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, NC.

"Supervising a baseball training facility is not an easy task," says McNeal, who's

known Calcaterra for 8 years through his involvement with the STMA board of directors and committee work. "He has activities at his facility every day, year-round. He's learned to manage through all the activity on a municipal budget and create a great experience for everyone that visits the facility whether as a participant or a fan."

For those skills, Calcaterra thanks his parents, who prepared him for how to and how not to manage certain situations, he says.

He also gives his boss, J.P. de la Montaigne, the city's community services director, credit for taking a chance on a young supervisor years ago with little management experience.

"He brought me into the municipal side and gave me insight on how to survive," he says, adding that he hit the ground running in the Peoria job. "He's been great, very supportive."

With a background in the private side of the business, Calcaterra enjoys the blend of private and public services in his current gig.

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same page,” Heck adds. “He understands what the challenges and what the opportunities are. He’ll be a great president for this organization. He has a varied background and brings some unique perspective to this office.”

Past STMA president Mike Andresen, CSFM, facilities and grounds manager for Iowa State University Athletics, Ames, who knows Calcaterra from their overlapping service on the STMA board of directors, calls him analytical. “He takes a discussion topic and spends the time to understand it completely, and then he comes prepared with a very comprehensive point of view,” Andresen says. “You have to pay attention when Chris speaks because he oftentimes comes at a discussion from a brand new and innovative, and oftentimes spot-on, angle.”

Sports fields and grounds sales manager for Toro, Dale Getz, CSFM, CSE, who’s known Calcaterra for 10 years through service on the STMA board of directors among other industry connections, says he always finishes what he starts.

“Chris is very thorough,” he says. “He makes sure that all the details are finished on a given project and provides input and insight to make sure issues are properly vetted.”

But Calcaterra quickly bounces any accolades onto his colleagues.

“I wouldn’t be where I’m at without the people I’ve got working with me,” he says. “They allow me to do things like this and they recognize the importance of being a team.”

With that support, Calcaterra looks forward to the year ahead with a membership he admires and is “thrilled to death” to represent.

“We don’t see each other that often because we’re regional,” he says. “Most of us go to show, and we can all make phone calls to people we saw 10 months ago and ask a collective question, and we’re going to get a compassionate, practical answer. It’s about sharing and communicating. That’s what we’re good at.” ■

Darcy DeVictor Boyle is a free lance writer based in Lawrence, KS.

“I have toes on both sides,” he says. “I’m working with two pro baseball teams, but I’m also in the municipal side. Everyone has their own needs, and we’re kind of the glue that makes that happen.”

In one of Calcaterra’s proudest accomplishments he collaborated with others in forming a nationally recognized intern program with a local high school. Called School to Work Career Technical Education Program, the initiative involves Calcaterra and others going into the schools, making presentations and selecting sophomores through seniors to participate. The students go through the interview process and are prepared for the workforce. On the practical side, the student interns interact with and learn from the division’s full-time employees. The benefits are beyond the obvious.

“For one thing, we always had a high turnover because we’re seasonal,” he says. “We understood that the high schools could provide an endless supply of kids.”

CALLED TO SERVICE

Contributing back to the community came naturally to Calcaterra, who continuously credits mentor Roy and his parents for giving him the tools he needed to succeed.

So it may come as a surprise that he fell into STMA leadership haphazardly. In 2005, an officer moved from a non-commercial representative position to a commercial job, and gave up his spot on the board. The president at the time contacted Calcaterra and asked whether he was interested in serving. He was appointed treasurer in June of that year.

Nearly 5 years later and Calcaterra is at the helm, and he’s got more than a few items of business to tend to.

“We want to educate our members,” he says. “By educating our members, we’re going to raise the professional level of everyone and our sister associations.”

Calcaterra’s commitment to education is bolstered by his own personal interest and participation in it, says Kim Heck, CEO of the STMA.

“He’s very focused on continual learning, and you can tell that from all of the designations after his name,” she says. “And he’s a very strong supporter of continuing education for our membership. He walks that talk.”

Because 65-70% of STMA membership works for parks and recreation directors, he wants to improve the image of the sports turf maintenance professional to those employers in particular and all employers in general.

“I’m going to help the board and Kim expose what we do well,” he says. “It’s about perception.”

He added that he wants to focus on research efforts, international outreach with chapters in England and Singapore, reinvigorating the conference, creating a more seamless transition and process for one-year leadership terms and increasing student involvement.

It’s a tall order, but one Calcaterra’s colleagues think he’s entirely capable of tackling.

He’s detailed and “provides well thought-out insight to the topics at hand,” says McNeal. “He’s always thinking ahead about how decisions being made today will affect the association and members in the future.”

A big picture kind of a leader, Calcaterra has “an uncanny ability to ask the right questions to make sure everyone’s on the