

My time at Maryland: lessons in learning

By Jeremy Menna

“THE TRUE WONDER of hindsight lies not in its ability to clarify situations and events, but in its propensity to coat them with a glaze of dignity and glamour, even glory.” This was the opening line in Richard Rubin’s book, “Confederacy of Silence.” What Richard Rubin did not know when he wrote this book was that those 31 words accurately and completely summarize my time as the Director of Grounds for the University of Maryland Athletic Department, a job that I am honored and privileged to have had.

I could say that I went to the University of Maryland to share my knowledge of providing an efficient work atmosphere that produces unmatched results, but that could not be further from the truth. I was the one who was taught many lessons. I have since moved on to take part in an incredible opportunity to rebuild a once sought after and impressive sports complex near Cocoa Beach, FL, a complex that has since faded into disrepair and was purchased out of foreclosure. My next challenge; however, my previous challenge was the single greatest learning experience of my life.

I arrived at Maryland in June 2006 as the Assistant Director of Grounds at 24 years old. I was tasked by the administration to make the department a dependable and a consistently performing work unit. What I now know is those goals were significantly below the capabilities and talent that already existed in that shop.

I was promoted to the Interim Director of Grounds in March 2007 then moved into the role as Director shortly after that. I began to evaluate the crew and run daily operations the only way I knew how. I was rigid and unwavering, two qualities that would not let the creative ambition of this crew shine.

After consistent failures, on my part, to connect with the staff I decided to try a new approach, to connect on a personal level with my employees. The main area that was missing was trust in me, and trust is the one quality that does not come with the title of boss, trust must be earned. This was as simple as saying good morning consistently, asking how everyone was

doing, not being in a hurry to get to work if we were in discussion. Updating the shop hockey standings and playing our morning game of dominos was tops on my priority list. This meant that many times I would be working late to wrap up administrative duties that I could have finished during the work day but I chose, correctly, to be part of my staff.

It did not take long for the culture of the work environment to shift to a happy, welcoming, trusting, results oriented work unit that I would not trade for any all star. Every member of this group was the all star I wanted to work with. We truly worked to embody the slogan, “work to live, don’t live to work.” This atmosphere was rewarding at the highest level when the rest of the crew worked through breaks and lunch to make sure a staff member could leave early to catch their sons tee ball game or pick their niece and nephew up from school.

When hiring new staff I made sure that their personal qualifications and character was weighed more heavily than their profession achievements. If you were motivated and would fit in with the staff then there was a spot for that person. It was my responsibility to make sure that all staff is one step closer to where they want to be at the end of the day then where they were when the day started. The result of this mentality was more incredible than even I could have imagined. The average age of our staff was about 25 years old. The young staff respected and learned from the older staff. The older staff drew energy and excitement from the younger staff. Everyone was empowered to make decisions, to problem solve, to work with coaches. The work unit was trusted by all and widely known through the athletic department and “the guys that get it done.” This aggressive mentality allowed this generation of young sports turf professionals to learn through problem solving and making mistakes. This truly was a rapid development work atmosphere.

When I left Maryland, my assistant Patrick Ellis took my place leading the work unit. Patrick joined the staff in 2007 after he graduated from Penn State and worked his way into the Assistant Director

position and now the Director of Grounds. Seth Whitehill, interned in 2008, rejoined the staff the following year after graduation and is now the head groundskeeper for the Little League World Series. Casey Rezendes was a student employee while attending the University of Maryland and is now the superintendent of the Maryland Golf Team’s short game practice facility. Kurt Klinger interned in 2009 and rejoined the staff after graduation and oversaw budget tracking and budget development for the \$760,000 operating budget. Kurt is the leading candidate to take Patrick’s position of Assistant Director. Alex Steinman, STMA and KAFMO Scholarship winner, interned in 2010 and rejoined the staff in 2011. Alex’s future is extremely bright and has been asked by Dr. Mathias, professor in the Maryland Turf Department, to help prepare the Maryland Turf Teams for the STMA team challenge.

I truly believe it is the responsibility of the person in charge of staff to ensure their continued growth and development. What happened following the execution of this promise was nothing short of extraordinary. The grounds work unit was the most dependable in the department; the staff retention rate was almost 100% with interns returning because of our commitment to them. Everyone on the staff felt a high sense of ownership because of their ability to make the calls on agronomic practices, all the while having more fun than any group of people I have ever known.

I was truly honored to be part of this team and I can honestly say that no matter how busy we were or what jobs lay ahead, I always woke up looking forward to going into the office. I would love nothing more than see this staff be recognized for their great achievements in such a tough area of the transition zone to successfully grow high performance sports turf. A task this staff has performed well as anyone in the country.

I believe the leader takes the criticism and lets the praise pass to the staff, works harder than everyone and spearheads the most undesirable jobs, and has a commitment to everyone that works for him to ensure their continued growth. If this can be done, be prepared to see results that will induce a smile that can be seen a mile away. Unselfish is the best word to describe this mentality. However, to try to sum up my time at Maryland in one word or even 31 words cannot do justice to my experience, an experience that not only made me a successful young sport turf professional, but most importantly prepared me for success for the rest of my life. A life that I will always stop and smile at the thought of my time at Maryland. ■