

By Kenzie Jay

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## SAFE celebrates 10th anniversary

**A** decade; some may view it as just a 10-year span in time, but we view it as a celebration. And this year, it's time to celebrate some STMA members. Although we won't literally be popping champagne in our offices, know that our hats are off to you as we celebrate your success.

The SAFE Foundation, STMA's charity, takes pride in its ability to provide scholarships for individuals aspiring to be in the field. Since its inception in 2000, the SAFE Foundation has presented 120 students more than \$225,000 in scholarships and travel to the STMA Conference and Exhibition. For some, this year marks the 10-year anniversary since SAFE has presented them with scholarships, an equally rewarding and honorable recognition. So this month we caught up with them to see what they're up to now. Willing and ready to share their positive experience with us, we dove into the details about the scholarship process, the conferences and advice for future scholarship recipients.



Kyle Slaton



Shawn Mahonski



Nathan Salmore

### WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Scattered all over the United States, that's where. We tracked down where these SAFE scholarship recipients have made their mark over the past 10 years, working with communities and universities alike.

Kyle Slaton, a Penn State University grad, is the Director of Sports Turf & Grounds at Georgia State University. Slaton has been in this position 4 years and enjoys being in charge of all the NCAA athletic fields within the university grounds. Slaton's favorite part of his job is having the ability to come in during a rebuilding year and see the progress made within the grounds department and athletic fields.

A fellow Penn State grad, Shawn Mahonski, is the Athletic Field Manager at Towson University. With 9 years under his belt at this position, Mahonski credits his loyalty to Towson and college athletics to the unpredictability and array of challenges he is presented with, keeping every day interesting.

Nathan Salmore, a University of Massachusetts-Amherst grad, is the Assistant Grounds Superintendent at Longwood Cricket Club in Chestnut Hill, MA. Salmore claims he's enjoyed the past 4 years at LCC due to the unique challenge of maintaining both grass and clay tennis courts.



Matt Anderson



Nick Gow



Dan Blank

A graduate of Michigan State University, Matt Anderson is the Grounds Superintendent at the University of Arizona. Anderson said the love of being outdoors and around sports has kept him in Arizona since he began the position 3 years ago.

Nick Gow, an Iowa State University grad, is the Athletics Facility Manager for the City of Muscatine, Iowa. With his position, Gow is responsible for an eight-field soccer complex, an 18-field softball and baseball complex, and is a turf advisor for a golf course.

After 7 years in a non-related field, Dan Blank has taken his talents to Omaha, NE serving on the biggest stage of college baseball. Blank is the Turf Manager at TD Ameritrade Park, home of the NCAA Men's College World Series.

### CONFERENCE TALK

One of the highlights of receiving the scholarship through the SAFE Foundation is the opportunity to attend the national STMA Conference. In addition to a financial scholarship, each winner's conference registration is paid for and each receives three nights lodging at the conference.

STMA's Annual Conference & Exhibition allows members to share information with other successful members of the sports turf industry and participate in educational seminars and hands-on workshops. Conference attendees are able to tour professional, college and municipal turf facilities that offer a range of insights to take back home. STMA works hard to plan exceptional conferences, but it's the unplanned friendships that make the biggest impression on the scholars.

"There were people that came up to me and introduced themselves to me at the first conference. I was able to talk to them and build a friendship," says Slaton. "The best part of the conference is making friends and seeing everyone."

Known for its eclectic host cities, fun events and exceptional speakers, the conference is unanimously the favorite of scholarship perks among the scholars.

"My ultimate best thing about going to the conference was going to see some of my friends that I only get to see at the conference," adds Mahonski, "also the education, the developments presented in the classes and hearing about the research."

The camaraderie among the sports turf managers isn't the only perk that has the conference buzzing. For Nick Gow, the speakers confirmed that the sports turf industry was the right path for him. "There are amazing speakers out there," he notes. "The ability to hear several professors talk about topics that interest me and expand my knowledge in the sports turf industry helped significantly."

## CHANGES IN THE BUSINESS

Over the past decade, the sports turf industry has grown to be a highly visible profession with tremendous growth potential. Things are changing for the better, with rising salaries at top positions and new facilities and field conversions.

"The work I see people do (either on social media, newsletters, pictures), the quality of work people do blows me away," says Anderson.

The industry has secured a spot on the fast track to broader recognition with over \$1.29 billion in purchases of sports turf products and services annually, according to University of Missouri's Sports Turf AdvanTage. Technology has also seen a progression within the industry, helping sports turf managers' jobs become easier.

"It's amazing to look back at the first conference I went to. It's only been 10 years, and there is such a difference and improvement in equipment and types of fertilizers," says Slaton. "I can't imagine what the next 10 years will do. Technology is becoming a bigger part."

The combination of better technology and a growing industry has helped to better equip fields for use and safety. Nick Gow mentions how the growing industry has provided more opportunities for sports turf managers. "The green industry has really gone from growing grass to upper management of synthetic fields," he says. "It's a growing industry and will continue to grow. I've seen major improvements of high school facilities. The number one goal of a sports turf manager is to provide safe, quality athletic facilities for youth and adults in communities."

As the industry has become more recognizable, so have the rewarding aspects of sports turf management. Gow touches on a very important value of being a sports turf manager, and opens up the discussion for how others, such as coaches and players, can make a difference. According to Sports Turf AdvanTage, some of the most rewarding aspects of Sports Turf Management include: appreciation by coaches, players and fans, having a plan come together and seeing fields hold up to heavy traffic.

But the biggest draw, mentions Salmore, is the opportunity to work outside and around sports. "Working outside is a big draw," says Salmore. "Working around sports is great."

Blank shared in Salmore's enthusiasm claiming that being outside was also his favorite part about working within the green business. The desire to work around a particular sport is also important to some sports turf managers.

## SCHOLARSHIPS

Every year, the SAFE foundation awards their scholarships to the most qualified applicants. The applicants are judged on academic preparation, cumulative grade point average, experience in sports turf

management, and references provided by student advisers and previous or current employers. They are also evaluated on their contributions to their school, department, and organizations to which they belong, as well as their career objectives. Although GPA is included, the scholarship is not focused on the idea of grade point average.

"I've recommended applying to scholarships to students and people I know in the industry all the time," says Anderson. "It's not just based on your academic performance and grades. More is taken in account than just your GPA. People think that is what it's all about, so they don't apply." Like any scholarship, the hope is to further encourage the academic success of the individual as well as provide some positive recognition of an individual's accomplishments.

Dan Blank discusses how beneficial receiving the scholarship was for him. "[It] solidified everything for me. It made everything real. It was a 'this is it, let's do this' kind of thing," he says. "It was a positive reinforcement and good to have on a résumé."

Almost all of the scholars claimed the recognition and having the scholarship on their résumé helped with job interviews. Most of the job interviews eventually landed them jobs in the long run.

"[The scholarship] shows that you're dedicated and interested in what you're doing," says Salmore. "It helped on my resume and job interviews. It definitely helped get the jobs that I applied for."

The scholarship is also an important introduction to STMA for those individuals interested in the sports turf industry. An STMA membership allows members to access job postings and a leg up on others applying for jobs within the industry. Shawn Mahonski received his current job as Athletic Field Manager at Towson University because of his membership with STMA.

At STMA, we make it a SAFE bet that applying for the scholarship will be worth it. With the easy application process and long-time benefits, we encourage all individuals planning a career in the sports turf industry to apply.

The application process includes simply printing and completing the application and returning it to the SAFE Scholarship Committee. It's as simple as that: just do it! SAFE's goal is to make it as easy as possible to apply for the scholarship. Nick Gow urges those interested to apply and apply every year. The scholars raved at how easy the process was, and mentioned how they recommend it to their interns and students because it could lead to something bigger and better. "Apply for every opportunity that is out there and take advantage. Most of them lead to somewhere or another opportunity," says Mahonski.

Ten years has come and gone, and these scholars are still reminiscing about the journey they've had. STMA applauds you and your dedication to the industry. Continuously grateful to our members, the SAFE Foundation and its scholarships would not be possible without the support and donations to help us fulfill our mission to enrich communities through championing safe, sustainable sports and recreation fields for all athletes. ■

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