

Feature

Insider's Guide to Scoring That 'Super' Job

*Superintendents and Headhunters Share
Their Trade Secrets With Assistants
Looking to Climb the Ladder*

by Jim Pavonetti, CGCS



f there is one topic that rarely gets old among assistant superintendents, it's how to up their chances of landing that super job. That's why, after a six-year hiatus, we decided to revisit the topic, this time seeking the counsel of area assistants who recently landed premium superintendent positions, as well as several headhunters, who are on the inside track of what it takes to impress a prospective employer.

If you're hoping to read about how to build a resume, website, or cover letter, you won't find it here. Instead, we'll take you to the next level, sharing the often-unspoken rules of a successful job search and interview process. The goal: to help you boost your chances of winning that job you're hoping for.

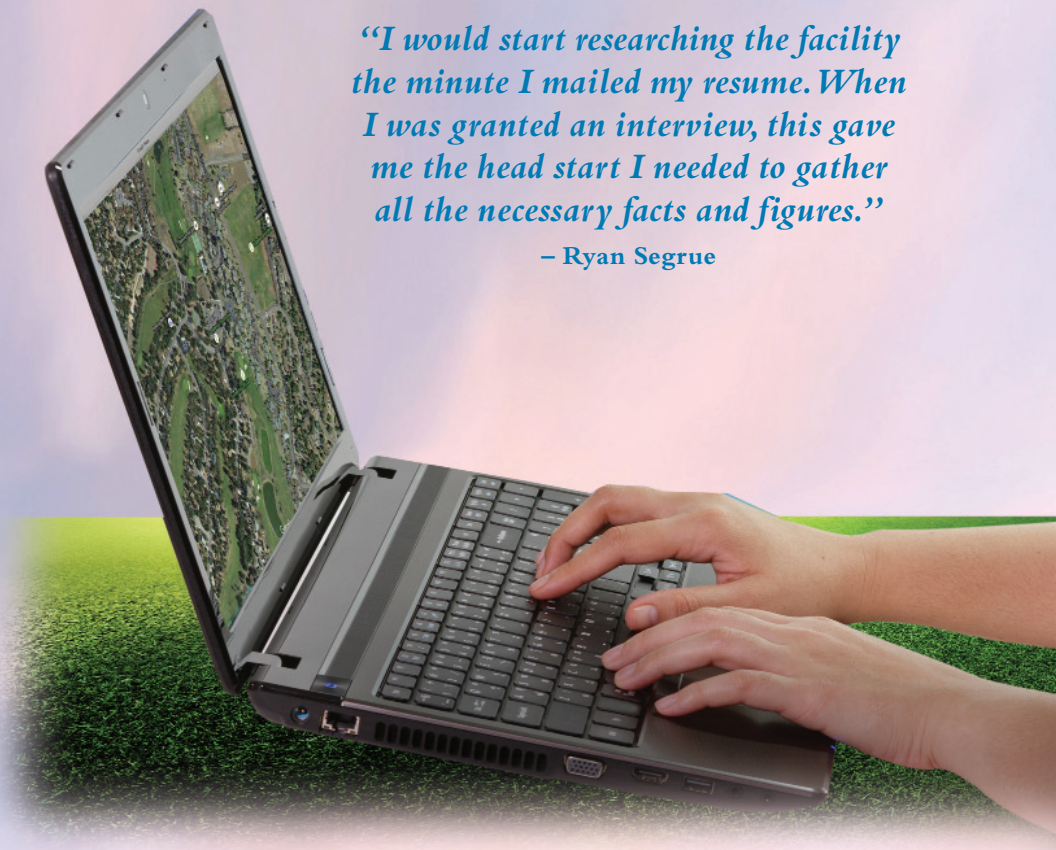
Beginning the Job Search

#1: Walk the walk and talk the talk. If you want a superintendent's position, look—and act—the part. Dress appropriately, shave regularly, and just as important, maintain a professional attitude both on and off the course.

You can begin by cleaning up your social media. Be sure it does nothing but reflect well on you. "If you are Googling the golf facility or club, you know they're Googling you," cautions Shorehaven Superintendent Ryan Segrue.

"Assistants should put as much work into themselves as they do their daily maintenance duties," says Wykagyl Superintendent Dan Rogers. "Behave like a professional, and dress for the position you want, not the one you have. After all, you never know when or where you'll run into a member—or a prospective boss."

"To talk the talk," says Greg Wojick, whose company Playbooks for Golf offers job consulting services for professionals in the turfgrass management industry, "it's essential that you not only know turf, but the game of golf as well: the rules, the top professionals, the best courses and their architects. This will set you apart from the average candidate and show a hiring committee that you're well rounded and knowledgeable."



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— Ryan Segrue

#2: Be proactive when searching for a job. "I can't emphasize enough that it's not your boss's duty to get you your next job," says Wykagyl's Dan Rogers. "We, as superintendents, can make contacts, provide knowledge and insight, but it's up to the assistant to be the driving force behind his or her own career. They need to want that job bad enough to get it. And that attitude will ultimately come through in the interview process."

#3: Accept every opportunity to interview. Practice makes perfect—or at the very least offers the experience you need to feel more at ease when that big job interview comes along.

"Assistants need to be put in that uncomfortable position of being judged and questioned about things they know, and don't know," says Wykagyl's Dan Rogers. "They will undoubtedly have some failures, but that's the kind of experience they need to succeed when there's a job interview that really counts."

Shorehaven's Ryan Segrue encourages job hunters to include in their interview repertoires any job openings with management/maintenance companies. "I know there's a stigma out there about these companies," says Ryan, "but I worked for ValleyCrest for three years and I learned more in that time than I ever could have imagined about the business side of the superintendent's job. Do good work, and better opportunities will come along," he adds.

Playbooks for Golf's Greg Wojick advises making the most of every interview experience by reflecting on what you did well and what you could improve on. "It's wise to keep a notebook of the questions you were asked and the answers you gave," says Greg. "Over time, this notebook of questions will be a valuable resource in helping you prepare for future interviews."

Executive Golf Search's Bruce Williams advises looking at the GCSAA website to view the most often asked interview questions, many of which Williams, himself, developed years ago when he was on the GCSAA board.

Prepping for the Interview

You just got the call from the club's search chairman or general manager inviting you for an interview. Now's your chance to differentiate yourself from the other applicants by learning more about the golf facility and job you're applying for than any other candidate—and then preparing to demonstrate why you're the best fit for the position.

#1: Research club and course particulars. Job number one is to investigate the facility's history and philosophy and any particulars about the maintenance operation and golf course. Find out if there are any renovation projects planned, underway, or recently completed and what they might be looking for in a new superintendent.

Come to the Course Equipped

Most everyone we spoke to noted the tools needed on a site visit:

- a notebook or portfolio for taking notes
- a camera or Smartphone for taking pictures and documenting what you see
- a soil probe to determine how well the course has been aerated and topdressed and whether there are issues with such things as drainage or thatch



Shorehaven's Ryan Segrue believes in getting a jump on the research process. "I would always start researching the facility the minute I mailed my resume," he says. "When I was granted an interview, this gave me the head start I needed to gather all the necessary facts and figures."

Ryan recommends perusing the club's website for information or photos that could improve your understanding of the club and property. He also suggests viewing the course on Goggle Earth. "I always tried to gain an intimate understanding of the property before I made a site visit," says Ryan.

Yet another information-gathering tack Ryan suggests: Understand the course from the golfers' perspective by checking out course reviews. "You'll find golfers' comments for public courses, for instance, on sites like GolfNow," says Ryan.

Country Club of New Canaan's Mike Roe begins his investigation during the very first phone call: "I request a copy of the operating and capital budgets, equipment inventory, USGA reports, and the square footage of the greens, tees, fairways, and rough," he says, suggesting that you also inquire about staffing levels and the average hourly wage of the staff.

And while you're at it, Bruce Williams of Executive Golf Search suggests that you also request a copy of any maintenance standards or standard operating procedures that the club has established. But probably more essential, says Williams, is that you investigate the club's financial standing to be sure it's on firm footing. The last thing you want to do is sign on with a sinking ship—or one that may not have the resources necessary to do the kind of job that will reflect well on you.

#2: Put your network to work. The best way to get the rub on the job you're applying for is to speak with your contacts: your boss, industry mentors, and any contractors or sales reps who might have had dealings with the club. In addition to offering insight into the position and why it's open, you might be put in touch that all-important someone who would be happy to put in a good word for you. As we know, it's often *who* you know,

not *what* you know, that will give you that edge in a job search.

New Canaan's Mike Roe found it helpful to reach out to the members of his club who had contacts at New Canaan. "This was a huge factor in my getting the job at CCNC," says Mike. "Many of the New Canaan members were familiar with Wee Burn and came to play before my interview."

In the end, your success comes down to taking some initiative. If you know, for instance, that a headhunter is doing the search, don't hesitate to get in touch with that person, if not directly, through a contact you have. Everything you can do to stand out will help increase your chances of being selected from that pool of capable candidates.

#3: Get it from the source. Try to contact the club's former superintendent and even his or her predecessor. Inquire about the course, the golfers, the club's staff and resources.

Executive Golf Search's Bruce Williams recommends taking your inquiry behind-the-scenes to understand previous superintendents' successes, failures, and length of time on the job.

Shorehaven's Ryan Segrue always focused on the current super and why he was being replaced. Did he retire, move to another position, or lose his job? "The circumstances behind a superintendent leaving can make a big difference in the way you approach the job, both in your cover letter and interview," says Ryan.

Another source of valuable information is the club's equipment manager. He can give you the lowdown on the grounds crew and the maintenance facility. You can ask about the shop and the equipment fleet: what should be replaced or upgraded and what is missing that you should think about purchasing.

Yet another good resource: salespeople who call on the facility. They can tell you things that staff may not feel comfortable divulging. Ask about the morale of the staff, if the club pays its bills, and even what kind



of products the superintendent likes to buy. The objective of this type of in-depth investigation: to make your interviewers feel you are so familiar with their operation, and what it needs, that it would be the easiest transition for everyone if they were to choose you, rather than another candidate, for the job.

#4: Conduct a site visit. Even if you've played the course, you can't set foot in the boardroom without having conducted a site visit—or two or three. The site visit is your time to scrutinize course conditions and look for ways you might enhance play or course conditions.

Walking the course with a committee member or the green chair is a great chance for the committee member to get to know—and hopefully like—you. It's your chance to demonstrate your knowledge and the member's chance to disclose any pet peeves that you can use to your benefit during the interview.

Listen closely to what the committee member points out about the course. Don't worry if you don't have all the answers at that point. Just be sure to jot them down and then address them during the interview or in your presentation.

Most everyone we talked to agreed that it's always wise to talk to employees, the golf pro and other facility managers, and members to get a feel for what they like about the course and what they would change if they could. "During each of your contacts, leaving a personable impression should be high on your list of objectives," says Playbooks for Golf's Greg Wojick.

"Plan to spend at least three hours out there," says Shorehaven's Ryan Segrue. And both Ryan and New Canaan's Mike Roe emphasize walking the course, even if you're offered a cart, to get a better sense of the layout and conditions.

"You are looking for minor details and areas you can improve on with your skill set," says Old Oaks Superintendent Shannon Slevin. While there is always something that could be improved, both Wykagyl's Dan Rogers and Ryan caution against ap-

pearing overly critical. "Be a positive problem solver who can provide ideas and solutions," says Dan. "The last thing you want to do is put your foot in your mouth by looking for little issues that you know need to be fixed but the members never noticed. They may perceive you as overly critical and feel you're putting down their property," he adds.

"Try to focus on the major issues that members are aware of, rather than focusing on the more minor flaws," continues Ryan. "And if the course is in great shape and the previous superintendent was well liked, I would take nice photos of the signature hole and vistas around the property and use them as background photos in my PowerPoint or report."

#5: Come to the course with a plan. Make the most of your site visit by not only putting together the materials you need, but also a thoughtful plan of action.

Be sure, first and foremost, to wear nice golf attire with golf shoes or good walking shoes. Prepare for whatever the weather might bring. It rained about two inches while I performed my first site visit at Fairview. The benefit there was that I was the only one on the course, and I got to see how water moved across the property.

When I made a site visit, my to-do list was lengthy. I would look at the trees, noting whether there were too many positioned too close to fine turf. I evaluated whether or not the trees, water features, bunkers, and other hazards were being well maintained. Is the irrigation system adequate? How are the cart paths? Has the course been well aerated and topdressed? Are there drainage or thatch issues? What is the condition of the maintenance facility, clubhouse grounds, and practice facility?

"The devil is in the details," says Shorehaven's Ryan Segrue. In addition to looking for general agronomic and drainage issues, he recommends that you take time to view the course from the members' perspective. "Check for details like edged curbing, the condition of tee markers and ball washers, weeds in flowerbeds," he says. "You will be

Come to the Course Knowing What to Look For

Make the most of your site visit by taking a comprehensive look at the property—the good, the bad, and the ugly of the golf course and clubhouse grounds—making a photographic record of what you see. Here are a few specifics on what our respondents were always on the lookout for:

- The composition of turfgrass species on the greens, tees, and fairways, as well as their conditioning
- Course aeration and topdressing
- Topdressing layering, root depth, and moisture content on the greens, tees, and fairways
- The appearance of the clubhouse grounds and surrounding flowerbeds
- Drainage or thatch issues
- The maintenance of trees, water features, bunkers, and other hazards
- The condition of the cart paths
- Irrigation system coverage and efficiency and pump house operation
- The condition of the maintenance facility, inside and out
- Equipment inventory and condition
- Maintenance operation staffing levels

Last but not least, secure a copy of the maintenance operation budget, the maintenance standards, and the club's standard operating procedures so you will get a good look at the club from the inside out!



surprised at how much members notice these types of details compared to what we, as turf professionals, see.

Ryan also recommends gaining an understanding of the protocol and circumstances of your site visit so there are no surprises. "I've been on site visits," he says, "where I was expecting to be on my own, but the committee ended up joining me." Forewarned is forearmed!

Some of the details New Canaan's Mike Roe feels are important to note are the top-dressing depth, if it exists; topdressing layering, root depth, and moisture content on the greens, tees, and fairways. On the tees," he says, "I also check to see how quickly the divots are recovering or if the tees are rotated properly."

Last but not least, Mike recommends checking for the composition of turfgrass species, as well as the irrigation layout and the number of quick couplers around the greens, tees, and fairways.

Crafting a Plan of Action

After your research is complete, your next step is to quickly craft a plan of attack. TMG Golf's Jim McLoughlin recommends that your plan of action include what you would like to accomplish in your first year, your first two to three years, and then highlight a longer range vision for the operation.

#1: Show them what you can do. Do your best to describe how you plan to manage each portion of the facility, including greens, tees, fairways, bunkers, water features, landscaping, trees, rough, practice

facility, paths, equipment, irrigation. Leave no stone unturned.

Old Oaks' Shannon Slevin recommends taking pictures of areas that you can relate to one of your past projects or experiences and then incorporate those photos into a PowerPoint presentation. "The PowerPoint is the biggest opportunity to showcase your skills," says Shannon. "Ninety percent of the candidates will have similar looking resumes."

New Canaan's Mike Roe prefers to present his information in report form. "I used a PowerPoint twice," says Mike, "and both times I felt like I lost my audience." Mike shows up to his interviews with a spiral-bound booklet that he has prepared at Kinkos, adding the club's logo for a finishing touch.

"I like to have the report tell the story of the course and then back up what I say with photos," says Mike. "The report I did for CCNC was 37 pages long. It detailed how I was going to take what they have now and build off that to raise the conditioning and level of golf."

Placing pictures from courses where he's worked, side-by-side, with pictures from the course at New Canaan, he demonstrated how specific areas might be improved.

#2: Show them the money. Keep in mind that it's wise to demonstrate not just how you plan to spend the club's money, but also what you can accomplish for no additional cost or, better, *less* money.

But Mike cautions against telling a club you can do the changes you're proposing for the current budget, just to sell yourself. "I

went through what I thought could be done to improve every playing surface and then explained, realistically, how that would affect the current budget," says Mike.

#3: Go for the extra credit. Executive Golf Search's Bruce Williams recommends going for the extra credit points when preparing your report by including copies of any documents that you, yourself, have written. "Items such as Maintenance Standards, Standard Operating Procedures, Budgets, Equipment Replacement Plans, Daily Checklists, etc., will give the club a glimpse into what you can do for them to take them to the next level," says Williams.

And don't forget to include any articles you have authored or even an example of your club communications. Communication is one of the keys to long-term success on the job.

The Interview

With all that's been written about interviewing, you probably know about the power of first impressions. Many surveys have been conducted in the business world that say it takes most interviewers just 6 to 10 minutes to draw a conclusion about a candidate. That means that you have to be on your game well before you set foot in that meeting room. Here's what our sources recommend you keep in mind:

#1: Pay attention to the details. Extend a firm handshake, maintain eye contact, and present a professional image. This includes ensuring your shoes are shined, clothing is pressed, hair is cut, and your nails are clean and trimmed.

I, personally, recommend having two different well-tailored suits ready to go for your first and second interviews. When called for an interview, you won't have time to run to Jos. A. Banks to be fitted for a suit and then wait a week for it to be tailored.

#2: Know the key players. "If possible," says Playbooks for Golf's Greg Wojick, "you should learn the names and titles of the people you might be interviewing with. You'll appear more confident and interested if they know you took the time to learn their names."

Old Oaks' Shannon Slevin and Wykagyl's Dan Rogers place this practice high on their pre-interview to-do list. Says Shannon, "It's important to make a connection not only with the names of the club officials and staff involved in the interview process, but also their professions. That will help you talk turf in terms they can relate to and understand."

Dan adds, “If you’ve made it to the interview, these people know a lot about you. Knowing their backgrounds and understanding where they might be coming from will help you better navigate their questions.”

Dan also recommends writing down the names of the interviewers in the order in which they’re sitting in the boardroom. “That way,” he says, “you can use their names when talking to them, which helps establish a personal connection.”

#3: Ace the likely questions. Make sure you know how you will respond to predictable questions, such as, “Can you tell me a little about yourself?” Review interview questions you’ve been asked in the past and prepare answers. At the same time, think about the insights gained from your network so you can couch your responses in the context of how you can benefit this particular course and club.

“Ideally,” says Playbooks for Golf’s Greg Wojick, “you should try to gain enough control of the interview to insert the points you feel are important to your getting the job offer.”

#4: Rehearse. I’m an advocate of typing answers to potential questions and then rehearsing the responses out loud. Take it a step further and record your responses. Play it back to see how you sound. Repeat the process until you’re satisfied that you sound natural, relaxed, and confident.

Executive Golf Search’s Bruce Williams suggests a more impromptu rehearsal approach: “Do mock interviews with your current superintendent or peers. And make sure they ask you the tough questions,” he adds.

#5: Take it outside. TMG Golf’s Jim McLoughlin touts the value of encouraging an on-course interview with the search committee. “The rationale for this recommendation,” he writes in a June 26, 2014 Turfnet blog entry, “is that a search committee will learn far more about their golf course and each candidate through collaborative on-course exchanges than they will be able to via routine sit-down interviews, primarily because search committees find it difficult to develop a meaningful line of questioning when dealing with technical course issues.”

#6: Don’t be cocky. Strike the right balance between presenting your accomplishments in a positive light and coming across as overly confident. Being arrogant is one of the worst mistakes a candidate can make.

“From my perspective,” says Wykagyl’s

Dan Rogers, “most important is being confident that you’re the person for the job, yet humble enough to know you don’t have it yet. Confidence comes from preparation, and humility comes from failure. It’s going to take both to make it happen,” he adds.

#7: Tell memorable stories. Give specific examples of how and why you’ve been successful. “You’ll make a positive impression on the hiring committee by sharing interesting anecdotes about how you helped to solve a tough turf or staffing problem or contributed to saving the club money,” says Playbooks for Golf’s Greg Wojick. “Be clear about your specific role at each course, and make sure to discuss topics that you know are top-of-mind for the club, whether it’s widespread tree removal or a large-scale course renovation project.

“Just be sure never to alter the truth or exaggerate the facts,” continues Greg. “Even if the committee doesn’t recognize then that you’ve stretched the truth, they’re bound to find out later. And that’s a deal breaker.”

New Canaan’s Mike Roe cautions against sharing negative stories about the former superintendent or his or her maintenance practices. “I would be truthful,” he says, “about what I wanted to change or disliked, but I would steer clear of any comments that may be perceived as sour grapes.”

#8: Be yourself. “Avoid coming across as overly rehearsed,” says Greg Wojick. “Interviewers want to get a sense of your personality and how you would fit into the fabric of the club.”

“Search committees can sense nerves,” adds Shorehaven’s Ryan Segrue, “so find a way to calm down before you enter the room.” Deep breathing helps.

#9: Follow up. If you really want the job, following up is critical. Rule of thumb: Touch base within 24 hours.

Handwritten thank you notes can go a long way in this electronic age. Address a note to the general manager and to the head of the hiring committee, reconfirming your interest. Mention the high points of the interview, and restate why you’re right for the job and how you can meet the club’s needs. This is also a great time to correct an answer that you may have stumbled on during the interview.

In the end, this is the perfect opportunity to put your name in front of the hiring committee one more time.

In the End

As an assistant, you really aren’t expected to know all. The key, however, to your interview success now, and in the future, will be your ability to demonstrate a positive, can-do attitude. This skill will serve you well beyond the interview and into your everyday work, helping you navigate the politics and the stresses and strains involved in running your own golf course one day.

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