

A Path With Heart

by Jason Miller

Confucius said it best... "Find a job you love and you'll never work a day in your life!" Sounds as simple as flipping through the pages of the Golf Course Trades, but finding the perfect job isn't always so easy depending on what makes the job perfect for you. I think a love for the outdoors, the instant gratification of our work, or merely a love for the game of golf are what gets a lot of us hooked on this business. Although, the ever increasing standards on turf quality and playability, dealing with the politics of the membership and players, financial strains, and labor issues have a way of taking away that luster. Like everyone, I have my ups and downs, but I do my best to keep my eye on what is truly important and that is enjoying what I do. It's so easy to get caught up in the day to day that you begin to lose sight of what allured you into this business in the first place. I've seen it a hundred times, you see a superintendent or assistant get burned out and try something else, and a few years later their back in the business. I truly believe it is in our blood. I feel that superintendents are increasingly becoming more and more professional and have gained a new level of deserved respect for their contributions to the game of golf. Few times have I seen another individual wear as many hats, solve as many problems, or work as hard, as the golf course superintendent. As complicated as it may seem sometimes, I think there is a very simple reason why we do it. We love it. I have been very fortunate throughout the twelve years I have been involved in this industry to get to meet a lot of good superintendents who approach their golf courses a lot of different ways. It has taken a lot of time and hard work for me to get my shot, but for me, Confucius was right.

I recently stumbled across an article on how creating a relaxing workplace environment can elevate the morale and improve productivity. It got me to thinking. I spend a lot more time in the office than I used to, but I truly can't think of a more relaxing atmosphere than the 18-hole Nicklaus design I manage in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. Must be why I'm so productive? Probably depends on who you ask. But this place I speak of goes by the name Aspen Glen Club. Aspen Glen is one of ClubCorp's premier properties in their large portfolio of golf courses. The property is located between Glenwood Springs and Aspen Colorado off Hwy 82. The two nines are cut in half by the Gold Medal waters of the Roaring Fork River. There are so many elements to this job that make it unique and the ever changing weather seems to bring something new to each day. Although I feel very much at home here, I am not a native by any means.

I grew up in small town central Arkansas before going off to college at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. I sometimes wonder how a kid from Pangburn, Arkansas got way out here, but on with the story. As beautiful as Arkansas is and as much as I would love to call it home again one day, the opportunities that I was looking for were never really there for me. Until just recently, Arkansas didn't have much of a high-end private club scene. My journey truly began in Augusta, Georgia. I was finally getting serious about my career path, had worked a couple of high-end clubs, and wanted to take it to the next



Photo courtesy of Rob Wright

level. The year was 1998 and I was in the middle of the fall semester. I had been trying for months to get an interview with Augusta National Golf Club for an intern position. Like anyone who has a love for golf, the Masters Tournament is the Holy Grail. Having had little luck tackling down an interview, I got the courage to call upon Frank Broyles, who is a member of Augusta National, and the Director of Athletics for the University of Arkansas. Not expecting him to answer the phone when I called, I stuttered around for a minute, before laying out my proposal. It must have been well received, because I had an interview within two weeks and a job by Christmas (Thanks Coach!). My plan of taking it to the next level was on the fast track. Augusta National was like nothing I had seen. I never have and probably never will see a piece of land more beautiful. It truly doesn't happen by itself. Through the years, Augusta National has been the

grooming grounds for some of this industry's best superintendents and I have been fortunate enough to get to know quite a few of them along the way. I have worked for a few Superintendents, but I don't know that I have ever seen anyone display the level of passion and intensity towards producing perfection as I saw in Brad Owen. This year will be my 11th Masters tournament to work and as soon as I lay eyes on him the Sunday before tournament, I'll go back to being that 23 year old intern.

While interning at August National, I also had the honor to work under Russ Myers for a brief time. I traveled to Tulsa in August to help out with the 2007 PGA Championship and I have to say that he did one hell of a job! I would like to think that my experiences at Augusta National had a lot to do with bringing me to where I am today. I'm positive that the five months of syringing bentgrass greens under Russ had me seeking a milder climate. With that being said, the next summer I decided to escape the heat and humidity of the south and go out west. I wanted to work another PGA event and see things from a different angle. Marshall Fearing granted me that opportunity, and I spent the summer at Castle Pines Golf Club, where I would assist in the preparation of the 1999 PGA Sprint International. What an experience! Not only was the golf course and tournament awesome to be involved with, just being in the presence of Colorado everyday was an experience that is difficult to put into words. It might have been the fact that for the first time in five summers, I wasn't chasing bentgrass greens all day long in 100 degree heat and humidity. It might have been the cool mornings, panoramic landscapes, and clean mountain air. Whatever it was, I was sold. I returned to college that fall knowing that I had to end up in Colorado.

In November of 2001, my dream of working and living in Colorado was granted. I was hired as 1st Assistant Superintendent for Aspen Glen Club. Aspen Glen is consistently a top-ten private club in the state and very high-end. I must say the next two years were two of the most intense years of work I had experienced, but what a place to do it. Towards the end of 2003, I was approached by Dr. Doug Karcher with the University of Arkansas Turfgrass Program to come back to Arkansas to work on a unique master's thesis. I am huge on education, so I returned for two years and completed a masters. I have to add that the research that Dr. Karcher and Dr. Mike Richardson are doing at Arkansas is great for the program and the industry. In my final semester there, I was com-





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pletely uncertain as to what my next step would be. And then opportunity came knocking. The Superintendent position at Aspen Glen Club was extended to me and here I am.

I am in my third season as Superintendent and things couldn't be better. I truly have the job I talked about earlier. And let me tell you, it is an experience. The property could not be placed any better in the Roaring Fork Valley. If you haven't seen this area you need to check it out. You have world class skiing at your fingertips and no matter what direction you look, you see magnificent mountain backdrops. Four of our eighteen holes play into Mt. Sopris, a beautiful 13,900 ft mountain that stays covered in snow most of the year. Aspen Glen is also broken up by the Roaring Fork River, which was voted the #1 destination for fly fishing trout in the country. You are probably wondering if we ever work. Well, like anywhere else it comes with its challenges.

The climate is mild for a good part of the growing season, which makes poa a big part of the management equation. It loves it here! Thatch can also be an issue because of ideal temps and growing conditions and little microbial breakdown during the growing season. Because our season is so short, finding those windows of opportunity to turn the place upside down with aerification are limited. Luckily I have a manager and committees who understand what it takes to achieve the conditions we are looking for, even if it means giving up the golf course. There are definitely some upsides to the mild climate. I have recuperative potential all season, so I push the greens really hard all season. Last summer through pushing them days on end without water and smooth rolling very aggressively, I achieved 12s and 13s on the stimp most of the season with no real detrimental effect to turf quality. They were crazy fast at times, but the members loved them! I am also starting to push the envelope with lower and lower heights of cuts on fairways and approaches during our more stressful periods of the season, which can be a little touchy for the poa. As for disease pressure and pest activity, I have very little for the most part, unless

you consider the 300 head of elk that occupy the course during the winter months turf pests. I sure as hell do.

They are beautiful animals to observe, but that beauty comes with a price come spring. They are a lot like the friend who drops in to visit uninvited, stays too long, and leaves your house a mess. We do our best to keep them off high priority areas like greens and tees with fencing, but everywhere else is covered with elk droppings, hoof and chew damage, and dead spots of turf from urine. We typically spend the first two months of our eight month season just getting the place cleaned up from all the damage. Just part of a vicious cycle we have come to except.

We also share the property with two bald eagles that start a new family here each year. They have a large nest atop a huge pine tree on the front left of our #10 hole. They typically show up in December, do their thing and hatch a few eggs, and spend the remainder of their time teaching the young eaglets how to fly before leaving the nest around June 1st. Did I mention that the Colorado Division of Wildlife enforces us keeping the hole closed to play until they do so? Our back tees are on the opposite side of the river from the nest and they are worried a stray tee shot might hurt or kill one of the eagles in the nest. Believe me; you don't want to be that guy.

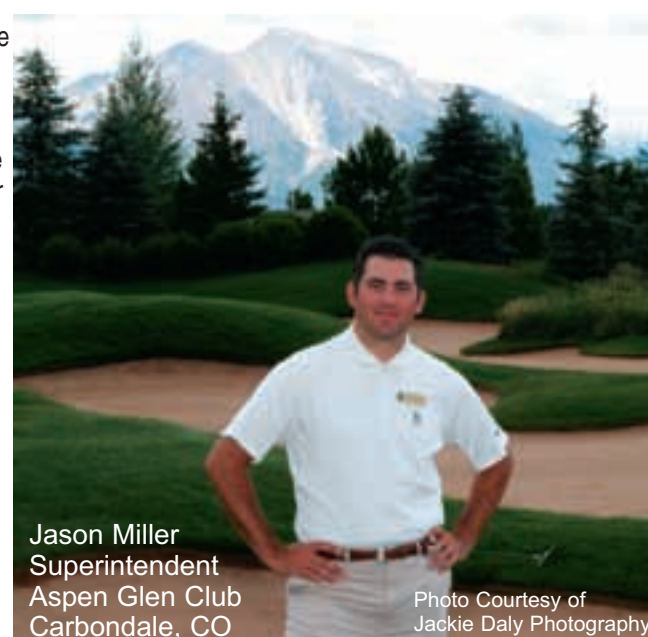
The days are typically sunny and bright and the air is always fresh. There is something about it that always makes you see the brighter side of things. That is sometimes hard to do when you think about the declining housing market, weak economy, and who will become our next President! I guess what I am trying to say is that we are all lucky to be a part of an industry that no matter what type of golf course property you are involved with, all you have to do is look around at the beauty you have created and it doesn't take long to remember what made you fall in love with the idea in the first place. At least for me it doesn't!

Good luck to all of you in 2008!

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Photo courtesy of Rob Wright



Jason Miller
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Photo Courtesy of
Jackie Daly Photography

Thanks for the 22 years of service that The Golf Course Trades has provided to superintendents across the country. I have always enjoyed the diversity and usefulness of this publication. It is quite an honor to be writing an article for a magazine that I have come to rely on.

**Thanks,
Jason Miller**



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the superintendent's monthly buying guide

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Aspen Glen Club in Carbondale, CO

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