

There is a reason the term superintendent includes the word “super.” Golf course superintendents often work behind the scenes and usually this results in them not getting enough credit for the work that they do. On September 13th, it is “Thank a Golf Course Superintendent Day” where we recognize the hard work it takes to keep golf courses enjoyable, sustainable, and in peak condition. Thanks to days like today, the work of superintendents across the nation can be celebrated and appreciated by all.

Don Blatchley is the superintendent of Sawmill Golf Course and has worked there for 42 years. He started working there in 1979. I interviewed him on his role as a superintendent, and how it has changed and developed over the years.



Pictured above from left to right: Don Blatchley with his daughter, Taylor (1996). Don cutting fairways (1991). Don Blatchley with his daughter, Taylor (2022). Don golfing on the 11th green (2022).

### How did you get into this line of work?

**Don:** My family golfed at Sawmill and I asked George for a job when I was out of high school.

### **Which part of being a superintendent do you find most satisfying?**

**Don:** That moment when people approach you and comment on the condition and quality of the golf course. When you change something no matter how small or large, and people notice. That's the best part.

### **Which part of being a superintendent do you find most challenging?**

**Don:** Making sure the greens, tees and bunkers are in the best shape possible. Especially the greens because they are the heart of the entire course. If the greens are not in perfect condition, people will know. New challenges exist now that didn't exist a few years ago. You have to keep adapting as the environment and conditions change.

### **What was it like working as a superintendent in the 1970s, compared to the 1990s and present time in 2022? How has it changed?**

**Don:** The main difference I can think of is the technology available. In the 1970s and early 1980s all your fertilizer and fungicide was granular. Now, it is all spray based. The only sprayer we had back then was tractor mounted. Technology has advanced through the years to the point where the sprayers we have now are computerized and regulate and control the amount of spray they put out. The equipment used now at golf courses drastically reduces the amount of time it takes to perform tasks. Back in the day, top dressing the greens would take us around a week to do, and now we can do it in less than a day. All of the equipment has changed from when I started. Fairway mowers, rough mowers, and greens mowers are all more advanced and designed for maximum efficiency. The only downside to better technology is that when something goes wrong, it takes longer to fix it or you may need to call in a specialist because of the electronics involved. Irrigation used to be done manually as well. I would spend hours at night watering, whereas now everything is automated and all I have to do is click a few keys on the computer. The course itself looks very different too. Bunkers have been added and removed and I'm pretty sure there isn't a single bunker in its original location. The same applies to the tee decks. As for the trees, let's just say that I used to be able to see the clubhouse from the shop, and now I can't. In the 1970s, they were just twigs sticking out of the ground.

### **What was the most difficult on-course situation you've ever faced at Sawmill?**

**Don:** Snow mold on the fourth green. This was a long time ago, the winter was long, and we were not able to get snow mold protection down early enough because the golf season ended so abruptly and the snow stayed on the ground. We did not have the equipment available to aerate and all we could do was put new plugs into the affected areas. I'm not talking about a few patches here and there. What I'm talking about is hundreds of plugs. I don't even remember where we got the plugs from exactly because it was so long ago. But that was one of the most difficult situations I remember having to handle.

**If you could give one piece of advice to anyone wanting to get into golf course work, what would you say?**

**Don:** Make sure you're passionate about it. A lot of times the work will seem like it is twenty-four seven. Issues have a way of suddenly appearing at the worst time possible. Usually at the beginning or end of the week and never in the middle. Sometimes you'll have to drop everything to deal with a golf course situation and that's the way it is. There could be a broken irrigation line during a drought, or disease on the greens, or a pump that breaks down leading to you hand watering for a week straight. Some things just can't wait until the following day. It's challenging but rewarding work and if you love what you do, it's worth it.

**What is your passion or favourite hobby?**

**Don:** Golf.

**What's your favourite sports team or individual?**

**Don:** Toronto Maple Leafs

**What do you like to watch on TV?**

**Don:** Nascar. I used to watch it a lot more than I do now because all the good drivers are retired.

**What is your favourite thing about working at Sawmill?**

**Don:** The people and the owners. The owners have always treated me like family and some of the members have been there as long as I've been working there, so it's a real family environment.

**Remember to use the hashtag #ThankASuper today on social media and show your appreciation for our golf course superintendents.**

**Written by: Taylor Blatchley**