



# Day in the Life

## Waking up the Course at Rich Harvest Farms

By Greg Jourdan

His office has been called Augusta North. When Jeff VerCautren pulls into his Sugar Grove “cubicle,” he knows that his efforts deserve comparisons to places like Augusta National. Rich Harvest Farms is on the bucket list for any golfer who has pursued the daunting task of playing America’s top 100 golf courses. For Chicagoland golfers, an experience at Rich Harvest is a feather in the cap and brag tag on their golf bag. If you have played a round at Jerry Rich’s masterpiece, then you have a story for the grandkids.

Jeff VerCautren, 38 years old, loves his office, which encompasses a 2,000 acre estate and also happens to be the site of one of the most exclusive golf clubs in the country. As superintendent of Rich Harvest Farms, VerCautren likens his job to that of a superintendent for a major league baseball team’s ballpark, “My team’s efforts are showcased each day. Our course must exceed



our members’ and their guests’ expectations.” VerCautren adds, “A day at a major league ballpark is a treat. A round of golf at Rich Harvest Farms is like giving fans a chance to play inside the ivy at Wrigley Field.”

The responsibilities of a superintendent at an elite private golf club are heavily weighted on reaction to things you cannot control. Elements like the force of Mother Nature, common turf disease, and the wrath of pestilence require experience and a proactive maintenance philosophy. “Mr. Rich provides my team with all the tools and resources to maintain one of the best golf courses in the world,” shares VerCautren, “There’s nothing better than hearing our members rave about how well the course is playing.”

In order to get it right, VerCautren relies on his intimate knowledge of the course and his management experiences at TPC Prestancia in Sarasota, Florida, and



TPC Deere Run. Also, he gets by with a little help from his friends. VerCautren understands that what he sees at Rich Harvest is probably an issue at other area courses. “Superintendents are like a brotherhood. We network on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter to stay on top of current issues we are having. Whether it is bugs or turf disease, we post

pictures and pick each other’s brains to prevent or fix a problem.” He adds, “If Shane Richie at Orchard Valley, or Matt Sinatra at Schaumburg Golf Club, is having issues

with turf, then I need to ensure I am ready to combat what is heading my way.”

### 3:45am Rise and Shine

“I usually beat my alarm to the punch, then it is a big cup of coffee and a five minute commute to the shop. Bunker, my nine-year-old golden retriever, needs a nudge to wake up at this hour. He is the smart one.”



### 4:30am Planning and Communication

“I email our department managers about what the golf course and grounds crews have planned for the day. Before the sun rises, I meet with our assistant superintendents to prioritize duties. We set up and assign equipment for the operators.”

### 5:00am Game Plan with Assistant Superintendents

“Growing grass is only 10% of my job. We set up the daily job board and check equipment that was serviced. With a golf course staff that includes over 30 full-time positions, I am also a human resources manager. My staff includes

“Growing grass is only 10% of my job.”

four, full-time assistant superintendents, three mechanics, and 24 operators. We have over 100 members. Those individuals and their guests are my bosses; oddly, that is the fun part. They ask great questions and want to hear about our current projects.”

### 5:30am Game On!

“It is an impressive sight to see all the operators and equipment roll out of the shop to wake up the course. At this point of the morning, all of us are on a mission. I know that Bunker wishes he was asleep and at home with my wife and daughters.”

### 5:35am Cutting Cups with Bunker

“I cut all the cups. This is my favorite part of the day. I get to see the guys on their

# Mistwood Golf Club Breaks Ground

machines, look at the course from the top of our greens, and get my feet on all 18 holes of the course. I also take stimp readings to make sure our greens are rolling at PGA Tour speeds. We pride ourselves on the fact that we could host a professional event without a day's notice."

### 7:00am Coffee with Golf Staff

"I check in with the golf staff. We make sure that we are on the same page and coordinate our days. Bunker usually grabs a snack."



### 7:15am to 10:00am Back to Cups

"I usually meet with Mr. Rich on the course while I am cutting cups or meeting with the golf staff. Afterwards, I check the progress of the operators, spray the greens, and take notes."

### 10:00am to 11:30am The Office

"It isn't just about greens. Paperwork is just like the course. You need to stay on top of it. I complete daily purchase orders, return e-mails and phone calls, and meet with our general manager. Before I return to the course, I grab a quick lunch and call my assistants and interns."

### 11:30am to 3:30pm The Other Office

"After lunch, I begin my second tour of the course, work on projects, and meet with my



assistants and interns on the course. Every day I see and do different things. I go from greens keeper to plumber to electrician to operator. After finishing office manager and accountant duties behind the desk, working outside gives me my second wind. All superintendents are outside pets."

### 3:30pm to 4:30pm-ish Wrap it Up

"I meet with the assistants and we set up irrigation. When I return to the shop, I wrap up any calls or emails that are hanging and

end my day with another meeting with staff. Our mechanics usually have everything ready for the next day, so our team is ready to wake up the course tomorrow."

"In 12 hours, our team has taken care of an 18 hole golf course, six chipping greens, two full ranges, one organic garden, and everything green on a 2,000 acre estate. I have a 250-acre cubicle at Rich Harvest Farms and I couldn't ask for a better place to spend my time. Yeah, it's really special here."



Mistwood Golf Club in Romeoville has gone through a major face-lift over the last two seasons, which included a renovated golf course drawing national acclaim and a new Performance Center that was immediately proclaimed among the best in the country by *Golf Range* magazine.

Next on owner Jim McWethy's to-do list is a new clubhouse. Work, which began in August with the demolition of the previous building, is well underway and the new version, designed by Chicago-based Daniel Wohlfeil Design, is expected to open next June.

"It's going to be spectacular," said McWethy, who has owned the facility since 2003 after being one of the original investors when the course opened in 1998. "Almost nothing will be as innovative, creative, and attractive as this will be." The new facility will actually consist of two buildings that will have the same stone architecture and Scottish farmhouse theme as the Performance Center, which was also designed by Wohlfeil. Together, the three buildings and surrounding landscape will have the look and feel of a Scottish village.

One building will house a restaurant and banquet facility that will easily seat 250 to 300 diners. The restaurant, still unnamed, will be

separately branded. "We want a place where people who might not even be golfers can come and have a great meal," said McWethy. The other building will have two stories, the lower one housing a pro shop and locker rooms that will accommodate 80 to 100 players and the upper one used for staff offices with a special view of the entire course. The buildings will also share a large underground basement area used for storage and golf carts. Though he's consistently declined comment on the cost of his Mistwood projects, McWethy admitted, "it's obviously very significant."

Presently, Mistwood's biggest event is the Illinois Women's Open tourney where professionals and amateurs from the U.S. and around the world compete. Mistwood has also hosted Chicago District Golf Association and Illinois PGA major events. "We definitely want more," said McWethy. "We'd love to have more national amateur and professional events, for both men and women." McWethy admits that his extensive, expensive projects fly in the face of a difficult economic climate. "The economy has been struggling, and golf is an activity that is being challenged," he said. "But, it goes back to my fundamental belief that if you do a good job with every aspect

of it, there's still enough business out there. There's still a lot of people playing golf."

And many of them are likely to visit Mistwood. More have already come – and many from further distances – to experience the renovated course and spiffy Performance Center. The new clubhouse will only add to that, and McWethy expects Mistwood to eventually become a golf destination.

"You need to build a great golf course, which I think we've done, and we have a Performance Center without peer," he said. "The clubhouse facility is the third piece of the puzzle and I believe we will have one of the finest golf facilities in the Chicago area."

The course, originally designed by Michigan architect Ray Hearn, opened in 1998. Hearn returned to handle the renovation, which required the course to be closed for parts of 2012 and 2013. That inconvenience paid off when *Golf Digest* named Mistwood as one of its Best New Courses in 2013 and *Golf* magazine listed it as one of the Best Renovations You Can Play in January, 2014, and one of its top Renovations of the Year in the world six months later.

Follow the story from groundbreaking to final punch list at [www.mistwoodgc.com](http://www.mistwoodgc.com).

