



Episode 02

Equestrian turned Superintendent

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Podcast Transcript

Music Intro

Sara: Hello and welcome to the second episode of Canadian Turf talks. I'm Dr. Sara Stricker from the University of Guelph, and I'm here with my co-host, Reg Langen. So today we're interviewing Leasha Schwab, the superintendent at Pheasant Run Golf Course. And she's the founder of the Ladies Leading Turf. Now, Reg, why do you - why are we interviewing Leasha? What are you interested in hearing from her?

Reg: Well, Sara, I think, you know, for me, I like the idea of interviewing these Leasha because you know, she's, she's gonna gain some, she's gonna give us some perspective on what it was like to be a female growing up in a male dominated industry. I mean, I can't say that from my shoes, I can really, you know, get a good grasp of the challenges and how difficult it must have been to come up to the ranks of Superintendent through an industry that let's be honest, is, you know, male dominated. And I think that's really interesting. And I think founding an organization like Ladies Leading Turf is a really good - you know - it takes some it takes some courage to really to go out there and build something like that. So, I'm interested to learn more about what made her make those decisions to kind of go that way. And then just to learn a little bit more about her and her journey to where she is now and maybe what her next steps are.

Sara: Well, I mean, I think it's really important for us to all be aware of the privileges that like we are born into, you know? I recognize myself as a white woman born into middle class. I mean, there are other difficulties that like you might not see within me, like, I have attention deficit, and I'm part of the LGBTQ plus community, you know, so someone looking at me might not automatically jump to like, oh, what struggles I've seen in her life. So, it's really interesting to try to interview and talk to people from like, a wide variety of life experiences, to because it's not same experience. Right?

Reg: For sure. And I think that that's, that's the point. I mean, you know, when we started this all up, and, you know, we talked about doing this to me, it's about the people, it's really always been about people to me, and it's like, they're the ones you know, that that drive the industry. Hey here she is now!

Sara: And with no further ado, let's introduce our guest, Leasha. Hey, Leasha!

Leasha: Hey, how's it going guys?

Reg: We're good. You?

Leasha: I'm good. Thank you.

Reg: Thank you. Thank you for coming.

Leasha: No problem, Reg. It's good to see you.

Reg: So tell you a little bit about... Sara, you don't mind if I step in here, do you? But so yeah, we started this... I did a presentation in OTS this past year, on operations management in turf and Sara reached out and said, "Will you do podcast with me?" I guess I 'm a ball of energy, and anybody who knows me knows that. So, she's like...

Sara: He likes to talk. ha ha

Reg: Hey! I'm an extrovert! If you've ever done Myers Briggs, I'm like, way far on the extraversion, like way over here. So anyway, but no.... So I said, "Yeah, absolutely." I think I think this is a really cool thing. And, you know, part of her role is communications coordinator with GTI. And I was honored to be asked, and I think, you know, interviewing people like yourself who've done you know, who are interesting, for lack of a better term, characters... was something I thought was really important though.

Sara: So my background, I'm a bit of a lab rat. I did my masters and PhD in pathology. So like, I don't know, if you've heard of Tom Hsiang he does the, you know, microbes and looking under the microscope, it's so like, I have such a close zoomed in perspective of turf. And I'm trying to expand that to see the wider and get, you know, boots on the ground, for lack of a better word, and trying to figure out how I can get boots on the ground when I can't necessarily travel and and get those boots on the ground

Leasha: Absolutely.

Sara: Yeah, so COVID kind of birthed the podcast because we're like, "How do we reach out when we can't reach out". So, let's try this...

Leasha: Amazing. Yeah.

Sara: So, you're a superintendent at the Pheasant Run Golf Course in Ontario. Right? What's close to Pheasant Run Golf Course?

Leasha: I would say that closest big city or town would be New Market.

Sara: Okay. Yeah. So, sort of Greater Toronto Area, north of Toronto area.

Leasha: Yeah, a little bit northeast for sure, out in farm country definitely.

Sara: And you're also the founder of a group called Ladies Leading Turf. So, we're going to ask you a few questions about that. But first off, I want to just tell us, you know, tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got into the turf industry.

Leasha: Oh, I started in the turf industry when I was quite young, about 14. I grew up on a farm my whole life. And then I rode dressage, which is a type of horseback riding, think of like medieval times horse dancing. So, I worked on a farm. I used to get dropped off - my bus dropped me off there when I was like, you know, 12 to 14. And then so I decided I wanted to continue doing something outside and I was pretty handy. So, I decided to try out a golf course. So, I got my first job at Cedarhurst Golf Course which is in Beaverton, Ontario, which is even more farm country than Pheasant Run. And I was about 14 when I got my first job there. And it's I've been in the industry ever since, haven't missed a season.

Sara: Wow. I like how you explained horseback riding as a horse dancing. That's so nice. Yeah.

Reg: Who did you work for at Cedarhurst?

Leasha: Sean Evelyn.

Reg: Sean Evelyn, so way back eh?

Leasha: Yeah, Sean Evelyn. He passed away and I worked – So, his assistant at the time was a man named Bill Tran, who still he has also passed away. But still to this day, he is my biggest mentor. I like, I think of him daily. He made a big impact in my life. I would have called him like a second father at the time. And I'm still quite close with his wife.

Reg: Aww that's nice

Leasha: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Sara: Sounds like it's bad luck to be the super at Beaverton though...

Leasha: No, totally, totally. Yeah, it was that was like a whirlwind. Both of them passed away within a couple of years of each other like,

Reg: Whoa

Leasha: Yeah, yeah

Reg: Where'd you go? Where'd you go after Cedarhurst?

Leasha: So, after Cedarhurst I - so I had a little interim at Wyndance in 2006. They were doing the build there, the construction. So, I worked for Jake Reiksteins. At that time, and I would say that Jake would be another big mentor of mine. I still keep in touch with them to this day. I was doing my little campervan trip through the States this this winter with my two dogs and I stopped in and he lives in Texas now. And I stopped in and stayed with his family for a couple of days. And I love to stay close with people that. Like, I would have been 17 when I worked at Wyndance. And yeah, yeah, that was, like, being part of a construction project is amazing at any time, but Jake... Jake was an unreal person to work for. He's a top of the line guy for sure. And after that, I think I went back to Cedarhurst for a season. And then and I was going to school in Ottawa at the time. Umm... I was yeah, just going to school in Ottawa at Algonquin College. And then, when I was finishing up there, I was offered the assistants position at Foxbridge Golf Course, which is Uxbridge. Yeah. And so, I was there for two years and then that's when I went to Guelph University. They, Foxbridge, sent me there. And as soon as I finished that, I think I was 20 or 21, the superintendent decided to leave, and the reins were passed over. I just.... it was a sink or swim moment for sure.

Sara: So, you mentioned in there that you went to Mohawk, you went to Guelph, like so what are the educational programs like what background do you have?

Leasha: So yeah, so I went to Algonquin College for Business Admin. That's what I started with. Yeah, I got my Advanced Diploma in Business Admin. And then Foxbridge sent me to Guelph University for the Turf Managers' Short Course.

Sara: Okay, so do you find that that that business background supports you in your work?

Leasha: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. It does, especially at a club like Pheasant Run where you are required to do a lot of that admin work or human resources work, or health and safety work, or budget work... you have to be a lot more versatile. Not to say you don't at other clubs, but I find you know at the smaller ones you've got to be a jack-of-all-trades sometimes. So it's I found it very very helpful, I'm still not the most techie but...

Reg: For sure, you gotta have - you have a - have a width of general-ness to your to your title. So, all that said, What do you love about turf? Like, obviously love being outdoors... Is there anything specific about turf? Like why not...? There's lots of outdoor positions or career paths, like, why this one?

Leasha: I find that if you are someone that is keen on learning, there is no end to the turf industry at all. Like, last winter I enrolled in - there's this woman Dr. Elaine Ingham - she does this soil biology called course called the Soil Foodweb. And you, like, so I decided okay, I want to learn about - like you like you were saying - pathology like soil biology, microbes. And so, you can go that route. You can go plant

pathology, you can be learning about insects, you could be learning to weld, you could be... like, as a superintendent, if you're a curious person, there's so so much that you can do. Like, last winter I learned how to drain and re-light a water heater. Like, why? Like where would you? But you just get... you know, people always call the superintendent. That's just, that's just the way it is in the turf industry. And if you're willing to did not fight against that. and kind of be like, "Okay, you know, what can I learn?" Then it.. you know... after I did that hot water heater, they were like, "How did you know how to do that like?" Well, I didn't, but I watched some YouTube videos. And here we are!

Reg: One of the things I've been lucky to take back from my experience, same thing you're saying, is I did a lot of weird stuff. And you fix pipe, you fix an irrigation satellite, you know, if you understand power and water, you can transfer that into renovations in your home.

Leasha: Totally

Reg: Because it's the same concepts, if you can just that experience is invaluable in life.

Leasha: Absolutely. And a lot of people, when something happens, their thought is to call somebody else. That's all. If they don't know how to do it, then they call somebody else. As a superintendent, you tend to learn that you can figure it out. And I think that's such a valuable lesson. And especially being in it from a young age, then I started to realize like, "Oh, my God, this is actually really exciting", because I am the person people call. I might not know how to do it, but I can figure it out. And so, then the turf industry becomes so much bigger, never mind the actual turf stuff that you have to learn every day. And things are always evolving and changing. There's so many different routes that you can go, you know, trying to be more environmentally friendly. What does that actually look like in practice? Because sometimes that can spin on its head and you're think you're doing good things, but you're not. So just understanding all of that is... the turf industry is such an exciting place to be. I continue to say this to my students that if there's ever a time to get into the turf industry as well, this is a very exciting time in our industry also.

Sara: Oh, for sure. Well, and I guess you work at a golf course. The natural question that comes up next is... Do you golf? Do you like to golf?

Leasha: Yeah, right? This year, I'm in my first league, which is very exciting. I'm part of the Wooden Sticks Ladies League, which is of course in Uxbridge where I live, with three of my closest girlfriends. So that's really fun. I would say yes, I golf, for sure. But I like to think of golf in the span of my lifetime. So... it's a frustrating sport, as we all know, and I want to continue to want to do it. So, I just like, assume that listen, hey, I got until I'm - what? I don't know, 80, 85 maybe? - to try and get good at this. Like, I don't have to go crazy. But I definitely, you know, being one of the only women in the turf industry, you don't want to go to an event and also be just like the worst golfer so....

Sara: haha, yeah, that's me

Leasha: Yeah, haha, that was like the motivation for a long time. Like, okay, I just gotta not be terrible. Let's, let's figure out how to do that. Yeah,

Sara: I feel that in my bones.

Leasha: Totally. Absolutely. I will say one of the most valuable things I've started to figure out in the past maybe like, three years or so is that if I golf my place, I am a much better superintendent. So I try. Yeah. Like it's insane. The stuff that you... and I make sure I walk. So, the stuff you see when you're walking - because a lot of the time as a superintendent, you're trying to deek out golfers, so you're not going where they are. And if you're walking, you're walking over what they see, and you're like, "Oh, wow, that's inconvenient. Why is that path there?" Or like, you know, there's - the people are always going this way? Well, no, no wonder, that makes more sense. And you just kind of get to get to see it from a different perspective. So that has spurred me to golf a little bit more as well. Because I'm a pretty competitive person. So, I don't want to be out there and not be good either. So...

Reg: Yeah, for sure. My guys used to hate it. They hated when I played golf because I'd come back the next day with this list. And it's like, do you ever just... do you ever just leave it alone? Like, just... No! I'm like, No! I'm.... if you're superintendent, it's not that it's never good enough - It's that it can always be better.

Sara: It's good to see the actual players' experience too, right?

Leasha: Absolutely. Oh, it makes a big difference. And they're the ones playing it. So, I - that's my job to be there and understand how I can make a better.

Sara: Yeah. Do you still horseback ride?

Leasha: My mom has a couple of horses. But you know, that modality takes a lot of... a lot of time and a lot of money. And as much as I... I also competitively rode for so many years. And so, it's pretty hard to then just go out and do it for fun. At least I find. I'd love that maybe it's something I got into more in the future, because I was a great rider, and I really did love it. So sometimes, like my mom's trailered her horses down here to the Durham Forest and we've done it a couple times, and so you never know what's in the future.

Reg: You're a big traveler. I know that about you, right? So, tell us a little bit about some - some- Sorry, I'm jumping off the map here - But tell us a bit about some of your travels that you've done because it seems like a hobby.

Leasha: Oh my goodness, some of the travels I've done. Okay. Well, my latest one was I was a little bit more around our areas. I loaded my two of my dogs in a camper van and traveled through the States for about seven weeks. And that was such a fun trip. Like, what a thing to do! Like, just finding... taking off every... I only stayed in one place for two nights. So other than that, I was on the move. Did about 15,000 kilometers in the seven weeks. And that was so fun. We just found epic hikes to do every day and really caught our stride - kind of - maybe Texas, Arizona, New Mexico area. When we were in Tennessee and Kentucky, it felt a bit dicey... but...

Reg: Haha!

Leasha: Haha! I think I called my parents crying, like, so many times stuck in a snowstorm in Tennessee, like, "What am I doing? I need to turn around! What..." and they're like, "No, no, no, no, no, you are not turning around. You keep going."

Sara: Oh my gosh.

Leasha: Yeah, so that was a wonderful trip I really loved that. Made it down to GIS. That was the final destination, and then I found my way back. Before that, I always ended up a little bit more - you know - Australia, New Zealand, Thailand. I'd say one of my favorite spots I've been is Bali. But really, you could even do anything in South America, it's amazing. I spent two months in Brazil once, which was just so epic. Really like one of the places that you're just hiking through the rain forest and then all of a sudden, you're on this pristine beach. And you're like, "What?" It's like, it's - it's all so so beautiful.

Reg: That sounds ... I gotta be honest, from my perspective, that sounds like a tough life.

Leasha: I know! Totally.

Sara: Some superintendents listening in on this are gonna be like, "What? She has time to take vacation??"

Leasha: I know, I know. I love the seasonality. That's one of the things I love about the job, too, is the seasonality of it. Like, I am still technically working all year. But I get to take quite a bit of holidays, which I'm very lucky. But even, so just like the cycle of a season is so important to me. I would really struggle to work somewhere that it was just like no - not working with nature or the world or the seasonality of life. Like, I really enjoy that and getting to travel in the winter is really nice, too. I think. I

don't even know where I would go next. I've always wanted to do this trip where you fly in to Panama, sail the Sandglass Islands to Colombia, down to Ecuador, and over to the Galapagos. That would maybe be one of my next ones. I think you'd been about six weeks to do that.

Sara: And that's awesome. Circling back a little bit to turf. What does your typical day look like when it is actually in-season, when you're at the golf course?

Leasha: Yeah, so I always set things up with my - I have three assistants , one has been with me... I actually worked with him at Cedarhurst when I was 14. But as far as him working for me, he's followed me to Foxbridge, and then I had a little stint at a course called Bushwood and then Pheasant Run. So, he's worked for me about 14 years and with me, 20. So he's one of my... Yeah, totally. I know. It's crazy. When you start counting the years, you're like, "Okay. I've been in this industry two decades? Huh. Okay. All right. All right, that's... let's keep going I guess"

Reg: Wow. Honestly, I have to say, I have the same thing. I'm like, I have 23 years, like, and they're like, "you look like you're 35" and I'm like, "Yeah, I started when I was 17." It's just how I..

Leasha: Yeah! So I'm lucky enough to have some great assistants, three really great assistants. So, we always sit down and do the day before, like, to set up the job or for the next day. And then they start the day around 5:30. A lot of the time I'm not there for the first morning meet. I let them run their crew. I find them to be able to be a lot more engaging managers if they have the opportunity to not have me there to always be the one that is steering the ship. It makes a big difference. In saying that, it's just kind of how I'm feeling or what's happening. And then so I'd get in, go either walk or drive around the course, just check in, see how everybody's doing, check in up at the clubhouse, come back, probably do a little bit of paperwork - because as I said, you know, I'm responsible for a lot of that as well. So, I try and keep up on that. And then a lot of the time I do get a little bit antsy at that point and I'll go grab a chainsaw or something else.

Reg: Every superintendent is a do-er. Every one, everybody that's how you got there, right?

Leasha: I know and you sit there and you're like, doing this paperwork and then you're like, "I gotta get out of here, oh my God.". So go paint - I don't know - go paint some lines on greens or ... it's just that fine-tuning detailing stuff that like, no matter what, it's very hard to pass that little stuff that's you... like, finicky stuff... on to someone else. So, I like to kind of have a pulse on all that as well as check on all the staff and, kind of, consider the rest of our week house today. How'd today look? How's tomorrow look? You know, as a superintendent, you're always thinking in tomorrow, next week, next month. And, you know, I have three dogs, so they're always a handful to deal with every day as well. And just keep everybody motivated and moving. Last week, I, you know, had a big lunch for all the staff. So, I would facilitate all of that as well. And yeah...

Sara: Do you bring your dogs to the course? Like, do you do the Dogs of Turf Twitter?

Leasha: Totally. I have three that I bring every single day. So, I have one - She's 15. She's come with me to the golf course every day since I was 18. So, we've worked together since I was 18. Every day! And yeah, she's great. And then I have a second dog that I got to take over for her. She's - I got her actually when I was in Thailand, I was working at this elephant sanctuary for a bit, and she was there. And so, I brought her back. And she's the laziest thing that ever walked this Earth, so she's not doing nothing. So, I had to get a third dog! Haha! And so, I got an Australian shepherd to keep all the geese off. And Pheasant Run's got a ton of water, so it needs a goose dog, for sure. And yes, they all come to work with me every day. And it's - you know - it is what it is. We're all there.

Reg: Okay, so where the golf course is now - Okay... And I know every superintendent does this - because you drive around, you see the areas for improvement, you're looking for, like... What do you think are, you know, for your next couple years or in the next year? What are the big tickets that you're thinking about you, that got to do on the golf course that's really important in your capital plans.

Leasha: Yeah, it's funny, I've kind of just started to get to this point. So, I've been at Pheasant Run six years now. And the first, at least three and basically five, we're just getting a handle on the golf course. It's 27 holes. It's over 300 acres. It's a massive property. And so, it was all about just turf, turf, turf. I was taking soil biology courses, anything I could get my hands on to really dial in that part. In the past couple of years, I've started to be able to step back a little bit, take my foot off the pedal in terms of knowing that my turf is safe and healthy, and it's where I want it to be. And so, Pheasant Run is actually quite a spectacular, beautiful property. It's in the Oak Ridges moraine. It has a lot of elevation changes, and it is cut into a completely mature forest. We have you know, 500-year-old oaks there, it's beautiful. So, a lot of tree-lined fairways, and when I got there, it was like if your ball was in the trees, that's it. That's it, it's just - give it up. So, the past couple years, we've been working so much with going into these areas, you know, in between holes. And cutting, taking out all the brush and really allowing golfers to be able to walk in through the forest and find their ball and it's - it's amazing how much of a difference it makes. Cleaning up all the deadfall, keeping stuff tidy. And so, that's a huge project. Like, it is - it's massive. Especially just because the course is so big, but we've started to make some big headway where it makes a big difference and I guess I would say bunkers too started to do... a lot of ... you know a lot of stuff at Pheasant Run is in-house. It is a family run business so, you know, you end up doing bunker renovations in-house and, you know, all of this stuff is in-house. And it's wonderful because your staff is engaged and everything is different, but it takes a lot of time. So finally, being able to step away and be like okay, let's focus on bunkers, right? Okay, let's deal with these forest areas. Let's get everything tidy. That has been my next steps and it's been fun to finally make some headway, especially this past year. And last fall, we really, really tried to move forward with some of that.

Sara: Awesome. That does sound like a really big project.

Leasha: Yeah totally.

Sara: But with this, I mean... you have... I assume quite a large staff, and is there any way or piece of technology or software that you're using to keep track of your equipment, your maintenance, all of these projects that you're doing?

Leasha: Not really. I am quite lucky that now I've built a staff, since my, you know, first or second year. I have a lot of people that have been there four or five years. I am so thankful for my staff. I'm actually about 50% female too, at Pheasant Run now, which has been very, yeah, totally. I know. It's very interesting.

Reg: So I gotta ask, I gotta I gotta I gotta interrupt for two - I have two questions there, Sara - I gotta stem off that. So, one) is that purposefully? Or is that just by accident? And two) my second is, you said, you've got staff for four to five years, right? Being someone who's hired people that had them work for me, how do you keep them that long? What do you do that you think other people don't do?

Leasha: Totally, I would say I don't ask people to work ridiculous amounts of hours, like I just don't. And I try and pay them as well as I can to the point where I'm like, Okay, well, yeah, all right, better keep moving then. Like, but no, I don't I don't do every other weekend. I, I like the... I let people or encourage them to take a week or two weeks off in the summer. I really, really try to make sure that they're just happy people. And the rest falls into place. Like, if you need somebody to work so much that they're miserable, I can guarantee you that their work is not going to be all that great. And if you just make sure you have happy people, if that is your first step before the rest, it makes a big difference. So, I sit all my stuff down at the beginning of the year. Tell me your best-case scenario - is that you want to work - So, I have... you should see my schedule. It's ridiculous. Some people, they're working Tuesday, Thursday, Sunday, some are Tuesday to Saturday, some are Sunday to Thursday, some are like Monday to Friday, and they pick up three.... The minimum is three weekend shifts a month. So, whatever that kind of looks like. I want... what weddings do you have? What concerts you want to go to? Let's sit down and we build the whole schedule for the entire year. So everybody has their schedule for the whole summer. They know their weekends; they have their stuff off. Then we try and stagger

vacation. It's a lot of front-end work. But man, does it make the world of difference. People feel like you care if they have a really great summer. And I do care! Like, summer's fun. Like, let's figure out a way that like, I am aware of everything that's going on. I have a high expectation that if you don't show up on a weekend that we've organized, oh, well, then that's a different story for sure. So, there's clear, clear boundaries, but a lot of freedom within that to be able to build something that works for you. Which I think like, our industry is renowned for running people into the ground. And I just wonder when people are going to wake up and realize like, listen, happy people. Guess what? They work way harder.

Sara: Yeah. And back to Reg's other part of that question, the 50% female, was that... was that on accident?

Leasha: Oh yeah. I think some of it was by accident, and some of it was on purpose. After I did Ladies Leading Turf - I'm sure we'll get more into that - but I started to realize that once a movement is started, it is going to have a mind of its own. And it might not even be in alignment with your beliefs and views anymore. And I had to let all that go and really be like, "Okay, so what do I actually want to do?" Well, I want to get more women in the turf industry, because I think it's valuable. And I think that they have a lot to add. And I think men want more women in the turf industry. So, but they just don't have the same pull to get them in as I do. And so, it started off with, you know, intention in some way that if girls came in, I would try and talk to them. "Okay, do you have any friends?" I did a talk once for the York Region school board. But I think, and this isn't what people want to hear, because all the men want to help as well, I think we just being a woman is really the biggest draw. A young girl walks in, you know, she, when I got there, so there was a staff of 20. And when I took over at Pheasant Run, I was the only girl. That was it. And that mechanic walked out on me. So I, like... because I was a woman... so it's just like, you know, you're gonna have all that. But if they have somebody that they can come to that they trust - it just helps that I'm a woman. And, you know, I think now that we've started to get more girls and now young girl can walk in, and it is 50% female, so they don't even think twice about taking the job. Whereas when it's all men, they walk in and they're like... ughh I don't want to do this.

Sara: Representation matters. This is what we're learning.

Leasha: Totally.

Sara: You know, like, if you go into a kindergarten class right now, and you ask all the kids that are, you know, five years old to draw a doctor... 99% of them will probably draw a man in a white coat. Unless, they have a female doctor. Then all of a sudden, that door is open to them and they're like, "Oh yeah, women are doctors too". It's the same thing in the turf industry. The more that come in and the more exposure those have...it does seem to have like - it puts a bit more weight on your shoulders, and maybe you've experienced this, of like, now I need to represent an entire gender because everybody's looking at me as the only girl in the room. But more come in and it'll eventually normalize.

Leasha: That's totally.. you know, I got tomboys, but then I have a grisliest girly girls with their fake nails driving a tractor - doesn't matter! Like you can have all that, you can, I don't care, I don't care if you have fake eyelashes, come, just be there at 5 a.m. Like, and it's nice that they can start to see that, that it's not about any of that, you can be successful and still have all of that as we should be able to.

Sara: Mhmm... Now, we've kind of mentioned a couple times this Ladies Leading Turf, could you tell me like what's Ladies Leading Turf in a nutshell?

Leasha: So, I'll tell you how... So, it started with... I was going to another GIS. I was traveling Central America. So, we were in Honduras at the time. And I remember I was just laying there after, I think I had been snorkeling, like scuba diving or something. And I was thinking, like, "I am not stoked to go to this GIS again, and just like, be the only girl." And, you know, I got a great group of guys. And they've always been wonderful to me, but I just like - I just would love some ladies. I'd love to go grab a beer with some ladies and like - but instead I go and I'm just being asked whose wife I am, and I feel out of place. And you know, I'm in the States so already now there's so many people, and I'm trying to text a

couple Canadians that are there. And I just wish that I had a space. So, I just went on Twitter and I wrote, "Hey, I want to host a cocktail night for all the women in turf. If there's anyone out there that like would want to sponsor it? Let me know." And then I think I - I - I am notorious for breaking my phones when I'm traveling. So, I didn't have a phone. I didn't have nothing. I was like, what just whatever, shut off my iPad and carried on. And then a couple of days later, I sign on, I have like 500 notifications. And I'm like, "oh, okay, all right." So, and that was like January 10th, or something. And like, GIS was beginning of February. So, I'm like, oh wow, I guess this is happening. So that's how Ladies Leading Turf started. It was just a cocktail hour for me to put some faces to the women in our industry, because we don't even know each other. We... you know, we're like, yeah, whose wife is that? I don't know. Like, we don't know.

Sara: We're just as guilty of it! Yeah.

Leasha: Totally! I don't know their faces. So then I was like - contacted GCSAA . And it was like, "How many women are there?" And it's like 80. Like, what? Okay, so let's like get a cocktail hour. So that's how it started. My goal was yes, just to get some faces to names. From there, the next year, there had been this young woman from Kenya that had reached out on Twitter. Her name is Maureen. She is now currently at Penn State. She's doing her PhD. But so, she had reached out and said, "You know, I'd love to come to a GIS, but I don't have the means to do so. You're so inspiring, blah, blah, blah." And so, I just was thinking, "Okay, maybe that could be Ladies Leading Turf". Like what could we do to like, you know, help young women that are in our industry that don't maybe have the ability to get to these big shows. And so, I went to Syngenta and I said you know - because at that time, the first year there was a couple of sponsors because, you know, didn't get to my phone on time.... and so... I said to Syngenta like, okay, like if you want to be sole sponsors, and I would really love this young woman to be sponsored to come to GIS. So, they said, "Absolutely." So, they, we, got her to come to San Diego. And that was so great. And then now she's in the States and the way her life has changed has been so beautiful to watch. And a lot of that was my thought for Ladies leading Turf, and for this women's movement was that. I have since, more, stepped away from Ladies Leading Turf, and just tried to focus in on my own club and how I can do things at a bit of a smaller scale. Kind of like if you're going to talk the talk, you should walk the walk type deal. So, I've shifted a little bit more towards that. Um...

Sara: I think what you did is awesome. I really do. You know, having a spot to network and learn some faces at the conference. And also, when you brought that young lady to the GIS conference who maybe wouldn't have otherwise to it, that's awesome. Moving forward, Syngenta is still a great sponsor of this event and...

Leasha: Yeah, totally

Sara: These networking events that are presented at the conference offers an opportunity for people to discuss diversity in the turf industry specifically. And I think that's really important. It has a place. But I also understand that if your intention was to just have, you know, a cocktail hour, social, hang-out, learn some names, and then it sort of branched out into being a bigger thing and... online webinars, and et cetera, that's not what you had planned for. Right?

Reg: It very much, very much snowballed. It's kind of ironic because one of the questions here is what do you, what have you learned at the beginning, and it seems like you already know that...

Leasha: I don't know how I would have either... . And I'm happy it brought Maureen... like when I brought Maureen here from Kenya, and now she's doing her PhD and she's killing it. And it gave a lot - and that's fantastic- and it gave lot of women a lot of voices, you know ...

Sara: Yeah... It can be quite... ah.... some people feel very political about it.

Leasha: Oh, you can get pretty caught up in the weeds there. So, like you might as well go micro. Everything impactful, I think, happens micro not macro. That's where - that's where you're the most genuine, and that's where if, yeah, that you're gonna make the most impact. So...

Sara: Yeah, well, like me personally, I like to be involved in the community group that's just in my community. Like, on the weekend, I made sandwiches, and they were handed out at the tent encampment where there's a bunch of people experiencing homelessness. You know, that felt really big impact, I feel a lot less impact when I give a dollar amount to, you know, like, World Wildlife Foundation. You know, the bigger the organization gets...

Leasha: And it's probably less - and probably is less impactful when you do that. When you give sandwiches to people that directly need them. Like, that's impactful. When I bring a young girl from Kenya that's impactful on her life. And she will remember that forever. And she will carry that genuineness and gratefulness on in what she does. So, I don't know where it will go from here. I don't know my position in anymore. You know, but I think our industry is a beautiful place to be either way.

Sara: Yeah, you can let the negativity go and just be your best self. And that is itself, a lady leading turf. You know? Like, the better you do, the more you are a lady leading turf, because you're an example for everyone else that sees you.

Reg: That's good. That's a good - good - good mind for a good mindset. I like it. So, let's flip back to the interview type questions... so what do you think has been your biggest consistent struggle throughout all these years in the in the turf industry? Like what's really challenged you that you struggle with still today?

Leasha: Umm... just how to be a really good leader. Like that takes a lot, a lot of forethought and focus and like intention. You know, for example, we've had a lot of change at Pheasant Run this past year, a lot of management change up in the clubhouse. That hasn't really gone all that well. And so, I pulled my owner/General Manager aside today and said, "You got to set up a manager's lunch or a day away or something". And he's like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah...", and I'm like, "No, like, culture and connection - that all stems from intention. If you don't have the intention, it's just not going to happen on its own." Like, it will build itself. It will. And you like - it takes a lot of energy and a lot of intention, for sure. And then realizing that was - has been important. And even now, you know, all of a sudden, it's what? It's almost August, and I was like, "UGH I haven't!" You know, as someone that is aware of that it's you know, I hadn't really done all that much with my staff. So, like last week, I'm like, "Okay, let's like - let's get a barbecue scheduled for them." And then tomorrow, I'm taking them on a lake day on Lake Simcoe down here. And, you know, some people will be like, "What? Like, how are you doing that?" Well, that's how you make people be friends with each other and enjoy each other's time. And, me as well, that I can have like a relationship with them that's not me just telling them what to do. And then when I tell them what to do, it's coming from a much different place because they know I'm not just harping on them. It's just like, this is hey, we're team, this is stuff we gotta get done. And it all snowballs into each other. And so, over the years, slowly, figuring that out would be the biggest hurdle because I don't think anybody fully realizes how much it takes to really, really build a team. If you want to do it that way. You know, there's people that they're like, forget that I'll just, you know, I'll just keep them running through and tell them what to do and maybe that works for you. It doesn't work for me. I can't, I can't handle a lot of stress. I can't - I don't like seeing people unhappy. It really, really bothers me. And so, I had to figure out a different way to do it. And, you know, the hurdles over the years have been realizing like, well, that's a lot of work. So, you just, you just got to go like that is now my path, and I have to accept it and understand it. So, the way that I want to lead is a lot of effort. Now...

Sara: Yeah, well, positive relationships take time, and energy and intention, just like you said, you have to plan to have fun. I mean, like, I still have positive relationships with some of my friends back in high school. And that's because I purposely plan to meet up with them. And if we were just, you know, oh, yeah, by the way, we're still friends on Facebook. Like, that's not a that's not a relationship anymore.

Leasha: And it's like having an activity for people to go do that they can, like, connect outside of work. Like, you know, lunches and all that stuff is great. But like, you're taking my staff out for like a day on the water, where they're like, in the water, having fun doing this, doing that, like that's where they enjoy each other and have fun. Because they're not at work, they get to let their guard down. You know, all of that stuff matters. And, you know, we get so caught up in the weeds with like, what's appropriate? What can we do? It's just... like....

Reg: And I like - I'm like - I don't want to work with people who aren't my friends, I don't care. Like, I'm your boss, if you can't put aside the fact that sometimes, yeah, I gotta delegate to you and it's got to get done. And I've - I've- guys are like, you know, you need to separate it. And as I've climbed in my leadership career, I've learned, it is hard. It is harder, especially the higher you go, right? But it's about for what, like, at the end of the day, for what, like, if you can't, you know, there's a difference also between being friends with somebody being friendly.

Leasha: Yeah, totally. But the thing it all goes back to like, if you want those people to be happy - so if you're gonna be friends with them - you also - then they matter to you, so and you want them to be happy. So, you can't be slave driving them into the ground. So, it's like, all this stuff that all connects together. And like, no, you can't be friends with someone and like, if you expect them to work, you know, like, in my opinion, the 12 days on two days off, like that standard in our industry it is **bull**. It's not a way to live, you can't do it. And if you're friends with someone, you wouldn't actually ask them to do that, because you'd feel bad. So, I think that's where it happens within our industry. Like, I can go and be friends with my staff because I treat them as they should be treated: People that have lives that aren't work. And it's how I want to be treated at work. Like, I don't want to work somewhere that expects me to give away my life for something that - if I - The golf course is gonna be there longer than I am. And or it's not, or it gets bulldozed, I don't know. Yeah, that was one of your questions is like, "what do you think, you know, the turf industry has to change, or whatever?" And like, you know, people don't work the way they used to work. I even -even I don't work the way I used to work. I don't. You know? When I worked at Wyndance, we were doing a construction project, it was very similar to what you would think it has to be. But like, I don't think that that's right. And that should not be in conjunction with success. You shouldn't have to give your soul a way to be able to be a golf course superintendent.

Sara: I'm taking that. I'm gonna print that out and frame it. Haha

Leasha: I know, exactly. And it's like, those 12-, 16-hour days, they're needed. Sometimes. Sometimes they're needed. And - but then the whole, like,- what bothers me is the showing face or like that you have to be there because you have to show that, like, you care, like... Well, I do care. And I - you know - but I also care about my family and my friends, and I am I better superintendent, if I once or twice a week, I come in at 7:00 instead of 5:00. Because I get a minute at home and I get to enjoy that and like, then I get to work and I'm like, "Oh yeah, all right, let's go, okay!" and I'm, like, stoked about it. As I should be. I try and like, really, really curate my life so that when I get to work, I'm stoked to be at work. And then the golf course is way better. And it's the same with my staff. I want them to be happy to be there. And it all just comes back to that. If you just focus on that first, you'll be a better worker, your workers will be better workers, everyone will be happy. And this kind of the way I would love to see the golf industry start to move. Because it's such a beautiful industry. It's so fun, like, such a fun place to be. And it just sucks that like the way we've set it up just sucks all of that out of it

Reg: Better to be there 80% of the time and 100% and to be there 100% of the time at less than 80%. Right?

Leasha: Totally everybody's tired. You know, my owner. He's an amazing guy, he's a reasonable guy. And a lot of my biggest, you know, goals or whatever being at Pheasant Run was sitting down and having - having conversation of "what's our goal is with our staff?" Like, I don't want my assistants to be going home and be worrying about paying these bills, when you then expect them to make this place so that you don't have to worry about your bills. If I my assistants work a weekend, they're getting another

day off, like I, - me and my assistants, we split everything up so that even them, they work two, maybe max three weekend days in a whole month. And we want to be able to offer these people a viable way to spend their life. And, you know, if we pay people \$1 or \$2 more than, you know, somewhere else, or if we really try and make sure that they feel valued, they feel well paid, and that doesn't mean that they have to also work their tails off for us, then, you know, on a whole, we're probably going to save in the end. But that interim period of like, figuring that out and getting ownership, like, comfortable with that just takes a lot of talking and a lot of like, "Okay, well why is that? Okay, well, what? How do you want people to feel when they go home?" "Well, I want them to feel happy and good and want to come here." "Okay, so how are we going to make them feel like that? Because they don't now. And they shouldn't just feel that because you say they should." Yeah, that actually takes a lot of work. Sure. Yeah.

Sara: So, you've - you've kind of dabbled in a lot of different things. And you said you were interested in soil sciences and all these things. But I saw on LinkedIn that you sat on the Uxbridge Watershed Advisory Committee as the golf course. subcommittee chair. What - what was that about? And what did you aim to accomplish as part of that committee?

Leasha: I sat on the committee for five years, this was before like IPM was even a thing really. So, it was about getting people IPM certified, getting like experts had agreed to try and fast track all that get all the golf courses Audubon certified. And it was great. Like, it was nice to sit on the committee, I think it made a big impact for me when I was, you know, early 20's, because I felt like, "Oh, I'm, I'm on a committee and I want to, you know, be involved in community." And it really, like we were saying before, made me think of community and stuff that you can do on a smaller scale and the impacts that you can have right at your front door instead of always thinking so big scale, and then getting all caught up in the weeds and not actually doing anything. So, it was nice to sit on a committee in my in my hometown, and I was actually just walking in the park, also the other day, and I saw they planted a tree for me, which I didn't even know about.

Sara: That's so cute. Well, and, you know, I think it's really important to recognize also that giving people in their early career leadership opportunities will form them in their future career, you know, like, it gives you sort of the training wheels to be a leader.

Leasha: Yeah, and I also think that we think in the golf industry that it's all like so hard. Like you can - really.... it's not that hard. And you can take young kids and teach them a lot. You really can. And - and we like to think that we're like, you know, oh, so important. And we are to an extent of course, but you can create a lot of- oh-so important people

Reg: Love your intention to be actionable. Does that make sense? Like that's what I love is like - you're not just you know - it's great to be intentional, but if you don't actually do it, or follow through, then it's moot too, right? It's the preaching is here, but the action follows right. And I think that's awesome. So - Okay, so we're talking about new people coming in. So, you've obviously worked with a lot of young people. You know, tell me about the advice you would give someone who's coming to you. Maybe they weren't for you one of the one of the one of the females or males who work for you and said, "Hey, I want to get into this industry." What advice - after you've got you know, your bumps and bruises through the time - would you be giving that person right now?

Leasha: Mostly, to just be very, very, very curious. I think any superintendent, if they get somebody that's working for them, that wants to learn and is curious and is intentional about their own learning, that any superintendent I know, will just take that, and run with it. Like, you know, if you get somebody that's keen, and shows it and wants to learn, then there is no stopping them in the turf industry. Especially right now. Like, there's so much opportunity out there. And it just takes somebody that really wants to learn and really wants to take it and run with it. So that's what I would say, you know, I think soil biology and stuff that's really, really, important to try and learn all that. But I think it all comes from the same place, kind of. Like, if you are wanting to learn then - then somebody will take your hand and

be like, "Okay! You want to learn? Let's go!" They'll take you right away. So just show that you're keen, continue to be curious. And you will do well, in this industry, for sure.

Sara: It's just so - it's so good to listen - to talk to someone who's just passionate about the industry. It just makes me more passionate about it. You know? I'm like, "Oh, I want to get out there!"

Leasha: I know this, I know there's - It's such a great industry, I really think it's going to really change and morph in the next - I can't wait to see what happens over the next 10 years in our industry. I think that we're starting to slowly change the needle a little bit away from that hard- or old-school thing so that people get a chance to be passionate, because a lot of the time, you know, people will come into it with all this passion and then just be beat to a pulp. And I just think that if we can figure out a way to balance like people having that passion with still enjoying their life, like the golf courses are going to be better, people are going to be better, all the people that work for them are going to be better, and I would love to see that transform in our industry.

Reg: Leasha, it was - I think you're a phenomenal leader. And I think the energy and the focus you put toward it is awesome. And the actions you take, I mean, you know, just awesome stuff. It was it was so great to sit and talk to you and learn a little bit more.

Leasha: Thank you. Thanks for having me. It was it was wonderful to chat with you guys.

Sara: Thank you so much, Leasha, for being here and talking to us about everything from inspiring the new youth to incorporating women in turf, to, you know, turning a cocktail hour into a whole movement. I think that's just awesome. And thank you to our listeners tuning in to this episode of Canadian turf talks where we aim to bring the Canadian turf industry to your backyard. And in the words of Leasha Schwab, "Stay curious!"

Music outro

Sara: This podcast is brought to you by the University of Guelph and the Guelph Turfgrass Institute.