



## Episode 03

### Take three deep breaths

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superintendent, golf, turf, struggles, meditation, mindfulness, Fox Meadow, leadership, PEI, diversity, inclusion, gratitude

#### Podcast Transcript

**Sara:** This is episode three of Canadian Turf Talks. And we're here online with Paul MacCormack. He is the superintendent and GM at Fox Meadow Golf Course. And he's known on all the social media handles as the Mindful Superintendent. Now, Paul, can you tell me a little bit about what the – what your title means their mindful superintendent?

**Paul:** Well, that handle kind of developed – actually, it'll be 10 years ago, this December. I began writing a blog on Turf Net website down in the US, run by Peter McCormick. And it was really – started more or less just to kind of get ideas down on paper, or computer. And I just started writing about the more personal side of the business, and then started writing about all of the things that mattered most to me. And so yeah, and that whole handle kind of developed from that blog, I guess, originally, and then I just kind of made it my Twitter handle, and it's kind of gone from there. So...

**Reg:** It is really cool. Because like, I know, having previously been basically a superintendent, it's – there's a high level of anxiety, because a lot of things in your job are well outside of your control. And, you know, you're – and I just I have – I read some of the blogs today. And it's just like, man, it's so true. Like, it's, it's a challenge a lot of superintendents and those 90 days of hell that we call it here in Ontario, or in the industry is like, it's really challenging, right? Because you're trying to balance family life, but the golf course needs you. And it's always calling. And, you know, being mindful of where you're at, what really matters, and having the big picture thinking – to me as always someone who struggles with busyness is, and you know, young family and stuff. I think it's awesome. I think it's really good to try to be. It's not that easy.

**Paul:** No, it's not. And I can't claim to be an expert at it, I fail. Daily, actually. It's one of those scenarios that... but being intentional about it, and doing your best is really all you can ever do. And I think it's been an interesting journey with turf managers and superintendents to hear their stories and to have them convey their anxieties, their worries, their difficulties all the way through. And getting to meet people at conferences and such too, and having those real conversations after the talks. And after the speaking engagements. That is really the most rewarding part for me, I think. And it's really the thing, I think, that's kind of spurred me on to continue doing so.

**Sara:** Now, you mentioned you had this blog on turf net, are you continuing that blog? Or do you have your own website? Or what do you have?

**Paul:** I have a website in development, which means I'm kind of thinking about it. And yeah, for now, the blog continues, like, as I mentioned, it is 10 years in December. So yeah, we'll see where it takes me after this. You want to be mindful of your time, and your space, and your creativity. And I can't keep giving everything to everything. So, some things may have to fall by the wayside. But we'll see which those are.

**Sara:** Yeah, for sure.

**Reg:** Can you teach me that? I don't know how to do that. And I don't know the word "No". I don't know what that is.

**Paul:** So yeah, most superintendents don't. We're often viewed as the people that get stuff done. And so, if you need stuff done, you call the superintendent to do it. So, it's one of those things that it is hard to turn off because we are people-pleasing people most of the time. So yeah, it's been one of those. They're hard-won lesson. So I think over time, but I would really I think, in my career, that's been one of the biggest lessons learned is just boundaries, and just making sure that you can work smart, but you can also say no, and you can also delegate, and you can do all the things that make people a great leader – because doing it all yourself is just silly. That just doesn't add up over time. And it's not super sustainable.

**Sara:** Yeah, for sure. So, I understand that you did some schooling here in Ontario. Now you're working out in PEI, how did you get into the turf industry? And tell us a little about your journey.

**Paul:** Yeah, that's kind of a fascinating question. Actually. I grew up on Prince Edward Island, and actually went to the University of PEI and got a psychology degree initially. And then was starting a master's degree in social work, actually, and I was about halfway through the first semester of that and I thought, "This isn't for me." I was doing work, I was doing some different things. And I just – I looked ahead 10 years and I thought, "I am going to be burned out solid if I do this for a living." I just – I care. I care too much. And I couldn't separate what I had to, at that point. Maybe I would have learned eventually but... And, ironically, to get through my university degree I ran a lawn care business. And I had about six or seven employees. We cut about 200 lawns and it paid for my college education. So... I loved cutting grass. That was the silly part of it. And I grew up up the street from Belvedere Golf Course. And I remember thinking, "How did they do that?" Like, "How is it that that place gets managed?" I didn't have any idea how it worked. And I Googled it, I think, and found superintendent and then I remember my wife – who was my girlfriend at the time – I told her about this and then we talked about it, and then we subsequently got married and I was working at the hospital here in town and then I decided I wanted to go to school. And she said, "You want to do what? You want to go to school to do what?"

**Reg:** Hah!

**Sara:** For grass?

**Paul:** She was not a golfer and I'm not really a golfer either. So that's what made it even more interesting. So, then we packed a UHaul up about a year later and drove to Toronto, and ended up in Newmarket, Ontario and took a two-year technician degree at Seneca.

**Reg:** Great program. Great.

**Paul:** Yeah. And it was great. Because I was able to come back home in between time. And, yeah, went back up the second year, and then came back and actually started working here at Fox Meadow.

**Reg:** So, all that said, I mean, it sounds like – so I mean – it sounds like you know, you said you love cutting grass, you love to and you wanted to learn, so what about it? Why do you love it?

**Paul:** I like to reflect – kind of, all these years later -I think it's the artistry. I was looking at that question earlier today, and that's the word that kind of kept coming up in my mind. And I mean, that artistry can

take a lot of different forms, right from the ground up. Like, how you build it, how you kind of do things along the way to creating something, or the artistry can be in tearing it down and starting over again. And then the daily flow of maintenance and managing. And then, it never dawned on me that the component of leadership, whatever – come into it along the way, but it's such – it is the key component of it now, and it's a huge part of what I do each day. And so yeah, initially, I guess that that word artistry just – and it kind of just infuses everything I do in terms of turf. And right from how we mow the greens, how we get mowing lines in place, to renovating bunkers, to doing whatever we're doing. It's – I thoroughly enjoy that part. Even still.

**Sara:** Do you feel that the degree that you did, the bachelors in psychology, do you think that that has taught you something that prepared you to be a superintendent?

**Paul:** Absolutely. It was way more valuable than Seneca degree.

**Sara:** Really? We might have to bleep that out. I don't want anyone at Seneca to be upset with us.

**Paul:** Well, I don't know if Ted Tom will want to hear that, but ironically, somebody asked me that recently, and I say, "It's funny because all the things I learned at Seneca, I think I do everything the exact opposite now." Just because I've learned over the years that things evolve, and we learn things but yeah, the psychology degree. For me, it was the doorway into leadership. I think. I didn't know it at the time, but it was really that first, that first minor step into self-awareness. And I think for leadership, it is such a fundamental premise and learning how you work, and learning what makes you tick, and learning how to study people, and learning how to – kind of – relate to people. And that – I mean. that has become such a key component to being a successful superintendent. Your ability to lead, your ability to be compassionate, and your ability – like empathy, all those things. And to me, my psychology degree really was my first foray into – kind of – that side of human science. Really.

**Reg:** So you're truly like an artist of the craft, right? Like, it's your craft.

**Paul:** Yeah.

**Reg:** That's what I was. And it's I always loved – I always – I do miss it a bit, having left it. But it is 50% science, 50% artistry.

**Paul:** Absolutely.

**Reg:** And you need that. You need both of those pieces. The education is great. And you need that in the back pocket when times are tough. But it really is, "How do you see the golf course?" And it takes a lot of vision to be a great superintendent.

**Paul:** It does. Yeah.

**Sara:** And creativity.

**Paul:** And I've often thought it's almost like we're, almost like, curators of an art exhibit, really. Because, I mean, we oftentimes just inherit a property. And it wasn't our original vision. And an architect may have had a hand in the vision, it could have been just a mom and pop, it could have been somebody who just owned it. But at any given time, it's up to the superintendent to make sure the artist – the original artistic vision is visible. It's presented the way it needs to be presented. It's a playable surface, and it's sustainable and functional and same time. And so, all these things like that. It's just that constant dance really, that we're always involved in. And, so much of it happens without anyone noticing. And so much of it happens without anyone understanding or seeing what we're doing, or even really realizing that we're even there most of the time. So yeah,

**Sara:** So, it's a thankless job.

**Paul:** It is.

**Reg:** I gotta – I've got two other things. And yeah, it's just it's so hit me because it's exactly how I am. It's like, I got kind of tired of the grass because you kind of can predict what's going to happen, right? And then it was like, but it was the people that made it so much fun. Because you know, the way you were saying about leadership and all and the whole psychological aspect of the job in managing your people through the tough times. Because it's a tough job, if you're an assistant or if you're even a technician on the field. It's a – you're – it's a grind sometimes. Right?

**Paul:** Sure

**Reg:** And, and, you know, I think that, you know, having that psychology – having that peace of mind and having that ability to connect with people. That's where I was like, "This is what this job is really about." Like, the grass is the secondary piece, right? It's leading the team, it's the – getting the engagement, getting them on board, and growing the people around you and really being there for them is really there – that's the fun. And I think what you were saying, is like, getting the most out of them. And that's what the skill of empathy and all the other things really are for. And that's, yeah, that's..

**Paul:** Yeah, and to me, I think that that's been one of the, like – one of the questions you guys had was like, "my proudest moment?" And I tell you the truth, I read through the questions a few times. And I think that one was the hardest question. Because I was like, "I've had a lot of really great moments in this career." But I don't like to check one as the proudest moment. I'm not sure I could. But over the last number of years, we've worked really hard – because we're a bedroom community here so we have a lot of young people working here. And for a lot of them, it's their first real job. It's their first real long-term job, right. So, our goal has always been, "You guys aren't going to be turf managers. But if you want to, that's great." But our job, really as leaders and as part of a community, is to set the standard and set up the conditions so you can learn how to work, and learn how to be part of a team, and learn how to find your gifts, and learn kind of how to – So, when you eventually leave, we've set the foundation for your next job, and whether that's your career, whether whatever it is you're doing. And to me, we've had a number of kids go through here already and seeing them come back and seeing them actually be like, really high-functioning members of the community has been really, really rewarding.

**Reg:** That's so that's so great. That's so awesome.

**Paul:** Yeah.

**Reg:** So you said you didn't golf. Do you golf now?

**Paul:** I golf when I have to do.

**Sara:** What do you mean, you have to?

**Paul:** Well, when I have to play in a tournament, or I have to play with a member, I have to do something. I can play, and when I when I do it with any amount of seriousness, I'm not bad at it. I can hold my own. And I often say now my game is flashes of brilliance interspersed with picking the ball up and throwing it to the next tee. So yeah, golf is golf. It's not the reason I do this by any stretch.

**Sara:** It's interesting. It's sort of, like, a dichotomy, either the superintendence do golf, and that's like, the most important thing, or they're not big on it at all. And they do it for, you know, function, you know, to understand the golf course and understand the play the players' experience.

**Paul:** Yeah, yeah. I rely on players for that information. And our pros. I talk a lot to people. Because I do very much care about playability and the surfaces, and it's something I'm very tuned into. I putt a lot. That's kind of just what I do. I carry a putter a lot. But I do, I do tune in to the membership, and tune into players, and tune into our pros. And we're constantly talking about playability and, and how things are functioning, and whether they have advice or whether they're noticing things. And that's kind of how I approach it from a golf perspective. So...

**Sara:** Do you have any kind of tool that you use for collecting these feedbacks? You know, do you have like a feedback box? Or you – just everyone has your cell phone number and can text you? Or how do you gather this kind of intel?

**Paul:** Ah, really, just by being visible, I think a lot of the time. Like, I'm not exactly a stereotypical General Manager either. Being in the dual roles, I generally tend to lean more towards the turf role, because I've managed to build over the years an exceptional team that takes care of the – like the golf operations, day to day part of things – because you don't want me in the pro shop, standing behind the counter trying to sell you anything, because I don't know anything, and I don't care. But I'm really glad I have people that work for me that are really good at it. And you don't want me teaching you how to play, you don't want me serving you food, you don't want me doing any of that stuff. But I learned a long time ago as the GM, and as in the dual role, it wasn't my job to do everything. It was my job to ensure it got done. And then just making sure all the people who were in charge of those departments and those areas had all the tools they needed to get the job done. That's really all it was for me. So – and I've just been blessed. The people that work with me here are just fantastic and they carry as much of the load, if not more, than I do most of the time. So, it's really a team atmosphere that way.

**Reg:** Okay. So, you play a little bit of golf when you need to... what else? What other hobbies do you have outside of the turf world?

**Paul:** Well, obviously I meditate a lot. That's the mindfulness and the meditation. I am actually a certified meditation teacher, now, as well. So along with my personal meditation practice, I do teach. And I've started doing some teaching virtually online, and then doing some seminars and stuff locally here as well, with businesses and different things like that. And I plan to kind of move more in that direction eventually.

**Sara:** Can we mine you for some free teaching?

**Paul:** Absolutely.

**Sara:** You know, like, what, how do you do your meditation? What's the space like? Or what would you recommend someone to have a space ready to do meditation?

**Paul:** That's a good question. I think for meditation to stick, it's kind of like going to the gym or finding some kind of physical exercise routine that works. You have to enjoy it, and you have to be comfortable. Those are the two main things – like everyone thinks, when you think about meditation, you think about sitting cross-legged and putting your hands out and humming and there's candles everywhere. Like, if that's your thing, that's great. I can't cross my legs. Never been able to. And I went to a retreat two years ago, and was so happy to learn that not everyone's hips work that way. And it's just the way it is. And there's certain people that just cannot cross their legs, and I'm one of those people. So, I sit in a chair. And that's, that's perfectly acceptable. So really, I like to try to explain meditation from the standpoint of accessibility, that whatever access point you can find, to be quiet, and to find stillness within yourself. That's enough. It doesn't have to be anything – it can be pre-prescribed – and eventually, I think if you're intentional enough with it, you'll develop your own discipline over time. And that is important, because like anything we do, that's worth doing, it does take discipline. So, for me, I generally will meditate first thing in the morning before I come to work. I'm usually awake, probably about 4:30 in the morning, most days, and generally by five o'clock, I'll be meditating for 15 to 20 minutes before I come to work. And then there'll be lots of moments through the day that I'll just pause and take three deep breaths, and just sit in my office, or just sit outside, and be mindful and just try to connect with where I am and what's happening. Because really, that's what meditation is all about. It's the training to be present through the day with everything you're doing. And then lots of times, I'll probably come home and think about meditating at about three or four o'clock in the afternoon. But usually, I'm napping. And I'm really good at that, too. And if the evening goes well, I can have a sit again in the evening before I go to sleep and try to just use it as – kind of – that unwinding

point for the day. That's a good day. Doesn't always work that way. And it doesn't always happen. But generally, a day does not go by where I where I don't sit for at least some portion of the day.

**Reg:** I'm a big fan of like some of the – like, Kobe Bryant, like those kind of guys. Like, Michael Jordan. And I like that level of excellence. And a lot of – like Kobe Bryant has this thing that Phil Jackson came to LA when he left the bulls. And he said, like, that was the first practice he put in place. Everybody – the team did it together. And like, that's very challenging, but it really built a connection between the team -to get that – you know, and Kobe is like, "I took it past there." Even after he left, and it was something I did first thing in the morning. I think the best way I heard it described – it was, it lets you manage the day instead of the day manage you.

**Paul:** Yes

**Reg:** And I was like, "WOW!" That's so – that's so like, profound, but like so clearly -Because, I mean, I find like myself, I'm crazy busy. I've got young kids and stuff, but I got technology just running my life. Like, it's email, text, call, this, this. And it's just how do you just stay focused on what you want to do with your day? Like back, you know, maybe 25 years ago, we could go to work – and you know, you just kind of took care of the job and did what you needed to do.

**Sara:** Your phone didn't follow you in your pocket.

**Reg:** Right. And that's – with me personally, like I've struggled with the angst of it; that there's always something to do now. And the boundaries are much more skewed. Right? And

**Paul:** It's it is and you're not alone, Reg. I mean, I don't think there's many people that don't operate like that now. But it's kind of an illusion a lot of the time. Like, we think all this stuff's important, but it really isn't. And it's really, it's really just pointless busy work a lot of the time. Like, it's funny, even this morning, I sat down and when I was emailing back and forth with you guys this morning, I decided, "Okay, I haven't sat at my desk in quite a while and I just need to carve out two hours to sit here and tick off a bunch of things on my list and contact people." And I just turned everything else off and sat there for two hours and just did what I had to do – close the door, just made sure no one was bothering me. And I finished and I felt – like, the levity I felt when I was done. I was like, "Oh my goodness, I got so much done!"

**Sara:** Satisfying!

**Paul:** But I really didn't. It was just a whole bunch of pointless things that I had to check off. But I think we fall into these grooves and it just become so repetitious over time. And how we measure our success is oftentimes how busy you are, and how much money you're making, and what you're accumulating, and all these different things. And I used to be that way. I mean, I used to measure my success by how hard I worked. And that was it. And that was something I learned a long time ago from my parents, and my grandparents. God bless them all, because that's what they learned. But I realized about a decade ago, I hit the wall. And it stopped hard. And I was working as a superintendent at both Green Gables Golf Course and Anderson's Creek Golf Course, simultaneously. And we were renovating Green Gables. And so, this was about a two-year descent, really, into burnout. And I was back and forth to neurologists because – I was actually, I had been teaching at Holland College here in town and I was teaching turf, and I took a panic attack up in front of the students. And I'd never taken a panic attack in my life.

**Sara:** Oof.

**Paul:** And I thought I was having a heart attack. I thought all these things were happening. And I was – I was just kind of beside myself. And it took a year of unraveling to, kind of, get to that point. And we got to the end of the Green Gables project and I was let go. They said, "You can come back if you want, but we really don't want you back." And at that point I had pretty much decided I wasn't returning anyway. But it was one of those watershed moments where that was my goal, like Green Gables –

renovating that golf course – was my career goal to that point. And I had almost sacrificed everything in my life for that goal, only to be let go at the end. And so that was the moment for me where I just discovered mindfulness. And it was only through the love and support of my wife, Jill, who handed me a book, actually, by Jack Kornfield, who became one of the teachers I took the course from two years ago. And it was one of those moments again, where I was, I was reading the first couple of chapters, and it was like I'd known it all along. And, as soon as I started practicing it, it shifted everything for me. And, I was able to come back into the business after that a year later, and just approach it from a completely different perspective. And really everything since then – not that it's been easy, and not that it hasn't gotten crazy and hairy and foolish by times – but for the most part, success is measured in a completely different set of parameters now. And it's got nothing to do with how hard I work.

**Sara:** Now, do you feel that mindfulness is more important now that we have all these technologies and all of these distractions?

**Paul:** Absolutely. I think we've been engaged in a massive social experiment with no double-blind studies. No anything. It's just, "let's give all this technology to everyone is no holds barred and we'll just see what happens."

**Sara:** I remember being 19 years old, and I had a flip phone. You remember those? And I always kept it in my back pocket. Right? And I went on a trip with my university to go to Nicaragua and one of the rules was we couldn't bring our cell phones. And for the first week of that trip, I was having phantom vibrations in my pocket. Because I thought I still had my phone! Like, that is an addiction.

**Paul:** Oh yeah. Absolutely. And it's worse now. I mean, with smartphones, because it's not just a telephone. It's an entertainment system, right? And it's the connection to the world. And it's...

**Sara:** Do you have panic – that when you leave the house in the morning, and you look over where your cell phone is supposed to be in your car, and it's not there?

**Paul:** Oh, yeah. Fortunately, I only live like 30 seconds from the golf course, so I can just turn around and go get it.

**Reg:** Hah!

**Sara:** Right, but could you live without your cell phone for a day?

**Paul:** Yeah.

**Reg:** Could I? No.

**Paul:** Actually, I love it when I forget it. I oftentimes don't turn around on purpose. Just so I can have a morning without it. But, yeah, no... I went on a silent retreat about two years ago. And that was part of it. You had to kind of submit your phone at the beginning and then not talk for seven days. So that part was even more interesting. But just...

**Reg:** WOW!

**Paul:** Yeah, it was easily one of the most fascinating experiences of my life. It was magical, really. And I do it again.

**Reg:** I'm lucky to not talk for seven minutes. Never mind seven day! I don't know...

**Paul:** Yeah, no, I'm pretty good at sharing opinions as well. But yeah, it was just – it was so fascinating to be in a group of 100 people for an entire week, doing everything together and not speaking the whole time. And just – and the last afternoon we were allowed to speak and it was just fascinating to actually walk around and talk to these people afterwards. Because you form all these stories in your head and all these little, like, fantasies...

**Sara:** Assumptions

**Paul:** ... all these movies of all these people that are sitting in front of you. But yeah, it was it was a fascinating experience. So.

**Sara:** Yeah, I struggle with silence. I often feel the need to fill silence, you know? In a dinner conversation, or in a meeting you know, I'm – we're running a whole podcast! Reg and I decided to do this because we like to talk, we could fill an hour of airtime with no problem. So, I wonder if you could give Reg and I some tips on how to embrace silence or how to be more present in our lives,

**Paul:** I think, probably one of the most – the simplest and most important mindful activities you can do is simply to breathe. Simply to pause and breathe. Because so often through our day, we don't ever think about it. It happens naturally. But we don't ever pause long enough to really think about, like, "Am I taking a full breath? Am I breathing really shallow? Am I sitting up straight? Am I all slouched?" Like, and you can go through a day, and how you breathe really does govern a lot of how you feel. I mean, there's all sorts of other things associated with it too, but just the intentional act of stopping. And it literally takes like 10 seconds to take three deep breaths, but it can interrupt – like Reg, you mentioned -this busyness part. Like, it interrupts that cycle. And if you can do that, multiple times through the day, like you don't have to sit and meditate for an hour. Like, if you can find little snippets of pauses through your day, that's every bit as important. And really, I think when we feel hijacked by technology, or hijacked by the busyness, or – we can... doing that simple pause for one minute, two minutes, five minutes, even if it's just sitting outside, kind of feeling the breeze, whatever it is, it just interrupts that mindset. And interrupts those habits that become ingrained. And then we kind of just reconnect with ourselves. And it's that simple. Like, it really doesn't have to be anything dramatic and as a superintendent, and turf managers in general, the gift is we're outside most the time. And yeah – like Reg earlier – you can get stuck in traffic, you can be, you can be all sorts of things in the run of a day... but most of the time, how lucky are we that my office is 170 acres, and I can walk around and drive around? And I can I can watch frogs, I can watch a blue heron, I can go putt, I can watch golfers play, I can feel the rain, I can feel the sun- all these things, like, are just right there all the time. And so yeah, to me, I think keeping aspirations as simple as possible. And like I said, it can be as simple as carving out time for yourself through the day. And whether that's breathing, or taking a walk, or sitting quietly, or even taking a nap. That's a very mindful moment. And I wholeheartedly support the art of napping any time I get the chance.

**Reg:** Siestas for everybody!

**Paul:** Absolutely

**Reg:** And I'll tell you about – There's a couple of things here that I love. And one of the things you mentioned is – and I've struggled with – and I'm working on, personally and professionally, is my reaction. Because I've always been of the mindset that you can control three things, you can control your action, your reaction, and your mindset. Right? Those are the three things you can really control, and focusing on those. And I think that that breathing piece is something I've worked on, especially in a leadership role. I think, you know, now that I'm a parent, you know, my kids will come to me with bad news. And you think about the years you were a boss, and someone comes to you, "A pipe blew up!" and you're like, "UGHHH!". But you know, they're just telling you the information or – as you've grown, I've grown in my leadership roles, it's like people come to me with more, bigger challenges or bad – even – or worse news. And I've had to learn to be like, "Okay, take a breath. It's not the end of the world, nobody got hurt. Not a huge priority." And I think that that's a good place to be mindful as a leader. Um, and the communication piece. I just want to circle back, because I think the funny thing I find about communication – I love communication. That's why I think I talk so much – at least that's what I tell people – but is that, you know, all these devices and it seems like we're making less quality communication. Does that make sense? They're very shallow, they're very quick. The true value of human beings and life fall. I follow you on Twitter and stuff. And I was like, "Man, this guy, like, he gets it. Like, he's, he's reached the point of intelligence to wisdom." There's that piece of wisdom that comes



with that, like, you know what, like, you guys can keep being busy. I'm just going to be over here doing me and deeming success in my own role, on my terms, not on everybody else's. Right?

**Paul:** Yeah

**Reg:** And I think that's a very intrinsic thing.

**Paul:** And I appreciate that comment. And again, I'll reiterate, I don't always get it right. I fail constantly, and that's just how it is. And – when animals are in cages, and they're fed the same thing, and they're not exposed to contact – like depression, anxiety – all these things become natural consequences. And I think as a society, we're seeing that on a grander scale, because...

**Sara:** We're putting ourselves in cages.

**Paul:** Right, and I think COVID only exacerbated that on a huge, like, global scale. And to me, one of the most important leadership lessons I've learned through COVID was to pause long enough to ask people how they were doing, and then stay long enough to listen to the answer. And that has been just so important, because what we were all dealing with collectively was one thing, but everyone was dealing with it individually because they all had their own backgrounds to come at it with. And some people, it was kind of looked like it was water off a duck's back. But for some people, it made life way, way harder. Because they were – their baseline wasn't the same as everyone else's when it began. And so, we had a lot of employees and we had to keep going, right? We had to all keep working. I mean, we – I hesitate to use the word essential because I mean, I only like to think of people who work in healthcare and stuff like that as fitting that definition – but at golf courses, we didn't really slow down. If anything, we got stupid busy over the last two years. So, we didn't have a choice but to stop and really to be able to pause long enough and give people the space and the flexibility to answer that question, and really feel safe enough to be honest and answer the question. And if it meant you needed more time off, or you needed to leave early, or you needed something to change, we just did it. Because I mean, there was no rulebook for "How do you run a golf course during a pandemic?" So, it was really just, "How do we be as compassionate and as caring as we possibly can be through all this?"

**Sara:** And I know, we're guilty of this all the time, we start off every phone conversation like, "Hey, how are you? Fine. How are you? Fine." But that's not really asking, that's not really getting the answer. That's not asking the question or waiting for the answer, either.

**Paul:** No. I often say to people now, I say, "Do you want the truth? Or do you want the flippant answer that I'm fine?" It's up to you. So yeah,

**Reg:** It's interesting, because I'm fairly empathic, right? And in becoming a leader and a boss, that's been a challenge for me. Because sometimes you do have to, you know, manage someone a little bit more sternly. And you know, you don't want to hurt someone else. But I found like, the amount of people that – you know – just were struggling through COVID. Like I would walk by, and, you know, I can just feel their pain, like just their anxiety.

**Paul:** Oh, absolutely.

**Reg:** And I think the social anxiety, I think, again, as someone who – I've struggled with it myself, honestly – it's like, like, just anxiety, and pressure, and stress, and all these other things it's almost... I hate to blame the culture. But I feel like a lot of it is the diet that we put in our brains. And a lot of that is coming from the social media world. And its – diet isn't just what you put in your face and what you eat. It's also what you put in your brain. So read positive things, be around positive people, you're going to feel positively. Be around negative people and read negative things, you know? And I think I think the mindfulness practice allows you to block some of that out. And if you have your own clarity of who you are and what you're after, and how you deem success. And it's just so – if you don't look busy, you don't look stressed, it's like a badge, right? And I think as the superintendent role that I came from, if

you didn't live the golf course life, if you weren't there all the time, and you didn't... you weren't succeeding. You weren't good enough, right? And we interviewed Leasha Schwab, and she said the same things, like, "I don't want to live in that world. I want to be a superintendent on my terms. And I can do this and be successful." Now, you guys, you, yourself, and Chris Tritabaugh, and Leasha, you guys all went on some kind of retreat. If I'm not mistaken. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

**Paul:** Yeah, that was back in 2018, actually, and it occurred here, actually, in PEI. And it was sponsored by Syngenta at the time, and we brought 15 people from across North America to PEI for the first mindful superintendent retreat. And Chris and I put it on. And so, we spent, probably – I think it was four days – basically introducing everyone to the concepts of mindfulness and then talking about like heart-centered leadership, talking about all these different things that Chris really feels passionate about. And then we just had fun. And we really just enjoyed ourselves and spent time. We ate together, we walked together, we went and played a little bit of golf, and we just really enjoyed it. And we had a grand time. And we've been hankering and trying to figure out a way to recreate it ever since, actually. We came close and then COVID happened. It will happen again. We just have to come up with a paradigm that fits. And both fortunately, and unfortunately, we figured out that bringing everyone here to PEI was a bit cumbersome and expensive. So, we're working on a bit of a different model where probably Chris and I will go to them. And then the group of people...

**Sara:** The mindfulness tour!

**Paul:** There you go. Yeah.

**Reg:** That's good. That's good.

**Paul:** For sure. So yeah, we're really hopeful that we can kind of reboot that in the next year. So that's our hope and plan. So yeah.

**Sara:** So, you've been in this golf industry for – for a little while. And I can almost guess what your answer to this question is going to be. But I'm going to ask anyway. What is the biggest myth you'd like to debunk about golf or working in the turf industry?

**Paul:** I thought this was the best question you guys had written down when you sent me a list of questions. Because it's one I feel pretty passionate about. And the biggest myth is that turfgrass is a way of life. It not just a job. But it is just a job. Like any other thing we do in our lives. It's a job. And if you let it consume you to the point of structuring the entirety of your life around it, you will burn out. It's that simple. And I've seen it 1000s of times in my compatriots and all the people I've talked to at conferences, and it is like a broken record playing over, and over, and over. And everybody thinks – they equate the idea of being passionate about what you're doing with complete and total sacrifice of everything. And I've done that. I explained earlier, when I burned out, that's what I thought you had to do. But it's a false flag. And it's not how you do this well. And I have come across so many people over the last five or six years that are choosing to approach this differently, and are incredibly successful by all measures you could come up with in this industry. And to me, watching the people wake up from this illusion has been the most fascinating part. Because I've done a lot of work, especially in the last two to three years, I've done a lot of work with assistant superintendents, and at top 100 clubs in the US. And sat in, like, at Penn State and done a lot of virtual stuff and podcasts and they're starting to get it. Slowly. They're starting to see. Because these guys and girls, they're younger, they're from a different generation. And they're looking at the system and the paradigm we built. And they're saying, "It's broken. It's not how this is supposed to... life does not work this way. I don't want to work 90 hours a week, and get paid dirt, and not see my family, and not have a life just for a golf course. It's stupid. It really doesn't make any sense." And when I hear people say that turfgrass is a lifestyle, that's what they're saying. It's like, "I'm willing to sacrifice the entirety of my being for a golf course I don't own". And really, that's the nuts and bolts of it. And then you become so invested in the property, and in your job, that you forget where you begin and you end. And that's a really dangerous thing in any job you do.

Whether you're a teacher, a doctor, lawyer, whatever it is. When you manage an organic entity, like a turf system, that lives and breathes and grows and changes and can crap out at any time...

**Sara:** Yeah

**Paul:** ...through no fault of yours. If that's all tied up in who you are; you're in trouble. Because it's gonna fail at some point, and you have no control over it failing. Whether it's a hurricane, whether it's ice damage, whether it's anything at all. If you equate that failure with an internal problem in yourself, you're in trouble. And so, you just, it takes a lot of work. But you really just – you have to gain that perspective. And sometimes – it's easier for me to say now, because I've been doing this 20-some years. I didn't think this way when I started out. I thought the exact opposite. But being 10 years or 12 years removed from that burnout, now, and looking at it and looking at how I operate now, it's just foolhardy. It really is. And, and they're hard-earned lessons. And sometimes you got to, kind of, go to the wall before you hit it. But if these young people can really see past that badge of honor thing. Like, it just doesn't make sense. Because, like, I don't know, I've met a lot of golfers over my years, and they don't care one speck how many hours we work. They don't care at all. All they care about is that there's grass under their feet, and the ball rolls fairly reasonably. That's all. That's it. They're just playing a game.

**Reg:** It's so interesting. And Sara, I don't know if you can equate – because, I don't mean to call you out, but you've never been down that road, but – the struggles I've had are a lot of the things Paul talked about. With you know, again, my identity was tied up in my job, right? And that's a really tough thing to remove. I still struggled to find my place and feel like I fit, because that's how I grew up. I mean, that's the way – my father was the same way. And that's kind of where, you know, our value is as individuals – and I, you know, our job is our identity. And I think next thing you said, you know – I've watched a little bit on Twitter there of these of these superintendents complaining about assistants, and there's no people and there's no this and I'm like, “Do not blame the millennials for this.” They are setting boundaries that you don't like and that's – it's a value difference. It's a difference in two people with two different values running into each other. And I've seen it my entire career. You know, they were trained by their parents who came from the Great Depression era. Find a great job, stick with it, do what your boss says. And you got to, kind of, my generation. We're kind of in the middle. Like, we kind of have this this transitional mindset where it's like, “I kind of get where the millennials are coming from but yeah, you should work pretty hard and be dedicated.” Right? And it's kind of like this balance. And then when I was like, “Yeah, but you're paying peanuts. I could start my business and make what you pay me and work half the hours. Why would I do that?”

**Sara:** I'll say, that's not unique to golf, either. Like...

**Paul:** No, I don't think it is.

**Sara:** Like in academia, you know, literally, the only thing I have is my name. You know? When I get publications out, and the number of publications I get, is equivalent to my success. And so, everybody knows my name. I even chose not to take my partner's name when I got married, because my name is my publications. And my name is my history that I am Dr. Stricker. I worked for 10 years to be that.

**Paul:** Right.

**Sara:** And in the past, as a grad student, as I was doing my PhD, doing my Masters, I equated my failures to something within myself and that led to depression. And then I, thankfully, within the university, I was able to seek support. So, I think we're shifting those values nowadays. I hope. To be able to ask for help when you are experiencing those feelings, right?

**Paul:** Yeah, no. You two very valid points there, Sara. First off, superintendents are not unique in the sense that we work hard and internalize what we do. So do teachers, so do academics, so do doctors. Like, I often look at the trajectory a doctor takes to become a doctor. And it's like, you run the gauntlet

the whole time in the most unhealthy way possible to become the person who's in charge of telling everyone how to be healthy, like...

**Reg:** That's so true! Oh, my God, that's so that's so makes so much sense. Oh...

**Paul:** Like, how? It doesn't make sense at all! And, again...

**Sara:** Do what I say not what I do what I do.

**Paul:** Yeah, and I mean, your second point, Sara, are about asking for help. And I think there are still a lot of barriers and roadblocks for people to step up. I think COVID change that in a big way, even if people aren't quite willing to admit it. Because I think a lot of people who never struggled, in real ways before, struggled during the last two years. Or are struggling currently. Because they were able to, kind of, hold it all together for a certain amount of time. But you can't forever. And so, all of a sudden things like anxiety, or panic attacks, or feeling isolated, or depression, any of those things, I think they're affecting people that don't normally come in contact with it. And there's other people, I think that probably have dealt with it in their own way through the years – either through addiction, either through just overwork – all sorts of different ways that maybe just felt a bit more comfortable, because everyone was struggling. And so, when you start a movement, you never quite know where it's gonna go. And it's kind of the similar thing with the mindful superintendent. I never, ever started out – I just wanted to write stuff. And I just had stuff in my head that I wanted to get out. And my wife kept saying, like, “You talk to me about all this stuff, write it down.” And I said, “Well, I don't know how to write.” And she said, “Just start. You'll figure it out.” But yeah, it's that type of thing that over the course of 10 years, when you look back at it, and you go, “Wow, you know what? It actually did make a difference.” It's the type of thing like, especially with, like, diversity and gender equality, or mindfulness – any of these things, it's not the amount of people it affects, it's because when it affects one person and changes one life, that's huge. Like it's no small thing when you can – somebody can – open themselves to emotional intelligence or personal awareness. It's no small thing when someone feels included. All of a sudden.

**Sara:** Yeah. There's simple things we can do too, you know? I always include my pronouns when I sign it to Zoom, beside my name, you know? Just in case, someone that might be in the audience feels the need to specify their pronouns to be able to be gendered correctly...

**Paul:** And generally I have mine. You can't see them because my wife changed her name on mine. So, I usually put mine there.

**Sara:** I'm not calling you out. I'm just saying that this is an example of something we can do that's pretty easy. And I explained it to someone else, you know, because they – their response was like, “I'm clearly a man, like, why would I need to put my pronouns? Everyone knows that I'm a man.” Like, it's not for you.

**Paul:** No.

**Sara:** It's for the one other person that might want to feel included that someone else is doing the same thing that they're doing, right?

**Paul:** Yes, I'm blessed with a very aware 17-year-old daughter who explains all this to me constantly. And it's beautiful and wonderful, because she's opened me to a whole breadth of inclusion and realization and awareness with people that I just didn't grow up with. And it's not that I didn't agree with it, I just didn't know as much as I should have. Right? And it's a different time now.

**Reg:** And I think it's that – you know – I'm a big fan of Brené Brown, right? And that whole idea of vulnerability. Like there's strength in vulnerability. Because vulnerability is where you allow connection, and that allows people to understand that they're not alone. Like, you know, I think – Like anxiety is one – And my only definition I've ever figured out for anxiety is you trying to worry about something that's never happened. And it's like, you're constantly thinking about the future. And the irony is, is you can't even control, like, 10% of what that's going to be. Right? And so, it's overthinking and thinking too much

about the future that cause a lot of these problems, right? Or – and I think FOMO is a big one now with social. Right? I see someone in Bermuda, and it's like, “Why am I not in Bermuda? I work hard.” And it's like, well, and I feel like I want to be in Bermuda. And it just – there's no way to see that every day and not to start to feel like, you know, maybe you're not up to that level. Or maybe you're not getting the same things out of life other people are. And I think that's where a lot of people are struggling with that. Myself included. Like I kind of, I used to be a big Twitter person. I kind of backed up a bit. I just found it became, you know... There's just – it's just got so much. Right? And it can be overwhelming when you see, like, people having fun, people doing this. And you're like, “I'm at work.” It's like, “What am I doing?” So it creates isolation in it's own way. It creates social anxiety because you don't feel like you measure up to someone else's Instagram post.

**Paul:** And it can be hard as superintendents too, because you're watching other superintendents do things you can't afford to do. Renovation jobs, or you're seeing improvements, or you're seeing things or you're seeing courses do things that you wish you could do. Or you're like, “Why am I not doing that? But it's not – It's apples to oranges.

**Reg:** Should I be doing that? Am I missing something?

**Paul:** Right. Exactly. The sky is falling! You have to be able to get to that point in yourself where you can – it's like anything on social media. Like, they're effective tools. And they're wonderful tools. If like any tool, if you use it the right way. Well, if you sit with a hammer and hit yourself in the head, it's not using the hammer the right way. If you hit a nail, that's how it's supposed to work. But with social media, if you're just going to use it to compare yourself to everyone else, well, you're never going to add up. It's never going to work. But if you can use it to learn, if you use it to gain, or you just use it for appropriate entertainment. I play music. I play guitar. I love watching on Instagram how people build guitars. So, watching the guys at Fender build electric guitars is cool. I never would have imagined I could have done that. So really, I think being able to use it the right way. And then just set it aside. And sometimes I fall into the same patterns where I'm far too invested in it myself. And – but really -I think again, coming back to mindfulness and coming back to the gifts that it offers. When you become aware of how you think, and how you feel, and how you feel in your body. When you start piecing all that stuff together. And you realize that every thought in your head isn't true. And you don't have to pay attention to all the thoughts in your head. Because it's this constant waterfall of thoughts all day long. There's no possible way you can pay attention to all of them. And you just start letting them come and go. And that's the practice of meditation. You just start letting them – it's like waves on a beach or clouds in the sky. You just start practicing watching it come and go. And then you kind of laugh at it after a while, and kind of – you kind of look at it and you're like, “Oh, there's this little monkey in there that I can never catch.” And he – sometimes he sleeps. But most of the time he just bops around in there and makes everything seem chaotic. But it's really just thinking, and everyone does it. And everyone thinks they overthink, and everyone thinks they think way more than the next... but we all do it. And unfortunately, the fuel of social media does not generally help thinking and overthinking and ruminating and such. So

**Reg:** How important do you feel gratitude is when you talk about mindfulness?

**Paul:** Gratitude is a key pillar of living a mindful life. Because if you can't pause long enough to appreciate the gifts you do have, even if it's simply the fact that you can pause and breathe... because I mean, how many times over the last two years that people struggled with breathing? Or that you have your health. Or that you have a roof over your head. So, all of these things. When we live in a culture like we do, it's all based on consumption. It's hard to be grateful because we're conditioned to just want more. So, it's hard to pause long enough to really see the gifts. But I think, again, coming back to speaking to the great collective pause of COVID. I mean, I think gratitude was a big part of it for a lot of people. It was difficult for a lot of people and I don't want to minimize it in any way. But I think people were offered the chance to pause and slow down and stop, because they had no choice. But then when you do those things, you get to tune back into yourself. And you get to know yourself better. And you

get to relax, and rest, and do all the things that we don't normally do in the run of the day, in the run of a season and all these things... And so, being able to pause long enough just to be grateful for simple things. Like I mentioned earlier, the gift of working outside all day. I mean, yeah, I gotta put sunscreen on and wear big hat, but that's fine. And occasionally, you get stuck in the rain, and you get wet when you're upside down in an irrigation hole. But that's okay, too. That happens. But I mean, really being grateful that I have the chance to go to work, and watch the sun rise, and work with wonderful people, and make people happy. Because really, at the end of the day at the golf course, that's our mantra here. It's just – we just want to make sure people have fun. That's it.

**Sara:** It's a game.

**Paul:** It's a game. And when we get all stressed out about diseases, or whether something isn't working, or this, that, or the other thing.. all we do is prepare a surface for people to play a game on. That's all.

**Reg:** That's such a great perspective. So, so you know, that all said, you know – we did really talk a bit about some new entrants into the turf industry. So, what kind of advice do you think you'd give coming out of the gate?

**Paul:** I think first and foremost is know thyself. Learn about what makes you tick. And like, the personal awareness thing is huge. It really is. And then, probably, be flexible, and be open to all sorts of different things. Like whether you're going to work on a golf course, or whether you're working with Sara doing research, or whether you're working for property management, like, there's all sorts of things you can do. And if you're open to new experiences, I think the world is your oyster really. Because this gig now – you can work anywhere you want. And then, I think maybe the next main thing that really coincides with the first thing is just invest in yourself. Invest in self-care. Invest in the things that make you happy, and then invest in the things that, kind of, propel you forward too. And sometimes it has to do with turf. And sometimes it doesn't.

**Sara:** I don't know about you, Reg, but I'm feeling more centered, and calm, and prepared for tomorrow. You know? This has been a really great conversation. And, Paul, I really appreciate your time and talking to us about this. I think this is a lot of valuable information that, you know, even if people are in the sod, or lawn care, or golf, or sports field, or outside of the turf industry could really learn a lot from you and your mindfulness practices.

**Paul:** Absolutely. Thank you so very much for having me.

**Reg:** Yeah, I mean, Paul. It's been a joy. I'm so happy you came and taught us a little bit. I've always felt -like I said – I've always followed you on social and I find that whole... I'd like to be more mindful in my own life and more present in my own life. Especially with family and things like that. So, you know, I'll reach out to you after this and chat with you a bit more because I'd like to learn a little bit more about how I could calm my own brain down and keep myself more centered. But. .. so... thank you so much.

**Sara:** Thank you so much. And you know, everyone can find you on Twitter. The handle is @mindfulsuper, and we'll stay tuned for your next retreat. I'd love to attend if I could, or have you here. And I want to thank all of our listeners for tuning in to this episode. And I hope that everyone listening can take three deep breaths and think about what you're grateful for. Thanks for listening and tune in next time to Canadian Turf Talks.

Music Outro

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