A Roller Coaster of Emotion

When George Brown asked me to be his Vice Chairman back in the middle of 2002 little did I know that one of the first jobs I would have as Chairman would be to pay tribute to one Executive Director and welcome a new one.

But that's exactly what I have done, with the premature and extremely sad passing of Neil Thomas and the appointment of John Pemberton, a man known to everyone in the industry, as his successor.

My first recollection of Neil, certainly to talk to, was at the National Education Conference. Sitting alone having breakfast, Neil approached and asked if he might join me. During that short conversation over breakfast Neil made a relatively new member feel that he belonged. It has amusing and frustrated me over the years since, that Neil's reputation in some quarters was of aloofness. While an introverted and quiet man in many ways, Neil also displayed to those fortunate to be close to him a compassionate, fair and always resolve manner.

I, like many before me, had occasion to cross swords with Neil and for me it was the National Championship and its future (or not!) at Carden Park. While at the time bitterly disappointed not to have the chance to host the event for a second time I came to realise that Neil's strength and determination to do what was best for the Association, even at risk of confrontation and potential disharmony with a member and creation of stress for himself, came above all else. That was Neil Thomas and, I feel, the one characteristic which has helped this Association flourish.

It would not be overstating the case to say that Neil was the person who ensured that BIGGA is where it is today. He took on the post in 1987 when the three previous Associations came together with a combined membership of around 2500, working out of a small office provided by the STRI in Bingley. From those small beginnings Neil steered BIGGA to a position where it is one of the movers and shakers in the golf industry. You may not be aware but BIGGA is regarded as an important body within golf and, as an Association, we are invited to contribute whenever golfing issues are debated. Relations with the other golfing bodies, the R&A, to whom BIGGA owes a huge debt; the Home Unions; the Secretaries Association; the European Tour and the sister Associations around the world, and in particular the GCSAA, are all flourishing. BIGGA can certainly say that it has grown up.

Couple that with the fact that BIGGA now owns its own headquarters building and you can see why Neil can be proud of the legacy he has left.

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No-one will feel his loss more acutely than his wife, Elaine, and children, Scott, Grant, Adam and Natalie, but his passing also left a huge void within the Association. While they have lost a loving husband and proud father, I hope that we in the Association can continue to offer comfort, support and friendship to them as they try to come to terms with their situation.

I would also like to thank all those who have contacted BIGGA to pay their respects and in particular the GCSAA and their Past President, Jon Maddern, who flew in from the States to attend the funeral.

Prior to the normal March meeting the Board met to discuss Neil's replacement. After a frank and open discussion, and using the guidelines for both job and people specification laid out previously by consultants, the Board of Management feels that we have exactly the right man to fill that void in John Pemberton, who had been Acting Executive Director, during Neil's period of illness.

John, who had been Neil's right hand man since he joined the Association in 1993, proved to everyone during the difficult last nine months that he has all the qualities necessary to take on the role full time and the Board of Management had no hesitation in offering him the job.

John knows every inch of the Association and those members who have had the privilege of dealing with him over the past 11 years will also know that he would do anything for them.

John will now have the opportunity to use his particular blend of talent, drive and enthusiasm over a wider brief and I am sure BIGGA will benefit.

Having worked closely with John over recent months I am personally delighted with the appointment. He has been a great help to me in recent months and I am sure that the support he has been to me will continue for the remainder of my Chairmanship.

Recent weeks and months have been a real roller coaster of emotion, bitter sweet in the extreme. Periods of real sadness and despair as Neil lost his battle with crippling illness, but also the other side of the coin as we found a more than able successor, who will continue the great work that goes into making BIGGA an Association to be proud of.

Andy Campbell
Chairman