Successful show indicates strength of industry

It’s hard to believe the GCSAA convention has concluded and spring is around the corner. Warm weather courses are in full swing. Once again, it looks like golf course industry is holding up in this uncertain economy.

The evidence of this strength became more clear in New Orleans. Here are my observations after talking with many suppliers, superintendents and others in the industry.

• Overall, the show was a huge success—particularly in comparison to 1991 when we were in the midst of Desert Storm. People felt better about this year.

• The New Orleans site seems minimal after all the rain and the usual minor problems. But, all in all, exhibitors were pleased with the facility.

• I found there to be less traffic through the hall than in past years. Many exhibitors agreed there was less traffic but higher quality. Decision makers were on the floor.

• Several new products caught my attention. It’s good to see the continued investment in R&D in large and small companies.

• As usual, the corporate hospitality was in full swing for media and superintendents. It’s impossible to get all the receptions, but the ones I did attend were first-class and very well attended.

• One new restaurant “find” for me: Chez Helene. (I understand it’s a favorite of Bill Cosby and Madonna.) It’s not in the best section of New Orleans, but it does boast true Southern cooking (not necessarily Cajun). Be sure to take a cab; don’t leave until your cab arrives for the return trip. You’ll find quite a few guests in the corridors.

• Congratulations to the builders and their president for the past few years, Perry Dye. And best wishes to incoming president Jerry Pierman.

Americans are the Johnny Appleseeds of golf

If golf’s roots are in Scotland, then its flowers are in America, and the seeds of the flowers are now blowing the world over.

Everywhere in the world—whichever Hemisphere you travel in, Americans are involved in every aspect of the golf course industry. American golf course architects and builders, superintendents and club managers have taken the art, mechanics and business of golf course design and operation and operation to new heights.

They’re acknowledged world-wide as the trend-setters in design; the leaders in construction technique and technology. They are forever unvelving breakthroughs in turfgrass research and plant breeding, and paving inroads into innovative marketing and operation.

American Robert Trent Jones Sr. set a globe-trotting standard perhaps no one will match, taking golf to areas that had never heard of the game before. His son, Robert Trent Jones Jr., and the family tradition going, designing the first course in Russia (outside Moscow). J. Michael Poellot and Arnold Palmer have taken the game to China.

Ronald Frear, Robert von Hagge and Jack Nicklaus have exported their creative talents around the world.

Others, of lesser fame, are being sought out by foreigners.

“I don’t know of one American architect I’ve spoken to lately who doesn’t have at least one golf course going internationally,” Palmer design company president Ed Sony said in February.

And the grass-growing, disease-fighting prowess of American superintendents is like gold abroad, especially in Asia where turfgrass schools don’t exist.

When government leaders talk about “American ingenuity” and lament the lack of exportable goods and services, perhaps they should turn their eyes toward the golf industry and get some hints.

Why are 85 percent of the golf courses built in Asia designed by Americans? Why are American agronomists, superintendents, professors, course builders and managers sought after? Check the basics and you’ll get the answer: strong, basic education in the fields of agronomy and design, and a long-standing heritage in the game.

While many Americans in other fields of work are running a distant race from the world’s leaders, golf is a different creature.

Take a close look and you’ll see:

• a firm underpinning of education in landscape architecture;

• top-notch turfgrass science programs in universities nationwide;

• ongoing research in plant breeding and environmental impact of chemicals;

• a talent of artistry—best expressed in free-form—that Americans show in such wide-ranging fields as advertising and figure-skating.

Perhaps greatest is a heritage of the game of golf itself, if not usurped from the Scottish then certainly staking a claim of closest brotherhood.

Those professionals who are traveling abroad are like the gardener spreading the seed, tamping and watering it.

What blossoms is a flower the whole world can enjoy. And that will reflect well on all Americans.

MARK LESLIE

Fore crying out loud: Golfers sure can be a hazard

By Danion Jacobson

A golf course is a battlefield. Golfers fight their opponents and unfriendly hazards while trying to beat par. On the other side of the game, superintendents direct the battle against nature—armed with chemicals, sprinklers and weather—while trying to maintain a beautiful and healthy playing surface.

Caught in between, the grounds crew and maintenance staff have the job of pleasing both sides. But sometimes their job is complicated by another little war—one waged against them by disinterested and careless golfers.

“It seems like every time I turn around, a golfball is headed straight for me,” one member of the Grand View grounds crew said a few years ago. His audience—members of the grounds crew at this central Minnesota course—was eating lunch at the maintenance shop.

The main topic of conversation on this particular mid-summer’s day was not the heat or the number of golfers on the course. Everyone wanted to talk about Troy Casper’s accident.

Earlier that day, he had been trimming grass around some trees between two fairways. Out of nowhere, a hard-hit ball smacked into his right hand, resulting in a lot of pain, a little swelling, but luckily, no serious injury. A minute later, an older man and his golfing companions came strolling down the fairway.

“He came over to me and started asking me what I was doing in his way... Didn’t even ask me if I was hurt,” Casper said.

The other players just shook their heads. Even in the short time they had been in the business, many of them had been in similar situations.

The nine-hole course at Grand View is typical of most small courses in the high-traffic resort community of the Minnesota Lakes Area. It relies on a beautiful landscape, light fairways, and challenging greens to keep tourists coming back. Before the owners built a championship-size 18-hole course nearby, it handled more summer traffic than downtown Minneapolis.

The golf staff is typical. It consists mainly of seasonally employed high school and college students, who find the outdoor work preferable to flipping burgers for tuition money. Many have an internship or summer job, and experience, however. One thing they are guaranteed is a fast education.

At the busiest times, workers start before 6 a.m. to get a jump on the golfers. Few grumble about the early hours once they experience what it’s like being in the line of fire.

The scenario goes something like this:

At 6:15 a.m., the novice greenkeeper is working a mower back and forth across a green. He enjoys the smell of the freshly cut grass, the cool damp air and the sound of birds singing... When the sun hits the grass it looks as though any moment a golfer is going to step out of the apron. He is ready. He is prepared. He is only waiting for the right moment...

The golfer steps on the apron in the line of fire. He is in the line of fire. He is in the line of fire...