Golf industry needs a lobbyist of its own

The golf course industry has a simple but nevertheless enormous problem in our nation's capitol. Image and perception are everything in Washington, and golf is sorely lacking on both counts:

- For decades, whether the Clinton Administration would follow through with its commitment to reduce pesticide use, you can stop wasting. The legislation is introduced in May and it will be difficult for Congress to stand in opposition.
- The national media increasingly depicts golf courses as flash points in the environmental debate. The Wall Street Journal article, "Golf Courses Are Denounced as Health Hazards," ran on May 2, is only the most recent example (see my editor-to-editor response at right). As for Paul Harvey... well, don't get me started.

And despite the monumental growth of public-access golf—and the fact that two-thirds of the nation's courses are open to anyone—the sport is still seen as a pastime for rich, white males who discriminate against women and minorities while erecting their new playthroughs atop environmentally sensitive lands or ancient burial grounds. It's time the golf course industry pools its efforts and resources, and the first step should be a golfin' lobbyist in Washington, D.C.

Now, before I go any further, a word should be said about RISE (Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment), the specialty chemist's association. RISE and its executive director, Allen James, have done a creditable job representing golf's interest. But the job's too big and RISE has pretty much cut itself off from the outside golf realm.

Further, sending a lobbyist to Washington is just what the golf industry needs to pull people and organizations together.

For a while there, the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) seemed determined to go it alone. But the superintendents have changed their ways, as exhibited by their recent cooperation with the United States Golf Association (USGA) and the United Golf Course Superintendents Association of America and state and regional chapters across the country. It's time the golf course industry pools its efforts and resources, and the first step should be a golfin' lobbyist in Washington, D.C.

Over the years, the entire golf industry has borne the cost of turfgrass research. The United States Golf Association, private industry, the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, state and regional chapters across the country have all gone to great lengths to raise money, then given it away to scientists investigating everything from pestilence to low-input turfgrasses.

Now it's time for the enduser—the golfer—to pitch in. Golfers are, after all, the beneficiaries of the lifetime of hard work superintendents and their crews devote to creating perfect playing conditions.

The Arizona green industry took a severe blow this spring when two legislators killed legislation that would have assessed 10 cents per round of golf, to be used for golf course maintenance and development. The Arizona turfgrass industry is now being hit with a loss of its efforts and resources, and the first step should be a golfin' lobbyist in Washington, D.C.

Further, the contention that golf courses apply seven times more pesticides than do farmers and homeowners is yet another example of political hyperbole. The farming vs. golf debate (and just who applies how many pesticides per treated acre) has raged for some time, and citing the now infamous 1991 study from the N.Y. Attorney General's office has become commonplace. Unfortunatly, for the environmental lobby, it's the only study in recorded history that supports its argument. Further, the study's lead researcher has long disputed the AG's final "edit," which enabled the study's conclusion to match its initial intent—namely, to paint golf courses as environmentally voracious. Compared to farmers, golf courses do not apply as much pesticide per treated acre—a fact the British environmental movement has accepted for decades. In addition, a golf course covers 150 acres, less than half the acreage is actually treated, whereas farmers spread pesticides wall to wall. Further, on golf courses as environmentally voracious. Compared to farmers, golf courses do not apply as much pesticide per treated acre—a fact the British environmental movement has accepted for decades. In addition, a golf course covers 150 acres, less than half the acreage is actually treated, whereas farmers spread pesticides wall to wall. Further, on golf courses they should get the support they need. And golfers should be among the supporters.

Earthquakes and mass murders grab the page 1 headlines—and rightfully so. Yet disasters somehow
cat — using mailings to GIN Handicap users to ask for donations for research (see page 13). Stuntz and his green industry colleagues in Kansas should be lauded. They and others must have unique ideas to pass on. We need to be more than a clearinghouse for these ideas, tried or untried. Multiply a $2 donation by the number of golfers applying for handicaps in America, and the potential is truly enormous for the Kansas-type fund-raising alone.

The industry could take the lead from organizers of the Herman Sani Fund in Iowa, which provides scholarships to graduating high school seniors. For 30 years they have raised funds at state tournaments. Sometimes it's voluntary. Other time, a donation is simply added to tournament charges.

There must be myriad solutions to the money problem. One thing is certain: "A worker is worthy of his wages." And scientists from the University of Massachusetts to the University of Arizona continue to solve problems affecting golf courses.

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Now's time to reeducate golfers, and ourselves

By DAMIAN PASCUZZO

We all seem to be in agreement that the golf course of tomorrow will be simple, environmentally unobtrusive and economically rational. Maintenance will be greatly reduced and fewer chemicals will be used. Rough mowers will be next. The course will be cheaper to build and maintain, and the green fees, if it is a public course, may be incrementally lower. The course may be fashioned by a more fitness- minded golfer and no one will feel press- sured to take a cart.

To those who like their landscaping formal and ornamental, the future could be disappointing. Gone will be timber bull- heads around greens, flower beds, foun- tains, and uniformly lush green grass in every fairway. The homogenization of courses will disappear. Players who go on vacation to the beach or mountains will find those courses nothing like the ones they left at home. Whatever the character of the original course, the green will remain.

Don Knott, the new president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, has suggested that golfers would celebrate a return to a less structured arrangement of holes which will allow many sites to be developed that are presently considered unsuitable. There may not be two re- turning nines (George Thomas wrote in the 1920s that this concept almost always compromises design). There will be no predominated number of par 3s, 4s and 5s, or their lengths. There may even be an odd number of holes instead of the predictable nine or 18.

Architects, developers, golf pros may not always have a standardized par-72 score like the Tour pros on television. So, they might be forced to go to match play, to pick the ball up, to move around the course at a much faster pace — and probably enjoy the game more.

If all of this is clear, why do we seem to be edging into this brave tomorrow at a snail’s pace? The general fear seems to be the golfer simply won’t buy it. If that is the case, why do so many American players make pilgrimages to St. Andrews, the very model (ironically enough) of the course of tomor- row, and come away saying, “This is the way golf should be.”

No, the public isn’t the problem. It’s us... architects, developers, golf pros, course superintendents and the golf media. It’s we who taught the American golfer to like lush, perma-green parkland courses, to think that sappy little golf cars are a big part of the fun, and to believe that it’s okay to learn the game right on the course with no sense of rules, etiquette or the rudiments of a swing.

Since we taught golfers the wrong way, it’s up to us to re-educate them now. Developers of golf-residential projects have always assumed homeowners wanted a seamless blending of manicured turf into their front yards. Now we find homeowners turning their yards into wildflower meadow- ows and planting unthirsty vegetation. Maybe these residents are ahead of us. What’s wrong with natural rough separat- ing the course from the backyards?

PGA professionals could do a lot to edu- cate their players on what a true course should be. Pros should be the ones to in- struct new players in rules and etiquette, on speedy play, on responsibilities in course- maintenance like fixing divots, and, of course, in developing a good enough swing that the player can keep the ball reason- ably in play.

If there is a transition away from the golf car, pros should lead the way, convincing a new generation of golfers that the course can be played more successfully and enjoy- ably on foot.

Superintendents can do much to lead the march away from the “green is beauti- ful” obsession. For instance, many courses that get heavy play would profit from planting Bermuda grass, but there is a concern play- ers will resist the plant’s brown winter phase.

Superintendents can help educate players on how the obsession with green and the idea the ball must be playable anywhere on the course is not what golf is about. The golf media’s support of this move- ment (sometimes called naturalism) is es- sential. Despite the ink invested in the phenomenon of naturalism, the new and old course rankings still line up with the “green is beautiful” crowd. Why shouldn’t there by style points in rankings for natural beauty, a “good walking course,” minimal maintenance and chemical usage, and low green fees?

Bringing naturalism criteria into the rankings would change things overnight. And why not regular features in the golf press on the new drill in golf course design?

Certainly, we golf course architects must assume some responsibility. It is true we serve the client. But that doesn’t excuse us from the responsibility of wise counsel on environmental matters, low maintenance, and selling the game as an adventure for the golfer, not just another numbers exercise.

We also can, through our national asso- ciation, pressure the media to start evalu- ating and ranking courses on some criteria other than biggest, costliest and greenest. The important thing is that we’re all in this together. No single group within the golf industry can, alone, change the public’s attitude. It serves all of our interests to develop as many courses as possible within the environmental constraints we face and the scarcity of quality land.

But the job requires a massive attitude adjustment to get everybody under the tent — an education process that will re- quire all of our best efforts.

So, what are we waiting for?

Golf Course News

Phillips commentary

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JOINING RIFE

Funding the lobbyist would be shared among the various golf organizations, a ver- table floor in an acro-proactive coopera- tion: GCSCA, USGA, NGF, PGA, PGA Tour, LPGA, ASGCA. Sharing the cost of a golf lobbyist would do more to bring these groups together than anything the Sierra Club might do.

Once the lobbyist has been hired and sent to the “Seat of Power,” there should be two messages; one for legislators and the general public, the other for the golf industry itself. The course will be cheaper to build and maintain, and the green fees, if it is a public course, may be incrementally lower. The course may be fashioned by a more fitness- minded golfer and no one will feel press- sured to take a cart.

Our new lobbyist should concentrate on convincing legislators. His opening message to Con- gress and the public at large: Man owns land. Man wants to make money. Man might develop a mall or upscale condo complex. Or man might develop a golf course. But the land will be developed... Which would you rather have: An asphalt jungle or grassy open space?

The second message will be harder, because we in the golf course industry must heed it. Basically, the industry in general and manufacturers in particular must get out in front of the environmental debate. Golf course superintendents have been doing this for some time because they have been under attack from the start. But make no mistake: Fertilizers, aeration, golf cars and mowers will be next.

Don’t wait for the green movement to set its sites on your segment of the industry. Start promoting the environmental safety of your products right now. Don’t merely position yourselves as “environmentalist” — position yourselves as “pro-actively environmentalist.” Big difference. And don’t be afraid to discuss how much better, how much safer your products are now compared to 20 years ago. Don’t be afraid of this perceived ad- mission of guilt.

That’s what our lobbyist will tell us. Let’s hire him and give him listen.

Journal response

Continued from previous page

This is the time of rich, white males. It’s an attack on elitism as much as anything else. But most revered profession against a pas- sion of holes which will allow a transition away from the “green is beauti- ful” obsession. For instance, many courses that get heavy play would profit from planting Bermudagrass, but there is a concern play- ers will resist the plant’s brown winter phase.

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