

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 economical. Maintenance will be greatly reduced and fewer chemicals will be used. Rough and other out-of-play areas will be unirrigated, thus saving on water usage. Hazards will be areas gone to native plants, sand wastes or wetlands. Cattails and rushes will grow at the edges of water hazards.

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 will be walked by a more fitness-minded golfer and no one will feel pressured to take a cart.

To those who like their landscaping formal and ornamental, the future could be disappointing. Gone will be timber bulkheads around greens, flower beds, fountains, 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 land (open hills, woods, marsh, dunes or desert) that character will remain.

Don Knott, the new president of the

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American Society of Golf Course Architects, has suggested 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 returning nines (George Thomas wrote in the 1920s that this concept almost always compromises design). There will be no guaranteed 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.

Yes, this means golfers 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.

So, if we all believe this is the right direction, 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 tomorrow, 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



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lush, perma-green parkland courses, to think that zippy 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 meadows and planting unthirsty vegetation. Maybe these residents are ahead of us. What's wrong with natural rough separating the course from the backyards?

PGA professionals could do a lot to educate their players on what a true course should be. Pros should be the ones to instruct 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 reasonably 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 enjoyably on foot.

Superintendents can do much to lead the march away from the "green is beautiful" 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.

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 movement (sometimes called naturalism) is essential. 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 be 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 drift 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 association, pressure the media to start evaluating 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 require all of our best efforts.

So, what are we waiting for?

Phillips commentary

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joining RISE.

Funding the lobbyist would be shared among the various golf organizations, a veritable flood of acronyms in pro-active cooperation: GCSAA, 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 main messages; one for legislators and the general public, the other for the golf industry itself.

- Our new lobbyist should concentrate on conveying the following message to Congress 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.

Chemical manufacturers have been doing this for some time because they have been under attack from the start. But make no mistake: Fertilizers, aerators, 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 admission of guilt.

That's what our lobbyist will tell us.

Let's hire him and give him listen.

Journal response

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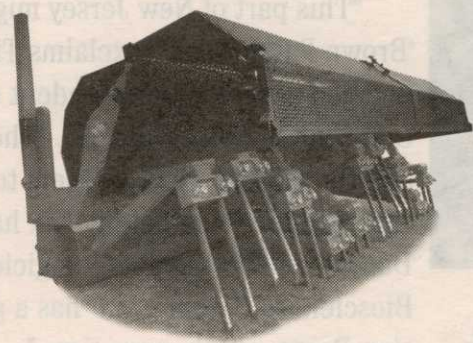
courses, pesticides are applied to areas covered with turfgrass, one of nature's most effective filtration systems. Farmers apply the stuff to more porous, tilled soil, through which liquid pesticide treatments leech far more easily.

No one dares pooh-pooh the findings of Iowa State University epidemiologist Dr. Burton Kross, whose study showed elevated levels of cancer in golf course superintendents who died between 1970 and 1992. However, those superintendents cited in the study worked on golf courses during the 1950s and '60s, when arsenic- and mercury-based chemicals were commonplace — on farms and golf courses. The federal Environmental Protection Agency has seen fit to ban these compounds.

The EPA has also seen fit to approve the chemicals currently applied on golf courses. Golf course superintendents follow label instructions religiously, more strictly than any other applicator group, including farmers, pest control operators, roadside vegetation managers and lawn care workers (Source: Sandoz National Environmental Poll 1994, conducted by the Gallup Organization). I think it's also fair to assume golf course superintendents are more careful applying chemicals than the average homeowner, who has no agronomic training or unannounced visits from OSHA.

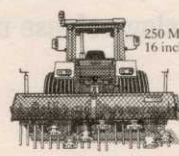
It's interesting this argument almost always pits farming against golf; man's most revered profession against a pastime of rich, white males. It's an attack on elitism as much as anything else. But while we're on the subject, how many farm-related bird kills has the N.Y. state department of conservation recorded since 1971?

Hal Phillips, editor
Golf Course News



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