COMMENTARY

Big Golf Inc., coming soon to a golf course near you?

The consolidation trend in the golf course industry continued unabated in 2001 and it shows no signs of easing up for 2002. While there are fewer companies left to buy up, especially on the chemical side of the business, there is little doubt that slowing golf course construction and economic uncertainty will add more fuel to the merger and acquisitions fire. This year alone Dow AgroSciences snapped up Rohm and Haas and Bayer made a play for Aventis CropScience. Last year, AstraZeneca and Novartis combined to form Syngenta and BASF purchased American Cyanamid. The trend reaches beyond the chemical companies. On the distribution side, Royster Clark bought Pro Source One. Heller Financial entered the golf lending business by purchasing a portfolio from Bank of America and was then subsequently bought out by GE Capital. (See story page 19) On the management end, Golf Trust of America and Family Golf Centers fell by the wayside and GPS companies forged alliances with golf car manufacturers.

The most interesting and far-reaching set of acquisitions this year, however, belongs to John Deere. The company bought up landscape supplier Meinen Farms and then purchased Richton International, the parent company of irrigation distributor Century Rain Aid. As this month’s front page story outlines, the newly formed John Deere Landscapes division is not only the largest irrigation distributor in the country, but it has also taken the unprecedented step of getting into the seed, fertilizer and chemical distribution business. No other turf equipment maker can offer this breadth of services, and the company has not ruled out purchasing other companies to expand its product offering further.

The possibility of one big golf company that meets all of a golf course’s needs from turf equipment, golf cars, agronomic supplies, course management and maintenance services, etc. is edging closer to reality. But as customers in any industry would point out, this will not be possible unless companies can continue to offer high quality products and services.

SUPERINTENDENTS WEIGH IN

According to superintendents I spoke with, many have already been impacted by the effects of consolidation.

“While I am constantly looking for some obscure product or machine,” said Larson agreed. “I have never been a fan of buying one brand. I have a hodgepodge of equipment and I have a hard time believing that someone who offers a one-stop shop could have the best products of each category. I don’t see it happening.”

While industry consolidation is inevitable in a free market economy, companies need to bear in mind that serving customers is just as important as pleasing shareholders. When companies come together to broaden the scope of products and services there is an opportunity to increase both market share and customer satisfaction. As the consolidation trend continues to march through the golf course industry, let’s hope that the version of Big Golf Inc. depicted in our editorial cartoon never comes to fruition.

Remembering turfgrass fundamentals is crucial to success

As I sit in my office on this cold October morning, preparing to write this commentary, I am surrounded by technology. As I tap the computer keyboard, I see my fax machine, PalmPilot and answering machines – and this is just in my office. During my 25 years in this business, the turfgrass industry – from maintenance equipment to irrigation controls and turf varieties – has gone high tech. While these high tech developments are all great for our industry, superintendents need to remember the fundamentals and cultural practices of turfgrass management.

BACK IN THE DAY

When I first started working on a golf course we used to toppergrass by hand. Our toppergrass machine consisted of three guys, a trailer full of a 1:1 sand/soil mix, and three large shovels. When I saw the first self-propelled topperdresser, I thought I had seen it all. Now we have topperdressers big and small, and for greens and fairways. I am happy that no one decided to topperdress fairways when we were using the shovel technique.
GPS doesn’t keep pace

To the Editor,

Having just played my first round on a course with GPS installed, I must say that on the first tee I was thinking it was a great way to speed up play. (Speed of Play focus, GCN October 2001) But by the seventh hole I was cussing the system because while we were supposedly “keeping pace”, we had waited on every tee ball and approach shot since the second hole. Since the group ahead of us was within acceptable times, they saw no need to allow us to play through. This resulted in a four-and-a-half hour round instead of the three-and-a-half hour round we would have played.

Sincerely,
Vance Voth, Mann & Co. Architects & Engineers
Hutchinson, Kan.

Personal Ranger a hit

To the Editor,

I just finished reading the speed of play articles from the October issue. Here at Balmoral Woods we too have implemented the Personal Ranger pace of play system. For a relatively low cost, it has improved our pace of play and it is easy to use and understand. I highly recommend it for all golf courses.

Sincerely,
David Mortell, General Manager
Balmoral Woods Country Club
Crete, Ill.