

Planting seeds for the future

A TEXAN PREPARES TO TAKE HOLD OF THE GCSAA'S REINS

by
PAT
JONES

GCN INTERVIEWS
RICKY HEINE,
CGCS, THE
INCOMING
PRESIDENT OF THE
GCSAA.

Most superintendents find their passion working on a golf course in their late teens or by playing on their high-school golf team. Ricky Heine, CGCS – soon to be president of the 20,000-member GCSAA – found his passion as a 13-year-old sod farmer.

“I grew up on a farm and loved the outdoor environment,” he says. “My older brother, Bobby – who’s almost 22 years older than I am – was working as a golf course superintendent and needed to grow in a truckload of sod. I respected him a lot and wanted to be like him and be a superintendent from the time I was about 10. So, when I was about 13, he brought me a truckload of sod, and I hired other kids from my class to help me. We planted the whole truck of sod by hand and turned it into a three-acre sod-production farm. That’s how I earned money when I was little.”

Nowadays, Heine earns his living as the general manager and director of grounds at Golf Club at Star Ranch, a semiprivate facility near Austin, Texas. He’s only 43 but has been a GCSAA member for 23 years, joining before graduating from Texas A&M in 1985. He’s one of those guys who just never found a reason to wander too far from home. His job in Hutto, Texas, is less than 30 miles from where he was born. Now, a fellow who stayed close to home will travel the world and mix with the powerful and famous as the GCSAA’s top elected official. Here’s how he’ll handle it.

Q Your year as president is about to begin. Does it feel like the finish or starting line?

It feels like the starting line, but it’s actually been 17 years of continuous board service. I started out with the Central Texas GCSA, then the Lone Star GCSA and now the national. Once you commit

to becoming engaged in the GCSAA, you really never finish. You just pass through phases.

Q What’s the most important thing you’ve learned about the industry during your time on the board?

I’ve learned a lot quickly. Probably the most important thing is that change doesn’t happen in a vacuum. The profession is changing as we speak. The golf business is more competitive, and time is so precious for our customers. Facilities and superintendents have to understand that change is inevitable and manage it.

You have to broaden your perspective and knowledge of the facility from turf only to the full spectrum – insurance, net income, food cost, risk management – you name it. Now, superintendents are getting those questions. Some are responding, and some aren’t as quick to get on board. Successful superintendents will respond. I’m not sure this dynamic is any different than any other industries or professions. Change is a constant in modern life.

Q Do you have a theme for your presidency or any specific goals?

I see my role as planting seeds and providing the direction and leadership that will advance the association and the profession. I don’t have a checklist or agenda that I will carry with me this year.

During my six years on the board, I don’t think anyone had a set agenda, but I think about what past president Jon Maddern said: “We are a board of nine ... not nine individuals and a president.” The president has to involve the other eight members, including the newest members. Once the debates are over, we have to support each other and

respect each other.

But, that said, I identified three key initiatives at the delegates’ meeting. First, we need to support our chapters to become more effective and efficient. Second, we must increase membership so we can have a stronger voice and advocate even better on its behalf. And third, now that our first class A group has met the new PDI standards of continuing education, we must effectively market them to employers and golfers like never before.

Q The new PDI/certification requirements went into effect mid-year. What have the short-term impacts been in terms of membership numbers, classifications, etc.?

When we first brought this concept forward in 1994, we knew membership would decline if standards were adopted. Plus, you’ve had the recession, 9/11 and a flat golf economy. There’s no doubt we lost some members because of the standards, but we reaffirmed our commitment to the concept. Some membership growth has been lost, and PDI implementation didn’t help that, but once we establish our professional value in the marketplace, the idea of PDI will be vindicated.

Q What do you think the impact will be in five or 10 years?

The value of golf course superintendents will grow during the next five to 10 years, and even more during my lifetime.

Q Has your general manager title presented any challenges for you politically?

No. There have been a couple of cases when people asked about it. It’s just a few more people to manage and a few more areas of expertise to keep up with, but it’s the same philosophy: detail and



follow through.

I served as a superintendent for 16 years, and I'm still involved with our golf course management team. Three of my guys and I have been together for 18 years. They probably know what I'm thinking before I even think it.

The GCSAA wants to provide the tools and opportunities for members to become general managers if they want to, but we don't promote that. I didn't go through a formal education process and seek the position, it just happened.

Q Has it given you a different perspective that might help you lead the association?

I hope so. Golf is becoming more of a business every year. I've learned a lot about running this facility, and I've tried to manage it like it was my own these past three years. That's been a great experience for me. If a superintendent becomes involved with the success of the facility, it will help the business succeed and advance his or her career. Understanding produces knowledge, and that knowledge can lead to respect, appreciation, pay and tenure for our members.

Q What's your take on chapter restructuring?

I'm in Texas, and we have six chapters around the state. We've discussed this a little. We're watching, listening and learning. It has to do with chapter effectiveness. We have pilot programs in Michigan and Pennsylvania. The concept is the affiliated state chapter can provide the effectiveness and efficiency while the unaffiliated local groups provide the networking, camaraderie and some education. Why do we need duplication of services such as Web sites, bookkeeping, insurance, etc.?

We've hired two field staffers to manage the process. One is working more

Photo courtesy of Carlton Wade Photography

on current chapter structures, and the other is working with Michigan and Pennsylvania to be a liaison to help with the restructuring. Eventually, this could lead to more in-the-field staff if the testing proves productive.

Q What should members who grumble about board expenses understand about board

service they don't know?

At the last delegates' meeting, there was solid approval for the checks-and-balances process. Once we communicated the business case for what we've been doing, the response was better. It will be less and less of an issue. Members can be assured nothing inappropriate is happening. No one on this board ran to enrich themselves. I don't expect

a pity party about the demands of the position either. We knew what we were getting into. The most important thing to know is we spend what we need, not necessarily what we have budgeted.

We do our best to do what's right and spend the association's money as if it were our own. When I get off this board, I won't have a stockpile of unused logo shirts and clothes to carry me into retirement. That said, the association task group recommended ideas about expenses and reductions, and we'll look at those. We need trust and transparency. I'm hopeful we'll accept those recommendations. They were good ideas.

Q National board service has taken its toll on previous members. Do you think you could have survived all the way through had it not been for the governance changes put in place a few years ago?

I have a great employer, so that helps. Also, consider average tenure for superintendents was about five years, and now it's about eight years. The change was evolutionary. Past boards had to do some heavy lifting. But – it sounds contradictory – we now have greater control even though our time and travel commitment has been reduced. I would have survived, but it wouldn't have been as much fun.

Q How can your work load be less and control greater?

It's like being a managing superintendent. We have our indicators that tell us how the association and staff are doing. It's very defined, and we can measure performance. We tell our c.e.o., 'We want this done.' At year's end, when those indicator numbers come in, we can decide if we've been successful or not. The control comes when those numbers are in. That's where the rubber meets the road.

Q Given that, are you encouraged that more people are interested in serving?

Yes, extremely. More good members are considering it. They're not waiting for the right time when their careers are established and they can do it. We also understand people are more family-centric as well. It's all about that balance. You have to have a strong relationship with your family and employer to even consider it. I successfully navigated



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Q How many days do you think you'll be on the road next

year for the association?

I haven't done the math, but I'm planning on about 75 days. I passed on a couple of things this year that just didn't fit with the balance I mentioned earlier.

Someone else from the board is always willing to fill in. If you're a board of nine, you can still be effective.

Q What travel secrets have you learned throughout the years?

I know exactly how long the drive is to the airport, and I know an airplane seat makes a pretty good office.

Q Tell us about the folks at your facility who keep things running while you're serving the association.

I have the best staff of friends anyone could ever imagine. My golf course superintendent, Travis Carlson, grew up on a family farm about a mile from my parents' farm that I grew up on. He's an Aggie, too. Samantha Fulford is my assistant manager, and we've worked together for about 12 years. She might be the smartest person I've ever met. Our director of golf, Rob Fulford, knows as much about the business as he does about playing the game. Megan Woodard, our sales manager, does a tremendous job with anything we ask of her. It is so much fun to go to work or to head off on GCSAA business and know things are going to be fine. Last, but not least, our owners, Tim Timmerman, Joe Cotter and Ray Wicken have entrusted everything to me, and they have been incredibly supportive though this whole process.

Q Who's your hero?

My father, Herbert, who passed away several months ago at age 94. He had an active pesticide license when he was 88. I helped him get to the continuing education classes he needed. I told him he probably could just let me handle anything he needed, but he said, "You never know, it surely won't hurt anything." So he attended the classes and renewed his license. That's commitment. We could all learn from that.

Q How do you want to be remembered as past president?

A few years ago, I read a book called "The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader," and I focused on three Cs in it: character, commitment and compassion. It would mean a lot to me if that's how I'm remembered by my family, my friends and my fellow members. GCN

Ricky Heine can be reached at rickyheine@hotmail.com.

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