Editor's note: During this year’s annual summer meeting of the Golf Course Builders Association of America, which was in Monterey, Calif., Golf Course Industry hosted a roundtable with six GCBAA members to discuss the golf course development industry. Participants were Glenn Caverly, president of Golf Course Construction in Howell, Mich.; Bob Bryant, president of Bryant Taylor Gordon Golf in Costa Mesa, Calif.; Oscar Rodriguez, vice president of Weitz Golf International in Temecula, Calif.; Klaus Ahlers, golf sales manager with Colton, Calif.-based Leemco; Wayne Massey, president of Medalist Golf in Cumming, Ga.; and Willie Slingerland, sales manager for Dallas-based Flowtronics. The following is an excerpt of the discussion.

GCI: What are your thoughts about renovation?

AHLERS: It has been – except for all the stuff we ship overseas – our biggest business during the past two years. A lot of it is because of water quality changes, the modernization of equipment, the fertilizer injector systems, as well as rebuilding bunkers, greens and tees. On many courses, that’s been the bulk of the work.

SLINGERLAND: That’s the majority of our work domestically. Internationally, it’s all new construction.

CAVERLY: I don’t believe renovation has picked up any. We’ve done as much renovation work as when the big golf boom was on.

GCI: Is that regionally or throughout the country?

CAVERLY: There are no more renovations now than there have ever been. It’s the only thing that’s keeping the industry going.

BRYANT: In certain parts of the country, renovation has picked up. For example, 10 years ago, if we did a project that involved replacing an irrigation system, that’s exactly what the project was – we designed an irrigation system. Sometimes, six months later or two years later, the owners decided to do a bunker project. Well, they’ve started getting a little smarter about planning. Today, with almost every project we’re involved in replacing an irrigation system, it involves some form of reconstruction. El Paso Country Club in Sacramento was a complete blowup and start over. That’s an extreme.

MASSEY: In the Southeast during the past two years, we’ve seen projects increase to 70 percent new construction and 30 percent renovation. All new construction is basically very high-end.

RODRIGUEZ: What I liked about renovations is that most of the time they’ve been budgeted, either privately funded or publicly if it’s a city or county. So when you go in there, you know you’re going to get paid most of the time. We don’t start

Slingerland
more information available to new developers than there has been during the past 10 to 15 years. There are conferences, our conference, our Web site, and obviously, the electronic age makes information more available. Sophisticated builders, not golf course builders, but developers, especially of housing, have access to the information. They just have to go find it. The architects are helping. Not all of them understand yet, but the majority of them do.

AHlers: Regarding the renovation thing, many courses say, 'OK, hold on. We're going to do this next year.' It's not a money thing. Sometimes they've already acquired all the funding. They don't have a model home opening and aren't trying to get their money back from this investment and the property. They do the master plan, get budgets, think it out, and just say countless times, 'Hold it, we're going to wait. We're going to do this next year because we don't want to lose the season. It's a big investment for us, and we'll be OK one more year or season.' Those are the kind of jobs ... I've never seen anything work out better. The planning's great. The people know exactly what they want. You make a couple bucks on it, too, because you don't have a lot of issues.

GCI: Do you treat renovation and new construction projects differently?

Rodriguez: You have to be more versatile with your people. Even though all this planning takes place, at the end of the day when you start opening things up, who knows what's underneath.

We have a few crews that do self-performed irrigation. We should put those crews on the renovation projects. If I bring in a subcontractor, I have to go through the change-order process and documentation. If you're self-performing, you can almost ad lib about those circumstances, working with a committee or the superintendent. Sometimes you don't have time to go through those channels and just have to make it work.

Bryant: It absolutely requires a different crew for irrigation. The crew who does that work needs to understand several things. One is that we have to maintain the old irrigation system. It has to remain in service, especially if we're not blowing up the entire golf course. They also need to understand how to take the sod up, get the pipe in the ground and get the sod back, so there's the least amount of disruption to those areas that aren't involved in the renovation. They also need to understand the members because many of these renovations are done with the members still playing on parts of the golf course. They need to understand the courtesy that's required for these members.

AHlers: I remember years ago starting to see the dust control, then the erosion control and now the storm water management program. I remember at first I thought, 'What's with these bails of hay? Why do I need bails of hay on a golf course? I never saw that.' It must be getting bigger and more expensive all the time.

Caverly: We used to bid jobs, and those items were treated as incidentals, and now every one of those items you just mentioned has a dollar value to it. And those costs are anywhere from $100,000 to $1 million. Soil erosion and storm water protection alone. We used to build a golf course for $1 million. Today, storm water management can be $1 million.

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SLINGERLAND: In the Carolinas and certain parts of the country, they'll only let you disturb, four to 15 acres, and you have to have that grassed with 75-percent coverage before you can disturb the next four to 15 acres.

Bryant: In Hawaii, it's five acres.

AHlers: I thought that job in North Carolina was ridiculous at 25 acres at a time. How do you build a golf course like that? And you're saying five acres!

Bryant: As with most things, there are certain rules that apply. It's not like you have to open and finish five before you move on to the other five. They're guidelines. Essentially, you're not supposed to be disturbing or involving more than five acres at a time.

AHlers: And that's what this 25 was. You did 25, and you got that regressed and covered, and they sodded it.

Caverly: We're on one right now that has a 30-acre work limit. And back to driving costs, we have a lot of idle equipment. We shut down the earth-moving operation to go back and stabilize. And we have to stabilize before we go to the next section.

AHlers: Weren't the irrigation guys waiting to start on the next thing?

Caverly: That's exactly what happens. I mean, we're in a typical situation where there's a timeline on the project, but nobody wants to acknowledge these things when they make that timeline. These things all drive up costs.

GCI: One issue seems to be exactly when a builder is finished with the work and when the responsibility shifts from the builder to the superintendent or owner.
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COURSE CONSTRUCTION

CAVERLY: I’m into one right now in which the owners believe that when the golf course is ready to open it’s theirs. The architect specs have always been my pet peeve. When the seed hits the ground, it’s the owner’s. For maintenance and watering purposes, however, they always put that line in there that says the contractor has to guarantee germination. It’s difficult for us to guarantee germination when we’re not in control of doing the grow-in of the property. And if we have a superintendent that’s not doing the proper grow-in, we don’t get our retainage, and we have to go back and regrass. It’s a big problem area. The grow-in is the biggest thing on the golf course, and it’s neglected. They don’t want to hire a superintendent until they have to, and we as contractors don’t want to have to do the grow-in – not unless there’s a line item bid for it.

GCI: So parameters aren’t being defined clearly?

RODRIGUEZ: It becomes a gray area when you bring in germination. In most of what I go through, the gray area is a little different because it’s really not when to seed or stolen or sod goes down, but when you’re irrigate it automatically. Most contracts are worded that if you use irrigation system to water an area, then the superintendent or owner takes over. The problem with that is that most people interpret that as an entire, complete golf hole. And how many times do we have to start here and end up on the same golf hole? We go with where we can. It could be environmental. It could be all kinds of things that are beyond our control that we have to piece out this golf course, and we can’t turn it over hole by hole. Now that’s where the gray area is, but something that makes a golf course a lot better is the quality of the grow-in superintendent. I could name a few: Virgil Robinson, Earl Sanders, Scott Lewis. There are some people in the industry that take what we give them and can’t wait to get rid of us and say, ‘We love you guys, but get out of here. You’re done, let me take it.’ And they take it to the next level and do an excellent job. Then you get the rookie that keeps bringing you back, and now you’re arguing about whether it’s erosion, overwatering or whatever the reason might be, but that golf course doesn’t get to the next level. It gets even worse sometimes.

CAVERLY: We’ve tried to work with Michigan State University for years, and maybe right there’s where the problem starts – the superintendents go through the turf program, and they believe because they have a degree in turfgrass management, they know how to do a grow-in. A grow-in is a completely different animal than maintaining existing turf. That education needs to be emphasized.

SLINGERLAND: Grow-in takes experience. It’s nothing you can learn in a classroom. It’s nothing you can learn until after you’ve done it. And it’s not just once.
COURSE CONSTRUCTION

GC!: How many projects have you worked on that had a grow-in superintendent?

BRYANT: It goes back to the architect. There are architects that insist on a qualified grow-in superintendent.

MASSEY: There's always that planning, that team concept that starts early in the project. We offer an internship with agronomists who are getting ready to graduate. It's amazing how few of those guys we see. There should be more of those guys out there learning how to build the green from the bottom up. Build sand bunkers, learn how to build irrigation, do all this from the bottom and then go back to school for another year or two and then get out. We're lucky to see three, four, five guys a year coming into these internships to work.

CAVERLY: One of the things I see about irrigation on every job is that if an irrigation designer designs a green with two-inch pipe around it, the first thing a superintendent wants to do is put topdressing or fertilizer down and turn on every head on that green at the same time and stress that pipe out. They think they know irrigation. All they know is how to push the button and make water come out. And I always say, 'Your designer would've designed it that way if you would've told him what you wanted.' But there's a misuse of things.

BRYANT: It's abused more on the fairway because they can turn on more heads. We would have to design four-inch laterals to turn on all the water they want to turn on. And they don't need to do that. With a proper grow-in process, they can schedule irrigation on the satellite without a central or with a central if it's available. They can schedule an irrigation without violating the hydraulics of the system. It just gets back to having an educated person do that.

Years ago, I was asked what was the most challenging problem facing irrigation in the future, and I said one of them was the education of the superintendents. Of all of the programs I've seen and all of the textbooks I've ever seen published that are used in major schools, none of them are current. They all go back to the late '60s and '70s in terms of irrigation technology. That's frustrating, and I don't know why the major manufacturers haven't made more effort to reach out to these universities to provide more education.

SLINGERLAND: I've been asked to talk at Texas Tech and Texas A&M, and I bet they spend less than 2 percent of the entire degree time talking about irrigation. And nowadays, it's one of the largest line items in a bid. It's nothing to see a $2- to $4-million dollar irrigation system these days.

BRYANT: It's not just to water the grass. An irrigation system is a long-term maintenance tool for the health of the grass and soil.

SLINGERLAND: It's maintenance of that system, too. They don't even teach that. Obviously, I'm in the pump business. I tell people that when I walk into some pump houses and pump stations that are a year old, they look like they've been there for years.