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2010: A GOLF ODYSSEY

I would like to go on the record and report that I'm deeply disappointed with the state of things as we reach the 10th year of the new millennium.

Is it the economy that's troubling me? No. Is it our social ills? No. Is it the lack of civility in American life? No.

Here's the problem: I want my damn flying jet pack! It's almost 2010, for gosh sakes. Where's my robot butler? Where's the "food transmogrifier" that instantly supplies all my tasty meals with one keystroke on my computer? And don't even get me started about the lack of a warp drive on my Jeep.

As my fellow 40-somethings will remember, there were *promises* made to us back when we were just wee sprouts. No wars. No hunger. Benevolent world government. Friendly alien visitors landing in big saucers and giving us cures for all known illnesses. And jet packs! Where the hell are the jet packs?

Instead, we're still sending young men and women to distant hell-holes to fight and die for religion and oil. Stupid, petty political divisions take up far more time and energy than wisdom and statesmanship. More people than ever are starving and jobless. And we're all sitting around waiting for the swine flu to rip us a new one.

What's more, the state of the art in today's technology seems to primarily consist of super-sophisticated video games and an endless array of mobile phone devices that – arrgghh! – link us to the rest of the world 24/7 whether we like it or not. Who thought this crap up?

But seriously folks...

Some things change, some stay the same. In the case of the golf business, here's a quick review of what we've been through in the years since Captain Kirk went off the air:

- We grew to become a serious business. There are 4,000 more golf

courses in the U.S. than there are McDonalds locations. (Would you like fries with that stunning statistic?) More than 40 percent of those courses have opened in the past two decades. The vast majority of those have been for-profit, daily fee facilities looking to turn a buck. In the same time period, the number of private country clubs has essentially stayed the same. If you believe the numbers from Golf 20/20, we are a \$76 billion industry. This is a big business. Period.

- Our technology has improved dramatically. Innovations in chemistry and equipment have, perhaps, overwhelmed us over the years. The old-timers will tell you life was a bit simpler in the days of mercury, cadmium and mowers without solid-state parts and onboard computers. Even the most rudimentary irrigation controllers have software that would blow away the stuff that sent Neil Armstrong to the moon. Genetic tinkering with turfgrass has become commonplace within a few short decades of the time Watson and Crick figured out the double-helix. It's a pretty good tech track record for a recreational pursuit that is basically using a crooked stick to propel a silly white ball into a small distant hole. Those ancient Scottish shepherders would be proud – or appalled.

- The culture of the profession has eroded. Okay, one downside: The tradition of slow advancement, apprenticeship, careful learning and experience that used to dominate the profession of greenkeeping has been supplanted by earning a degree from the right school, doing a few key internships and having connections to the right people in the right places. This has become a "who you know" rather than a "what you know" business. I'm not saying that's bad, I'm just saying that's the way it is.

- Some promises were kept, others weren't. We have become much more recognized as an integral part of the game of golf and salaries and status have grown as a result. On the other hand, we've disappointed a lot of bright young people who jumped into the profession with visions of big-time jobs, rapid advancement and some measure of celebrity dancing in their heads. Bottom line: There simply aren't as many jobs as there are good candidates.

- We have become – at least temporarily – victims of our own success. Golf became sexy, allegedly profitable, highly visible and trendy – at least among developers. Oops. Suddenly we find ourselves with way more tee times than players. Lesson learned, hopefully. But the reality is that supply needs to decrease faster than we can expect demand to rise. Hundreds of courses will go bye-bye before things get better.

- Yet, the glass is still more than half full. Think about entire industries that have tanked the last few decades and why they died. There are three big reasons: online competition, big box stores and being supplanted by a better customer experience. Well, golf can't be replaced by the Web. We're not at risk because of Wal-Mart or Costco. In fact, mom-and-pop operators might be in better shape than big corporate golf right now. And, even though many courses live and die by the economic status of their members, wealth comes and goes. But, if you provide the right customer experience for the right demographic in your area, the sky is the limit. Do it wrong and you're as dead as Sharper Image.

In the end, golf is eternal. I wish I could find words to tell you why... I just know that it is.

Now would someone please go get me a jet pack! **GC**