

EXCLUSIVE
INTERVIEW:

New GCSAA President Ted Woehrle

Theodore W. Woehrle decided fairly early in life that he would be a golf course superintendent — probably due to the influence of his father, Herman, who tended the turf and managed the clubhouse at Kankakee Valley Elks Golf Club in Illinois.

Woehrle received a B.S. in agriculture from Purdue University in 1954 and, after a 2-year stint with the U.S. Army, began working at the Beverly Country Club in Chicago. Through the next 20 years, he worked as superintendent at Point O' Woods Country Club in Michigan, at Beverly, and finally at his present club: Detroit's Oakland Hills Country Club. During that period he also served terms as president of the Midwest Association of Golf Course Superintendents and the Illinois Turfgrass Foundation.

In 1971, Woehrle was one of the first to become a Certified Golf Course Superintendent. The following year he was president of the Michigan & Border Cities GCSA. He was voted president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America in February of this year.

Continuing its series of exclusive interviews with the presidents of the major associations in our industry, GOLF BUSINESS interviewed Woehrle recently in his Oakland Hills office.

GOLF BUSINESS: There are many qualified superintendents who do not join the GCSAA. A recent survey of 370 courses by GOLF BUSINESS showed that only 53 percent of those answering under the superintendents title were in the association. Is there a membership problem and, if so, what are the long range plans to increase membership?

Woehrle: We have felt for a long time that our membership growth has been directly related to the number of golf course facilities. If you take our membership percentage of 1940 and compare that with the percentage of members we have today, it's relatively the same. It's been a parallel growth pattern. Now golf course construction is slowing down, but our membership continues to grow. Our percentage is probably close to 30 percent of the total golf courses in America. We don't know exactly how many golf courses have superintendents that we might entice into our association. We'd like to see more members, because until the day comes when we have a majority of the golf course superintendents in our fold, we're never going to reach some of the goals that we plan for the association.

We're finding golf courses and superintendents that we didn't even know existed. They in turn didn't know that we existed, even though they're exposed through magazines such as GOLF BUSINESS. They really didn't pay much

attention to what is available and nobody has approached them with costs of belonging, or benefits of belonging. We're taking a good look at the New Jersey GCSA's program and may incorporate it in a national recruiting drive, hopefully this year.

Another thing that our organizational study committee is looking into is a field representative for a region, possibly a past president or some past member or a retired golf course superintendent that was active in the association, and use him to go out and make contacts. This is just in the thinking stage right now. We really haven't started it, and we may never start it, but we're thinking of it.

This is the sixth year for the certification program. According to the national office, there are currently 346 superintendents certified. That number is approximately 15 percent of the total certifiable number that can be involved in the program. Has certification been a success? What are the long-range plans for the program to get more superintendents involved in the testing?

We instituted the certification program to satisfy some of the needs that our members had as far as education goes. Our membership is made up of people with educations ranging from grade school all the way up to master's and Ph.D's. We have a portion of our education program aimed at each one of these sections. We have the certification program which would be the ultimate. We would like to see all of our members someday become certified. We know realistically that this is a long way off. Fifteen percent doesn't sound like a lot, but that's not too far away from 30 percent, which is our goal.

How long do you think it will be before that 30 percent is reached? Some people have taken these tests more than once already.

The exam is not easy. It's difficult and not everybody passes it the first time. A greater percentage of our members are passing the exam now than 5 years ago. It means that they have educated themselves to the point where they can pass the exam. They're doing this through short courses at a university or through some of our seminar programs.

I think the rest of the membership will eventually realize the benefits of becoming certified mainly in education, and possibly the monetary value. In order to increase the in-

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come of the superintendent after he becomes certified, you also have to sell the merit of the program to the clubs, so that they appreciate the certified superintendent.

How do you see the general management concept at this time and its direct effect on the golf course superintendent?

I personally have never been against the general manager concept. The reason that it is not generally accepted in our profession probably has to do with the fact that many of the people filling this position are not qualified and have created some problems within their own operations with the superintendents. At Oakland Hills, we have a very qualified, knowledgeable general manager. The club is large enough to justify a general manager, and it's a very efficient, well-run operation. There are situations where general managers are being used, however, where you can't justify the position at the club and in order to make it more efficient, pressures are being put on the golf course superintendents.

I think a lot of it is misunderstanding of the people involved. They don't understand what the concept is. The feeling that many of our people have is that they don't want to take orders from somebody that doesn't know anything about their business. This is not the concept at all. The concept is coordination of the operation in the club. A good general manager would never tell the golf course superintendent, who is a professional, what to spray, when to spray, what kind of fertilizer to buy, what kind of tractor to buy. He would just handle the fiscal responsibility.

Is the association going to urge more superintendents to get some expertise other than in their own particular field, so that someday they can assume these positions if they come about?

I don't think we're going to urge our members to become general managers. We will equip our members with the education necessary to do whatever job they feel they would like to tackle. I'm sure we have members that have reached a point in their career, at an early age, where they're not satisfied with the challenge of golf course superintendent anymore and they're looking for more money. The only way they can achieve the next step is to get into management. When that person expresses a desire to become a general manager, we certainly would help him in any way we can, but we're not going to point any of our education programs toward the general manager.

The way you see the industry right now, do you feel that the superintendent has just as much of a chance to become the general manager, if he wants to, as does the golf professional or the club manager?

Absolutely. Of the three associations, in our last membership survey, the golf course superintendent, as an average, has the greatest amount of education and is also the youngest. So far as being qualified, if he directs his education towards management, he certainly is as well qualified as the other two. Not more or less, but equal, depending on his goals and his personal initiative.



A letter published in GOLF BUSINESS earlier by a former member of the association questioned the code of ethics and some other things the association either had or hadn't done. How do you feel about that particular case?

Up until last winter at Portland our code of ethics was strictly voluntary. It was up to the member to live by the code of ethics on his own. There was no punishment if he failed to live up to the code. At Portland, we developed and presented a new code of ethics, which the membership voted on and accepted. Along with this new code of ethics, which is more stringent than the original voluntary code, we now have at our disposal a method of enforcing the code of ethics by reprimanding, all the way up to expulsion of membership, for a violation of the code. Members agree once a year at the time of reclassification to sign their name to the code of ethics.

One point that this individual suggested, was that the association should adopt job criteria — qualities you should have when you apply at a certain club to be a golf course superintendent. What about this?

We developed the handbook on how to hire a superintendent. We've also done the same for the superintendent on how to find a new position. They're quite similar in this regard. They talk about the responsibilities and qualifications of the superintendent. The superintendent gets tips on how to be interviewed, and then we give some tips to the club on how to interview for this position.

This particular superintendent mentioned that someday a college degree, or equivalent, ought to be required before one could join the association. Would that be going against what the association stands for?

I think this is another misunderstanding of what our association is about. This would be the ultimate. I think we'd all love to see this someday. But we are realists and know that this is almost impossible, because not every club has the facility that requires a college education to maintain their golf course. Our whole purpose is to help our members

reason it is not generally accepted in our profession is probably qualified.”

achieve whatever limits or goals they have set for themselves. If they want to run a very complex country club that requires a college education, then we'll help them train themselves to fill this position — but we know that not every club needs this type of operation.

In the past, there has been discussion among other association leaders about aligning the GCSAA with other groups in the turfgrass industry. Is that feeling still prevalent?

A little over a year ago we discussed this very thoroughly in the executive committee and appointed an organizational study committee to look into it. Also, we formed an industrial advisory council and an educational advisory council. They, too, discussed the situation and all of them felt there is a need for such a group. But we as an association feel that we don't want to lose our identity as golf course superintendents. We are all for helping to organize such an organization, however. We see a need for such an organization and we are going to initiate the first meeting this year. We are going to ask various organizations to participate in a discussion about this problem.

At present, we're talking about turfgrass oriented organizations. We're talking about parks and recreation, sod growers, cemeteries, whatever groups would fall into this

category. I can see representation from each organization sitting on a council, maybe a national turfgrass foundation, so that we would have the numbers that we need to counteract any bad decisions by government, or that type of thing.

What is the impact of labor unions on golf courses now?

Unions are here to stay, and they're continually trying to expand into other areas. They are constantly going to be attempting to get into country clubs.

Oakland Hills has had the Teamsters for more than 20 years. It has made me a better golf course superintendent, because I'm strictly management now. There are plusses and minuses. The contract is renegotiated every 3 years. There are always requests from labor for more money, more fringe benefits. The club in turn asked for more efficiency and better working relations with labor, and we both gained. Of course, we have to pay more money, and this would be true whether you're union or nonunion. The cost of living is important to everybody, whether they're union or nonunion, and any kind of a merit increase is expected whether you're union or nonunion.

In the Detroit metropolitan area there are six or seven clubs that have the Teamsters. Oakland Hills is one of the first clubs to negotiate. Our anniversary date is early in the

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“Unions are here to stay. It has made me a better course superintendent. I’m strictly management.”

year, April 1st, and my past experience has been that as soon as the word gets out what the settlement was at Oakland Hills, especially in the hourly rate, the nonunion clubs are meeting this or, in many cases, paying more in an attempt to keep the union out of their clubs. So my crew, after all the work the men have done to get their increase, are suddenly at the bottom of the totem pole again.

How do you see the future of the private country club?

There's no doubt about it, the private country club is a luxury — a very expensive luxury — and in order to keep costs down the total operation of the club is going to have to be discussed and analyzed to a greater degree. They're going to have to make the club a very efficient operation. Quite often this will mean the loss of some of the services the average country club member is used to. He won't be able to afford the large staff and the dining room and the clubhouse operation that is there because of his desire to have good service. He's going to have to back off a little bit on some of his desires at the clubhouse level.

The golf course end of it is being run efficiently, but there's still room for improvement. At most clubs they're going to have to take a second look at some of the things they are accustomed to, the tremendous amount of grooming that is done at the private club, and possibly back off on some of the Sunday operation, which is double-time. They won't have greens mowed on Sundays. There would be a big savings. Mechanization is still new. There's new equipment available now to make the job easier and cost less, so the member is going to have to reexamine his values. What is he willing to pay for?

Will the golf course suffer in the long run? It seems like the course maintenance budget is usually the one where they start whittling things down.

That's true, the superintendent does spend a great deal of money, but if you look at the entire expenses of the country club, the golf course expense is somewhere around 10 or 11 percent of the total dollars spent on the country club. Administrative costs are equal.

Isn't labor the escalating area?

Labor has gone from 65 percent to 75 percent. If a member looks at it this way, it's not too hard to justify the high costs of the golf course. Taxes are increasing at a faster pace than golf course maintenance. Other costs — insurance, and some of the other things you have to pay before you open the door — are going up.

You mentioned mechanization before. It would seem the superintendent would be looking forward to more mechanization, so he can have fewer people and cut his labor cost and, in the long run, save money.

We may even have to think of some things along the lines of rebuilding golf courses to save money. I have a good example here. Our north golf course was redesigned 8 years ago. I can maintain that golf course with five men. On the other

course, because of the undulations in the greens, the number of small sand traps, and the steep banks, I need a crew of 14 or 15 people.

So you're talking about going back to a master plan, but you don't want to go to the point where it ends playing like a parking lot?

There's a happy medium there someplace. You can cut costs on the course by eliminating some of the hand maintenance. Automation of the irrigation system is a big plus. True, in most cases, you're eliminating only one or two people in the night watering department, but it does give you some of the flexibility during the daylight hours where you don't have to use your crew for supplemental watering.

Do you think the golf course superintendent has enough say in redesign of facilities? Do you think that superintendents are getting more involved in this particular phase?

I think the expertise of the superintendent has increased. He's knowledgeable about irrigation now, which wasn't true a few years ago. He's knowledgeable about civil engineering, knowing something about drainage, proper slopes, and that type of thing. Certainly, he is knowledgeable in the selection of grass and how to maintain it, so if he exerts his position or puts pressure on club officials to be considered in these meetings, he'll be listened to. Unfortunately, a lot of our members tend to sit on the sidelines and not get involved.

Water is scarce this year in many parts of the country. How can a superintendent justify watering a golf course when people do not have enough water to bathe or wash clothes in?

If the golf course is in an area where there is a shortage, certainly it's difficult to justify. In many cases, they can't justify it and aren't allowed to water. Some have their own wells, such as the case years ago in the east. They can justify the use of water if you consider the impact that the golf course has on the environment. There are a lot of plusses on a golf course which would be sacrificed if the course would suddenly dry up. You'd lose the cooling effect, the oxygen production, the esthetics which, believe it or not, have a lot to do with the value of residential property. You would lose some of the people that play golf. This is necessary in this jungle world of ours in the recreation end of it. □