

GCSAA roundtable: Six superintendents discuss the golf business



Gathered in Atlanta were (left to right) Editor Slaybaugh and superintendents Harmon, Rogers, Burress, Taliaferro, Wolff, and Palrud.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the national turf-grass conference and show sponsored by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, the editors of GOLF BUSINESS magazine interviewed more than a dozen men who had been attending GCSAA shows for many years. We asked them "What have we learned in the past 50 years of conferences?" and "How has the superintendent's job changed in that time?" The resulting comments were published in our February issue, which was distributed at the GCSAA meeting in Atlanta last month.

While at that meeting, GOLF BUSINESS gathered together another group of men for a roundtable discussion to follow up on the earlier interviews. In addition to magazine staff, those participating in the discussion were:

- Gene Burress, CGCS, supervisor of golf, City of Cincinnati, Ohio
- David C. Harmon, superintendent, Golden Horseshoe Golf Course, Williamsburg, Va.
- Gene Palrud, grounds superintendent, Playboy Resort & Country Club, Lake Geneva, Wis.
- Tom J. Rogers, CGCS, superintendent, Garden City (Kan.) Country Club
- Paul Taliaferro, superintendent, Willow Springs Country Club, Morrison, Colo.
- Tom Wolff, superintendent, Manito Golf & Country Club, Spokane, Wash.

Burress, Harmon, and Rogers are members of the GOLF BUSINESS advisory board. Palrud, Taliaferro, and Wolff are bright young men we met at the show and invited to participate.

The discussion began with questions by GOLF BUSINESS Editor Dave Slaybaugh relating to the current status of the golf course superintendent, but the participants' conversation eventually drifted to the GCSAA organization itself. We feel the comments made here are interesting and enlightening — and although some may be critical or controversial, they were made and are printed here to help improve the industry and the association. We invite our readers to add their opinions by using the postage-paid Reader Forum card bound into the front of this magazine or by writing to Editor, GOLF BUSINESS, 9800 Detroit Ave., Cleveland, OH 44102.

GOLF BUSINESS: Do you think superintendents today get the recognition and respect that they deserve, particularly among other people in the golf business — course owners, golf professionals, general managers?

David Harmon: It's obvious, as far as the PGA Tour goes, there is practically zero recognition on tournament telecasts. I talked with the national GCSAA staff, and they said they send out letters and information on the superintendents for each of those tournaments, but very seldom do we ever hear on television who takes care of the golf course. It's always "the pro did an excellent job." Without the superintendent they wouldn't have the golf course in the first place!

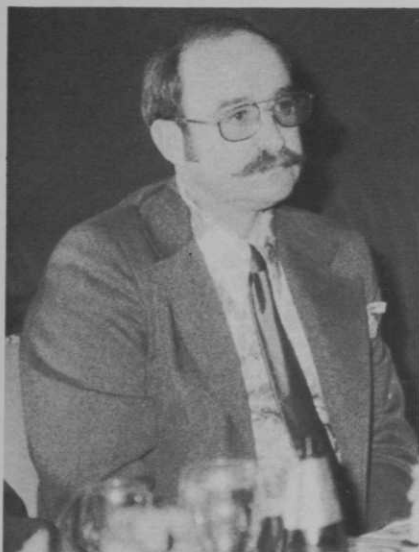
Gene Burress: I approached Pat Sumerall a few years ago at Inverrary during the Jackie Gleason Classic, and I also approached Chris Schenkel down at the New Orleans convention on the same subject that Dave is talking about. They frankly don't care. They look at that guy as a greenskeeper, and they don't place any importance on how well groomed and manicured the course is. I did hear a positive note, in watching the Phoenix tournament, after they had floods out there. They did mention the man's name and did give him credit for the fine job he did in turning that golf course around. But you rarely hear that.

I'm not sure that the GCSAA has really done the job that they should do in terms of public relations with the networks. If they struck out with the networks, then they should publicize the fact that they're not getting the support of the networks so that everybody knows that the blame lies here. But has the association made the effort with the networks?

Gene Palrud: Superintendents who do get recognition on televised tournaments have done it on their own. They've made themselves known in the press tents. They have projected themselves and received the recognition. A superintendent's not going to be able to sit in a maintenance building or be behind the scenes and expect to get recognition. It doesn't happen. You have to be able to project yourself — almost push yourself right into the limelight. I think this is one area where superintendents are lacking and this is where some strength should come from the national. The same with our educational sessions. To me maintenance of fairways and *Poa annua* and automatic irrigation have

become redundant, because it's the same programs year after year. I would like to see more from the national on public relations, on personnel relations, on projecting ourselves.

GOLF BUSINESS: As far as upgrading the superintendent's image in general, I believe part of the public relations function of the GCSAA office is to go to tournament sites



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and talk to the press to play up the superintendent's role. Has this really been done in the past?

Tom Rogers: I think so. I've been to five out of the last seven Opens and Doug Fender did a lot, and so did Dick Hale. They did a lot to promote the superintendents and what they were doing. They tried to get letters or articles out to the media in all cases. A lot of times it's the superintendent that doesn't present himself. I've seen it at Medinah when Jackman wouldn't even go out on the green to collect a plaque. A couple of times superintendents have been asked to write articles for the tournament program, and they won't even do that.

A PR department is fine, but if the superintendent isn't motivated to do something for himself or his own image, then there's no way I can tell him to change or that the GCSAA is going to come in and do the job for him.

Burress: Yesterday someone I was talking to used the phrase "Old Jake in the barn." I think it's time that we forgot about Old Jake in the barn. The superintendents that are coming on now are a new young breed, and I believe that you're going to find that the image we're looking for is in these young men. The old guys that are these Jakes in the barn are what's dragging the image of the golf course superintendent down. They are the guys we don't need in the profession.

Harmon: But these guys were the backbone of our business, and just because they're not the young breed, we can't kick them aside and forget about them. If it wasn't for them, you wouldn't be here.

Palrud: Can't we educate these people?

Harmon: We're trying to. That's why we have these conferences.

Palrud: What are these conferences?

Rogers: Every year they're the same thing.

Palrud: They are just shop talk, like when superintendents get together off in a bunch and talk about fairways and turf on greens and so forth. That's what every educational session is here.

We started off this conference Monday with a great keynoter that got into personnel management, motivating

people, and so forth — and then it died. Why don't we have a couple branch sessions going on at one time, and if a guy wants to listen to shop talk he can listen to shop talk. Other people are interested in public relations, motivation, personnel management, and maybe food and beverage operations — so that we have some insight into what goes on inside the clubhouse. Instead of sitting back and crying like babies because the managers are taking over general managerships of clubs, show them we are interested and show them that we're not going to give the job to them without a fight. Our national does not support us in this. That's where they fall down, and I feel that's a crime.

Rogers: Every time we change education directors the whole concept of education changes to the extent that we're going through a period now that we had 10 years ago. The same stuff is being presented.

Palrud: Nothing against Palmer Maples, but what do we hire for an educational director but a superintendent? I know several superintendents in the field that have their educational degrees. They are teachers; they are educators. If we want to get a superintendent to be our educational director, that's great, but why don't we go after one that has an educational background?

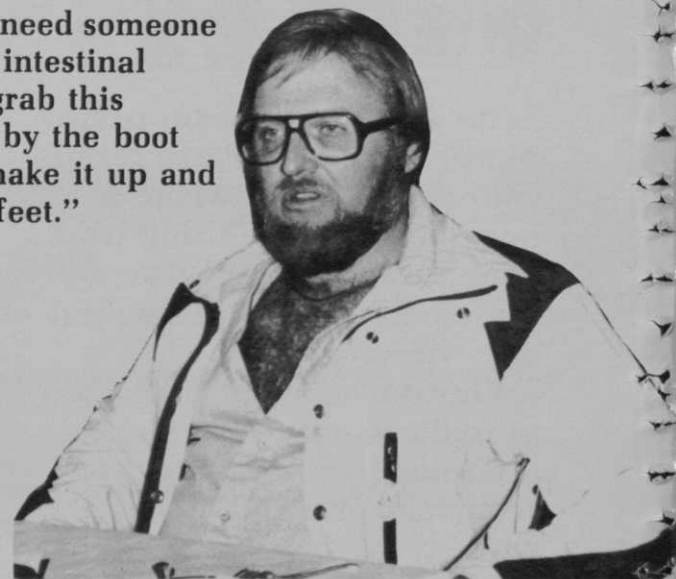
GOLF BUSINESS: Have you learned anything in the sessions that you didn't already know?

Palrud: No. It becomes redundant.

Paul Taliaferro: I think that some of the research they're doing might be interesting, but some of it is redundant. I think you have to give general background to lead into this research too.

Palrud: Research is another ballgame. I'm not saying that you completely wipe out your shop talk or research or anything like that. That is a very definite and big part of our profession, and it's something that we should be kept up to date on. The point I am making is that we shouldn't just limit ourselves to such a small area. We have to broaden ourselves. The Club Managers Association is giving its members an

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understanding of turf, giving them an understanding of the pro shop and so forth, so that they can move into the general manager's position.

Harmon: I think we're losing sight of what our job is. What's our job description? We're golf course superintendents. They hired us to maintain a golf course, and if we start branching off in all these areas it's going to spell disaster. The general manager can't run a golf course any more



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than we can run a clubhouse. I tried that at Colonial Williamsburg. They hired me as the director of recreation and activities. I was trying to take care of the pro shop, grill, cocktail lounge, golf course, swimming pools, tennis courts — but you can't do that. You can't be in that many places at one time.

Palrud: No, you can't. But that's where delegating responsibility comes in.

Harmon: That's right. I don't want that job, though. I like being a golf course superintendent. I finally gave all that up. They took all that stuff and put it on one side and put us on the maintenance side.

Burress: There are individuals who aspire to be general managers. I believe that the association should have some type of training program that will permit that small number of people to become a general manager.

I'd like to say one other thing. There is a hierarchy in golf and the hierarchy will always be there and there's nothing, I believe, you can do about it. At the bottom is the golf course superintendent. He will always be there. It's a caste system and I don't believe you'll ever be able to eliminate it.

GOLF BUSINESS: What about the young people coming into the business? Are the colleges and universities turning out people qualified to be golf course superintendents?

Palrud: I have a large student training program at Playboy. I am finding that a lot of the young people coming into the market are not qualified. They don't have the basics. I mean graduates of schools that have 2-year programs.

I would say that a lot of them that have come through would make good assistants. They may make good superintendents some day, but not in the amount of time that a young person wants to do it in. I would like to see 2-year programs that don't really accept anyone until they have 3 to 5 years' experience on a golf course. Then you know that they have the love for the profession, and they have then generated enough questions in the back of their minds that they are really willing to dive into the books. They've matured a little bit and aren't right out of high school. They will get more out of and put more into the program than the younger people.

GOLF BUSINESS: What about graduates of 4-year turf management programs?

Burress: I don't care if a person has 2 or 4 years or whatever. Of course, education-wise, there's much more learned in a 4-year school, but as a golf course superintendent, only 10 to 15 percent of your day-to-day activity has to

do with agronomics. The rest of it is handling people, priorities, work schedules, and what have you. That, friend, you don't learn in the university. The fact that you've got your degree or associate degree doesn't mean that you're going to be a golf course superintendent. If you can't handle people, handle work priorities, and know what to scratch at the right time, you're not going to be a good superintendent.

Palrud: I formulate it this way. It's 20 percent technical knowledge and 80 percent good old common sense. You're only as good as the people who work for you. When you're a manager that's one thing that has to be very prominent in your mind. You're only as good as how you can motivate the people working for you. If you're a good motivator and know how to stimulate them, and you can generate that pride and enthusiasm in them, you're going to be great. Your job will be easy. But if you can't motivate your people, you're going to be out doing the work yourself.

Taliaferro: I agree with you, but you can initiate only so much pride and enthusiasm if the pay isn't there. I have one fellow working for me who had been a stock boy at Sears making more money than he's getting at my place. I told him we couldn't pay any more, and he's getting married pretty soon, so he'll probably be leaving me.

Palrud: But you're giving him something you can't put in a paycheck. You have a medium of being out-of-doors, being in a healthy environment.

Taliaferro: You're getting back to the superintendent's role. That's why he stays in the business. There's no pay, but he likes what he's doing. That shouldn't be.

Wolff: "I think superintendents fall in love with their golf courses and won't move — that's where they make their biggest mistake."



Harmon: We're not in the business to get rich. We're in it because we like it.

Tom Wolff: I think that is a fault of the majority of golf course superintendents — they fall in love with their golf courses and won't move. I think what the aggressive superintendent will do is say, "This is what I can do for you for X amount of dollars," and if they deliver, stay there. If they don't, look for a new home. You don't owe them anything.

Palrud: Take your superintendent who's been at a club for 5 or 10 years. He knows the idiosyncrasies of that piece of property like the back of his hand. He knows under which weather conditions what's going to happen where on what green, what fairway, etc. If he changes, it's not like a club manager who changes from one clubhouse to another; it takes him 6 months to set up his new type of operation and know the clubhouse inside out like the back of his hand.

The superintendent, on the other hand, thinks "this

means now that I've got to establish a whole new crew, establish a whole new rapport, get to know a whole new membership, get a whole new working relationship with other people, and learn a whole new property over again," which is going to take several years to do. He also thinks, "Am I going to get that much more remuneration to make the move worthwhile?" A lot of times they figure it's easier to concede and stay there.

Wolff: I think that's where superintendents make their biggest mistake — not being willing to move.

GOLF BUSINESS: Why are you attending the GCSAA conference and show?

Taliaferro: I think the biggest part of the education process here is the intermingling with other superintendents and the exchanging of ideas.

Palrud: I have two reasons. One is the camaraderie of my fellow superintendents — sitting down here or going out to dinner with Tom here from Spokane and someone from New Jersey and maybe someone from Florida or California. Over dinner we discuss the year; the problems and situa-



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tions that have arisen, what we're expecting, where we're going, what directions we are taking. I do this all during the week. I end up visiting with friends that I have accumulated over the years from not only my peers, but also the commercial end of things. I sit down with the people from Toro or Jacobsen or whatever and discuss my needs, what I would like to see, what I feel we should have, what they can deliver, what they have on the drawing boards, etc.

The second factor is the show. There's only one time of the year when all the suppliers associated with golf from A to Z are under one roof. I can spend several days just browsing and talking, getting everything out of that show I possibly can.

Burrell: Would you be here if you paid your own dues and expenses?

Palrud: Yes, because I have done it.

Burrell: I'm here under that situation. I pay my own way and my own dues. I'm here on vacation time. I also echo Gene's remarks. I'm not here for the educational sessions. I'm not sitting in one educational session. I'm here for the show and I'm here to keep my finger on the pulse of this facet of the golf industry. I want to know what's happening with equipment, with people, and things like this.

Palrud: One thing that I have to say is that they always have a fantastic keynote. It's tradition, and I always get an awful lot out of the keynote address. After that I go on my way for other things.

GOLF BUSINESS: Are these the reasons you're a member of the association?

Palrud: I am not a member of the association. I dropped out because I did not like the direction the association was going. I did not like the things that were happening. I got frustrated writing letters, so I dropped out. When I see things making a turnaround, then I'll get back in again.

Burrell: Don't you feel that you would be better off fighting it from within than from the outside?

Palrud: I tried fighting from within and didn't feel I was getting any success with that, and the next way of hurting any organization that I know of is taking away funds that they have to work with. There are others in my area that feel the same way I do.

Burrell: I even see the possibility of dropping out myself. I really struggle with this thing. I know what you've gone through. I'm going to give it a couple more years. I met with several directors in the last couple days and tried to find out what direction they're going. It looks like they're heading in the direction you're talking about that you would like to see. It can be done in a couple years. To me that's fast. To do it in 5 to 10 years, no way.

Taliaferro: What is it exactly that you're dissatisfied with? Being a new member, I'm not familiar with some of the things that maybe you're dissatisfied with. Can you pinpoint anything?

Burrell: Compare the GCSAA with its sister organization, the PGA. The PGA is a powerful organization; the GCSAA is not. For example, (and this happened in Cincinnati recently at a couple golf courses) let's say the members of a club really do an injustice to a superintendent. I believe the GCSAA should step in and investigate the situation and if necessary place sanctions against that club. The PGA can.

Taliaferro: Are you saying that it lies with the directors? That this all goes back to the home office in Lawrence?

Palrud: I think in the presidency what we need is someone who has the intestinal fortitude to grab this organization by the boot straps and shake it up and put it on its feet. That is the key, and when we get that person with intestinal fortitude that's the time this organization is going to turn around.

Burrell: You need an aggressive, dynamic group of men on the board who are willing to make change. People are resistant to change. Some of us are ready to make some changes for the good of the profession, but coming to the national association convention is the extent of the involvement of 90 percent of the members.

A lot of people would not belong to this association except for the fact that when they're looking for a job, a professional organization is almost essential. It looks good on a resume. If you're a golfer, membership will get you into some golf courses to play golf. The employment referral service is pretty good if you want to know where the job openings are. What else is there? The magazine — you can get that without joining the organization. That's no big deal.

I feel that GOLF BUSINESS can do a lot for the GCSAA in this area. I really feel that it can be a sounding board for those of us in the industry who think the GCSAA is a very weak organization and needs a change of direction. I don't mean a slow change, I mean a fast change. I think that you can be a sounding board for improvement in a very positive sense, where I don't believe the association magazine is going to. They're not about to let that be the voice. □