While many superintendents didn’t travel to The Big Easy because “of my course’s financial cutbacks,” It Was on With the Show in N’AWLINS

By Larry Aylward, Curt Harler and Daniel Jacobs GOLFDOM STAFF

The most common question coming out of people’s mouths during the Golf Industry Show last month in New Orleans was not, “What exotic Cajun dish did you have for dinner last night?” (although the inquiry was a close second). The most common question was, “What do you think is the show’s attendance?”

Everybody knew attendance was down, what with the crummy economy. And attendance is always down in host cities other than Orlando (who wants to bring the kiddies to The Big Easy?) In the end, attendance was a tad over 17,000, down from almost 26,000 the year before in Orlando. Qualified buyers were also down more than 3,000.

If there’s any good news from these numbers, it’s they were expected by many. A recent GOLFDOM survey reflects that. We asked about 125 superintendents: Why they did or didn’t go to the Golf Industry Show this year? Fifty-six percent responded they didn’t attend because “of my course’s financial cutbacks.” Wow!

Incidentally, 4 percent of superintendents said they paid their own way to New Orleans.

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Attendance aside, there is plenty of news to report from the show. While we’d need a book the size of Chef Paul Prudhomme’s cookbook (did you happen to eat at his restaurant K-Paul’s Louisiana Kitchen?) to report it all, we’ll do our best to report some of the happenings.

A Zinger of a Story

Paul Azinger, who delivered the keynote address during the opening session, reflected on his relationship with Mark Wilson, certified superintendent of Valhalla Golf Club, where Azinger captained the U.S. Ryder Cup team to a win last fall.

“Mark and I became friends immediately,” Azinger told members of the media about the well-liked Wilson, who has been Valhalla’s superintendent for 20 years. Azinger said he told Wilson he wanted to set up Valhalla to give the U.S. team an advantage, much like the European teams have set up their home courses over the years.

Then Azinger told this story in his best Wilson voice about satisfying a request from Ryder Cup team member and well-known big hitter J.B. Holmes. It all started during a practice round when Assistant Captain Olin Browne called Azinger on the radio. Here’s how it went, according to Azinger:

Browne: “Zinger, I’m standing by this tree on 16. It’s like 300 yards off the tee. There’s a tree limb up about 30 feet in...

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Looking For Answers ... In the Moment

Seminar speaker will never forget this education session

By Christopher S. Gray Sr.

I'm not really sure why it happened, but for the first time in many years of speaking at the Golf Industry Show, there was an uncommonly large amount of audience participation in the education session, "In the Moment ... The State of Public Golf." And to be absolutely honest, it was refreshingly wonderful to be a part of an open and honest exchange of ideas and stories.

Perhaps the economic struggles have hit home so hard that superintendents and owners alike feel the overwhelming need to share ideas and problems in order to see what others are doing simply to survive this particularly difficult recession. About 100 attendees passed on the newly opened trade show to attend this particular session in hopes of finding some practical methods and ideas in cost-saving programs as well as some interesting ways to attract new golfers while retaining the ones they already have. Or maybe they just wanted to share their problems.

In all, the session proved to be an emotional interaction, not only between the speakers and the audience, but also amongst the audience themselves.

I started the session with my presenta-

tion, "Creative and Affordable Environmental Stewardship Programs." While outlining the multiple programs that have saved my facility thousands of dollars, I was repeatedly stopped by audience members asking more detailed questions about the programs such as how to get started, what is the return on the investment and what tax credits might be available for certain programs. For me, this was a first. I had never had anyone ask questions during my presentation. Unlike years past, this audience was truly into the real applicability of these programs to their courses and wanted to learn everything they could about them — and in much more detail than I had ever anticipated for a 25-minute presentation.

I informed everyone that I would make myself available after the session to answer more specific questions. If I hadn’t, I could have easily taken up the entire hour and a half.

When I finished, Brian Zimmerman from the Wisconsin Parks Department took over and spoke on a variety of successful revenue-driven programs. The audience again appeared to hang on every program Zimmerman introduced and hands shot into the air for a chance to ask specific questions on each of them. It was simply remarkable how interested the audience was to learn of new way to attract more golfers to their facilities.

After Zimmerman’s talk, the moderator opened comments and questions to the audience by asking, “What is the state of public golf right now?” The question struck a nerve. Attendees began sharing specific problems, such as dealing with shrinking budgets and reduced play, laying off assistants, and how to survive the upcoming season. The list went on and on.

To me, the feeling of the room was more of a support group than an education session. When someone finished telling a story, he actually had a look of relief on his face. It’s a sensation I’ve never experienced before in an education session.

When the seminar reached its time limit, there was applause — not so much for Zimmerman and me, but more for everyone who participated in the open discussion and shared a small part of themselves for which we all emphasized and felt compassion. In the end, this was an education session that I, as a speaker, learned more from the audience than the audience learned from me.

Gray, general manager and superintendent of the Marvel Golf Club in Benton, Ky., is a Golfdom contributing editor.
Some Heads You Want...

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the tree that J.B.'s worried about giving him some trouble?"
Azinger: What!? We can't even reach that tree, and this
dude is worried about a limb that's 30 feet up in that tree.
Browne: Yeah.
Azinger: All right.
(Azinger waits about 15 minutes and calls Wilson on his
radio to talk about the tree.)
Wilson: Hello?
Azinger: Hey Mark, this is Zinger.
Wilson: Hey Zinger.
Azinger: Buddy, I got one more favor to ask.
Wilson: Whatcha got?
Azinger: There's a tree limb that J.B. thinks might give
him problems, and ...  
Wilson: Hey Zinger, I already got a guy up in that tree
cutting that limb down.
Azinger: Mark you are the best! I'll talk to you later.
Wilson: Hey Zinger, don't hang up.
Azinger: What is it?
Wilson: That J.B. is spoiled, ain't he?

Player's Passion

Walt Norley picked the right person in world-renowned
golfer Gary Player to act as a
spokesperson for his company. Advanced Sensor Technology (AST),
Gary Player (right) speaks with Matt Shaffer (center) and Bill Myers.

of which Norley is founder and CEO, is all about water conservation with its soil sensor technology. The 73-year-old Player is just as passionate about the subject.

How passionate?

Recently, Player dined in a California restaurant. Sitting on the table was a sign that read, “Water Upon Request.” Player smiled upon seeing the sign, knowing that a lot of water is wasted in restaurants by diners who are served it without requesting it and then don’t drink it.

“I went to the manager and said, ‘Thank you for doing this,’” Player said.

Player did that because he’s astounded about how much potable water is wasted in the United States. “Every day, 150 million glasses of water are poured down the drain,” he claims.

Player was the guest of honor at a reception held by AST for golf course superintendents and others in the profession at the House of Blues during the show.

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Top Dog

Do you have a dog? Was your dog glad to see you after you returned home from the show? Did your dog greet you by licking you with his slobber-teemed tongue when you opened the door to your house? Did you miss your mutt just as badly?

Knowing how you feel about your dog, you’ll be sad to hear about the death of another dog and the grief that his owners are enduring because of their loss. You might know the dog: His name is Willie, and he’s the 7-year-old German shorthaired pointer mix that adorned the January month in LebanonTurf’s 2009 Dog Days of Golf Calendar. Willie died on Jan. 29 of a malignant tumor.

Willie belongs to Steve McCormick, the golf course superintendent at the Columbia Country Club in Chevy Chase, Md. McCormick and his wife, Jen, called Willie their “beloved soul mate.” The McCormicks rescued Willie from a shelter in St. Louis. It was a match made in heaven.

“Willie was an absolute blessing to our family, our neighbors, and our friends and to the greens staff and many members at Columbia,” McCormick said. “As many of us grieve our loss of Willie, what is undeniable is the incredibly blessed life that Willie had for almost eight years. He lived his life to the absolute fullest, even up to his final hours.”

Willie will be remembered for many things, including a wonderful posthumous honor he received during the show. Willie was voted the winner of the sixth-annual “Dog of the Year” contest sponsored by LebanonTurf and presented by Golfdom. Voting was conducted among more than 500 superintendents and other GIS attendees in New Orleans. Willie was chosen for the honor from among the 14 candidates that appear in the 2009 calendar. Duke and Bella, the cover dogs who belong to Wayne and Lynn Hand of Bucksport (Maine) Golf Club, finished second in the voting.

“Willie would have been very honored,” McCormick said. “Knowing he was giving back to the place he loved so much would make him very happy.”

Rest in peace, Willie.

Speeding Up Slow Play

A common complaint by today’s golfers is that it takes too much time to play a round. In fact, it is the No. 2 golfer gripe following poor course conditions.

“Slow play is not a problem. Like a fever, it is a symptom of other problems,” Bill Yates, CEO of Grey Town Golf in Pebble Beach, Calif., told attendees during a seminar on “Pace of Play: Myths & Miracles.”

Yates and golf course architect Forrest Richardson of Forrest Richardson & Associates in Phoenix dissected the reasons for slow play and offered some solutions.

Yates said it is a myth that players are the primary cause of slow play. While admitting that new golfers can slow things down, he said one way to help is to keep an eye on them, schedule them outside prime hours and to get them playing from the correct tees. “Course setup is a key,” Yates said, adding that routing, course conditioning and the day-to-day practices of the management and marshalls as other considerations.

The course conditions are the place where superintendents can make a difference. “Long grass in the wrong place is worse than bunkers or water,” Yates said.

Call It Golf With Training Wheels.

The Osgood Golf Course is a par-33, nine-hole public club in Fargo, N.D., designed by Kevin Atkinson of Phelps Design. But if you haven’t got the time, you can play a three-hole loop for just $5. In Minnesota, there is a Robert Trent Jones II-designed reversible three-hole course built around the driving range that can be played clockwise or counterclockwise (not at the same time, of course).

“Architects as a whole have always supported the idea of smaller facilities, alternative facilities,” says Rick Phelps, owner of Phelps Atkinson Design in Evergreen, Colo. “That’s been the missing link in that market segment.” Phelps spoke at the American Society of Golf Course Architects press conference.

Show Shorts

The United States Golf Association will become a participating partner of the Golf Industry Show beginning in 2010 in San Diego. … James Roney Jr., superintendent of Saucon Valley Country Club in Bethlehem, Pa., was named the overall winner of the 2008 GCSSA/Golf Digest Environmental Leaders in Golf Awards. The national winners were: National Private & Overall: James Roney Jr., Saucon Valley Country Club, Bethlehem, Pa.; National Public: David Phipps, Stone Creek Golf Course, Oregon City, Ore.; National Resort: Joel Blaker, Tahoe Mountain Club, Truckee, Calif.; International: Robin Sadler, Silvertip Resort, Canmore, Alberta, Canada.