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All Merit Club images courtesy of Judd Hansen.

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## ON COURSE WITH THE PRESIDENT

Tony Kalina, *Prairie Landing Golf Course*



# May 2009

*As I sit and write this column, I can't believe I'm already almost halfway through my term as MAGCS President. It's going by fast.*

Spring is in the air. Golf courses are open for play, and everyone is busy gearing up for the coming season. I am very optimistic about the great game and those employed in this industry. Is 2009 going to be easy? Probably not. At first glance, it appears as though 2009 may be a stern challenge. Change and challenge go hand-in-hand. The game of golf has survived world wars, our Civil War, the Great Depression, the introduction of the "Haskell" rubber core golf ball and steel golf shafts, many recessions, devastation from natural disasters, and our self-imposed societal divisions.

Right now, we are somewhere in the natural ebb and flow of a normal golf industry cycle, and it's severe. However, I believe our industry and game will continue to grow and provide the livelihood, recreation, and vitality that we expect in our lives. The growth curve may look just a little different. We are going to have to 'do more with less' and learn to live within our means or we will suffer farther. It's true. The uncertainty of the economy and the state of our industry has everyone watching every step. I feel that 2009 is going to be about survival, and I know that, when faced with great challenges, our members have the practical and logical abilities to prevail. I believe and know our profession is the fulcrum in the economic success of any golf facility. It's from this solid, basic foundation that every superintendent possesses that we achieve wisdom, wealth, and well-being – and we are not letting go anytime soon. This, too, shall pass. Golf will continue and thrive in new ways.

On the MAGCS Board front, I am very proud of the current board and their devotion to serving the needs of our members. I am benefitting from their service attitude and support – you are, too!

This year, Luke Cella and I have developed a new tool for Board use. It enhances productivity and ease of reporting for board members. We refer to this new tool as the Director's Dashboard. The Dashboard is an on-line, live, information manager which provides 24/7 unlimited access to our internal documents, calendar, meeting checklist, and agenda. The Dashboard is part of the family of services from Google called Google Docs, which are free to most users. The Dashboard is also a one-stop, web-based portal that archives all current and historical

documents pertaining to the board and membership activities. Board members can collaborate in any reporting aspect of their duties, live and on-line. As President, I can then log in for an instant update on the progress of any association item and make necessary changes. The board has used the Dashboard to conduct teleconference meetings with great ease. This feature allows the documents to be viewed live or saved in computer files. The environmental advantage of saving paper and printer ink are an added benefit, too. The only downfall is that the input must be timely. Procrastination in reporting causes a log jam in the process and creates tension. I am sure many of our board members are tired of my constant insistence on punctuality. All in all, the board has done well with their reporting duties.

Another new item at the board level this year is the creation of a special group called the Partnership Task Group. Since first being elected to the MAGCS Board in 2002, I have felt a growing need to enhance the value and recognition of our association's Class E Commercial members. This year, the Partnership Task Group was created as a special committee within the Board. The purpose of the Partnership Task Group is to explore ways in which our Class E members can maximize the return on their sponsorship investments, improve their sense of ownership at sponsored events, add value to our association's "touch" opportunities, and encourage greater Class A member participation. Our relationship with the Class E member is very important to the board. The board realizes that we are an association of golf course superintendents. However, at the same time, we have to reach out and welcome each member, address their individual needs, and deliver.

The work of this committee has been entrusted to Scott Witte, CGCS and MAGCS's Vice-President, as Chair of the group. In my opinion, there isn't a finer person or a more ardent professional to capture and carry the duties and goals of this group than Scott. In time, their crucial work will create a win-win situation for all classes of MAGCS membership. Good things are right around the corner.

The Class C Committee continues to be a vital and trusted part of our association and profession. This group of young men, led by Scott Verdun, continues in the traditions established

*(continued on next page)*



at their inception. The most recent example of their fine works came this year in New Orleans, with their coordination of the MAGCS's Habitat for Humanity Service Day. We are blessed to have such an active and willing group of assistants waiting in the wings. They are dedicated to our future and our success as an association. It's a great group.

There is a wonderful slate of MAGCS events this year:

- April starts the season, with the traditional four-person, Spring Scramble at Prairie Landing in West Chicago. Eric Mundt, Travis Dykstra, and I are thrilled with the opportunity to have our Midwest peers and friends together at our facility.
- In May, the ITF Spring Golf Day will be conducted at the Merit Club, in Libertyville. The Merit Club holds my personal distinction, resulting from John Nelson's efforts, as the most impeccable course conditioning standards I have ever played. Should be outstanding!
- In June, we'll have to trek to Kenosha, WI to test Matt Kregel's Club at Strawberry Creek. This venue promises a great maiden voyage northward.
- July is the annual MAGCS Family Picnic at the Kane County Cougars Baseball Game. Fun, fireworks, and frolicking with colleagues and family – what could be better? If you haven't been to this event, come see what you've been missing.
- In August, the new, two-day iTurf EXPO research field and commercial exposition will be held at the CDGA's Midwest Golf House in Lemont. This Expo will replace the IPTC Conference normally held in December. It's a new twist and an exciting change. The golf associated with the Expo is a new,

'little-known links' called, Cog Hill Dubsdread #4. The course underwent a complete renovation to challenge the PGA Tour's best. Need I say more? It will be fantastic!

- In September, we visit Kemper Lakes Golf Club, hosted by Dan Tully on the 8th. Kemper Lakes will provide a formidable challenge for our Annual MAGCS Championship and thank you to Dan for hosting this event on short notice.
- Lastly, we visit Arrowhead Golf Club in Wheaton for the MAGCS College Championship. This will be Mike Mumper's second stint hosting a MAGCS meeting this year. Thanks, Mike for your willingness to step up and serve.

I am very optimistic about the coming golf season. Sure it will be different, but that is always the effect of change. With each passing year, I become more aware that things move along too quickly for some, too slowly for others. If we all do our part, we'll make this a better place to live, work, and share. There is an old saying that goes, "many hands help ease the lifting." Look around and find your lifting in the 'Midwest.' We can always use a good set of hands.

I pray that God's graces continue to bless you and yours this year. I hope to see you at the monthly MAGCS events. Have a great season.

Sincerely,

Tony Kalina, MAGCS President -OC

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## DIRECTOR'S COLUMN

Scott Witte, CGCS, Cantigny Golf Club



# MAGCS Partnerships

*As chairman of the newly formed Partnership Task Group, I spent some time evaluating the value of MAGCS Partnerships. As I started to delve into the whole concept of partnerships, I thought it would be a good idea to look the word up on Merriam-Webster.com. When I looked up the word "partnership," it said, "see association," which led me to "see also, connection."*

**Entry Word:** partnership

**Function:** noun

**Text:** *the state of having shared interests or efforts (as in social or business matters).* **See ASSOCIATION.**

**Entry Word:** association

**Function:** noun

**Text:** *1 the state of having shared interests or efforts (as in social or business matters).* (It is interesting to me that this definition is interchangeable) then M. Webster says: **See CONNECTION.**

**Entry Word:** connection

**Function:** noun

**Text:** *3 an acquaintance who has influence especially in the business or political world.*

Then they said: **See ASSOCIATION**

So I started thinking about the link between the three words.

I think what makes the MAGCS such a great association is that we have great partnerships and great opportunities for connection. The level at which we associate, connect, and partner has a direct correlation to the success of the MAGCS and its members.

One of the keys to our success is the fact that our association incorporates the support of our commercial vendors in our business model to help provide services to members. This partnership places value on relationships and networking. No matter what class of member you are within the association, there is tremendous value in the opportunities that MAGCS provides for its members. MAGCS promotes: developing professional relationships, gaining education, sharing information, and increasing networks of industry professionals that provide products and services for golf courses.

When the officers of the association develop the annual budget for the MAGCS, there is no denying that there is a "For Profit" mindset; however, this so-called profit goes directly back to its members in the form of services. Partner investments are put right back into the MAGCS to offset the costs associated with continuing the circle of CONNECTIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS WITHIN THE ASSOCIATION.

So how do you put a price tag on partnership worth and networking potential? Well let's just take a conservative look at the value of the MAGCS membership as a whole. If we consider the approximately 300 golf courses that are members of the MAGCS and assume that their average annual maintenance budgets are 400-500K, we could also assume that after labor expenses, each club would have 160-200K for soft goods or operating expenses. Therefore, 160-200K times 300 members gives us a conservative estimate of 48 to 60 million dollars in purchasing power for soft goods alone. Add to that an average of 25-50K for Capital equipment purchases per member, and we add on another 7.5-15 million. Next we have to consider adding contractor fees for renovations and other improvements. If we average the 300 clubs' costs for contractor fees, new construction, and renovations, we might assume another 10 to 15 million. I am not a genius, or a market analyst, but I wouldn't be surprised if the Chicago area golf courses have an annual spending power of up to 90 million! How's that for a stimulus package?

From a superintendent's perspective, MAGCS partnerships provide easy access to a wide array of products and services. From a commercial vendor's perspective, MAGCS partnerships create opportunities for selling products and services. These partnerships are a two-way street. When companies invest in sponsorships, they are looking for opportunities to interact with potential clients and extract value from their investment. The Golf Course Management readership survey from 2005 found that 82% of superintendents are more likely to purchase from a

*(continued on page 30)*

## SUPER -N- SITE

Matt Breeden, *Evanston Golf Club*

# John Nelson -N-



*Superintendent John Nelson and The Merit Club, in Libertyville, will host the Illinois Turfgrass Foundation/MAGCS golf outing in May. I recently sat down with John and got to know a bit about his professional career, the course he oversees daily, and his family life.*

Graduating from Joliet Junior College in 1983, John followed the passion that started when he was 15 years old and worked at Cedardell Golf Club in his hometown of Plano, IL. His career began as an intern at Fox Bend Golf Club, in Oswego, IL, which was followed by a one-and-a-half year stint at Butler National under the tutelage of Oscar Miles, CGCS. This is where John got his first taste of professional tournament golf, while helping prepare the course for two Western Open Tournaments. He left Butler to join Al Fierst at Oak Park Country Club, where he spent five years as Al's assistant.

Then came a new challenge for John, warm-season grasses. He moved to Florida for a year and a half and worked at TPC at Eagle Trace where, again, he was involved in tournament prep at the host site of the PGA Tour's Honda Classic.

In the fall of 1989, the Getz family hired Oscar Miles to oversee a new course being built on their family farm in Lake County, IL. After coming back to Illinois from Florida, John went back to work for Oscar Miles. He was hired to work with Dave Schlagetter, Tony Kalina, and Scott Witte for the construction and grow-in at the Merit Club. This group was further enhanced with Enrique Valadez and Lorenzo Ramirez, both of whom had worked with Oscar at Butler National. They came to The Merit



*The Nelson Family, (l to r) Jack, Christina, Ben, Mitch and John.*

Club shortly after Oscar was hired. To this day, they still work for The Merit Club and John Nelson.

Built by architect Bob Lohmann, The Merit Club opened in 1992. The par 72, 7100 yard course is set on a beautiful piece of property featuring natural oak savannas, numerous ponds, a vast array of prairies, and a naturally sloping layout. The course was the host to the 2000 Women's U.S. Open. John joined The Merit Club in 1990. He took over the reins when Oscar retired in 2006. John has found a great assistant in Scott Verdun. Scott has been working with John for the past four years. He started as an intern

for Oscar. Once Scott finished school, John hired him as his assistant. Since John became superintendent, the course has continued to evolve along with the game of golf. Some of the changes include new bunkers, annual tree transplanting, rebuilding of a rock wall along a pond bank, and adding tees throughout the course where necessary to maintain the integrity of the golf hole's original design.

Supporting John at home is his wife of 18 years, Christina, and three sons: Mitch, 15; Jack, 12; and Ben, 5. John is very involved with his family and spends time with his sons by attending as many football, baseball, and basketball games as

*(continued on page 7)*



he can. He has also coached some of the teams the boys have been involved with. John and Christina have opened their home to their niece Maggie for the past eight months while she is attending the College of Lake County.

I have had the privilege of knowing John Nelson before I took the assignment of writing the Super-N-Site for The Merit Club. Needless to say, I have learned so much more about not only the course, but also the man who oversees the course. I learned that John has a great family that he truly makes time for. They, in turn, support his work and the long hours that are sometimes needed to get the job done. He is, and has been, devoted to The Merit Club since the course was opened in 1992. He has a great supporting staff that is equally devoted to the club. I am sure that he was able to accomplish all these things using the knowledge and experience of all the great people he has worked with over the years. -OC



Above right: The sixteenth green as seen from the 167 yard tee box.

Right: The twelfth green sporting the newly adopted Merit Club logo.

Below: The best seat in the house. Looking over the course from the highest point, the 13th tee.





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## FEATURE ARTICLE I

Fred Behnke, CGCS, Mt. Prospect Golf Club



# The Best Defense is a Good Offense

*I was toe to toe with the guy and he wouldn't back off.*

"Choosing pin locations is MY responsibility as the host of this high school sectional tournament, and I plan to fulfill my obligations to the letter."

"Coach, I don't care what you think are your responsibilities. At this golf course the golf course maintenance staff does the course set-up for each and every event that is played here," I replied.

"Listen," he said, "I just want to make sure the course is presented in its best light."

"Yeah, and who made you Pope of this dump."

OK – OK, I didn't really say that last part, but I was thinking it. The first part of that dialogue did occur, has occurred in the past on several occasions, and probably will occur again. Why? What is it about certain golfers that compels them to horn in? I never see these people when its time to pump bunkers and shovel sand, but when "their" event is around the corner it's...

"So you gonna double cut the greens for us?"

"We need the bunker sand fluffier for Saturday's outing."

"Can we get three circles at ten foot intervals around the cup on seven?"

Shut Up!! – Shut Up!! – Shut Up!! Am I wrong? I have been a couple of time in the past – a long, long time ago when I didn't know any better, but am I wrong? Am I just being a curmudgeonly old greenskeeper?

The short answer in this day and age is – YES! Make golfers happy, maybe they'll come back. If a group is interested enough in a special need for their event to seek you out to make it happen, maybe just maybe, they can be accommodated and you'll make a friend. Which leads me to the real point of this article – The best defense is a good offense.

I'm reminded of a story I was told when I was just starting out BCD (before compact discs). Everybody starts with two pails – one for the white balls – you get a white ball for every time you're a good boy, and one pail for the black balls – you get a black ball when you're a bad boy. As the years go by and the balls start adding up, you'll find that your white ball pail has a

---

*"...you get a white ball for every time you're a good boy...you get a black ball when you're a bad boy."*

---

leak and those puppies gradually disappear, but that black ball pail is as tight as a drum. Every one of those suckers is still there, even the moldy, old ones. That guy whose round was ruined when he sculled a bunker shot out of a footprint thinks you can't maintain bunkers. The day you pulled carts after two inches of rain and ended up canceling the ladies nine-hole league outing will never be forgiven or forgotten. The pin that ended up too close to the slope on number seven is indelibly etched in somebody's brain. God forbid they ever get on the board. After twenty-five years at the same place I've accumulated a pail full of black balls, in fact, I'm on pail number two now. How can I still be here?

Job security is not a passive enterprise. The best defense is a good offense.

The Past-President's Council met recently. We donned our black robes, conducted the ritual sacrifices, and in the flickering candle light made grave and momentous observations on the state of our chapter. One particularly sobering topic of discussion pertained to ways our association can assist members in maintaining their employment during these troubled times. Let's face it. The days of wine and roses are long gone. Golf courses are closing their doors. New construction is at a standstill. People are reeling from the de-valuing of their IRA, 401K, home values, etc.

*(continued on next page)*



Several questions arose in the course of the discussion:

- 1) Should the MAGCS even concern itself with this issue?  
According to our Bylaws, the Purpose of the MAGCS (Article 1.2) makes no specific mention of the association's right or duty to provide "job retention" services. We have always been a semi-loose confederation of independent Lone Rangers. Put in your time, make some connections, work hard, study up, and with a little luck you'll land your first super job. The GCSAA and MAGCS will help you grow the grass and give you a chance to network with other supers to share war stories and what works and what doesn't. You got the job; it's your job to keep the job. But if you answer YES to question #1 we move on to:
- 2) To what degree is it appropriate or proper for the MAGCS to provide job retention support and services to its membership? There is a large group of dynamic, educated, and hungry young men and women out there lurking. They are ready, willing, and able to grab the brass ring, and they are also members of our association. They are the assistant superintendents, and if a grizzled veteran falls back from the herd shouldn't nature take its course? Let the devil take the hindmost. It's what keeps the species strong. Harsh, but they pay dues, too.
- 3) Golf Course Superintendents who have seen fit to advance the profession by participating in and supporting their professional associations have agreed to operate under a Code of Ethics, a gentlemen's agreement, if you will. In essence, this code of ethics (found immediately after the Bylaws of the association in your MAGCS directory and identical to the GCSAA Code of

Ethics) mandates that a member will accept and fully agree to abide by a series of statements that identify proper and professional behavior. It further goes on to provide "Professional Conduct Guidelines." These guidelines boil down to The Boy Scout's pledge (minus the God and Country stuff) – don't lie, steal or cheat, and be man or woman enough to operate in the light. Don't sneak around somebody's back. Back in the day, this behavior was expected. The threat of ostracism by your peers was enough to keep member golf course superintendents playing fair. Like I said before – it's a gentleman's agreement. Sadly those days are long gone.

Organizations exist that seek out the decision makers at your golf course to directly solicit support in replacing or absorbing the current golf course superintendent and maintenance personnel. Some of these organizations are actually members of the GCSAA and MAGCS. There is little interest on the national level in sanctioning these tactics, despite the fact that they fly in the face of the Professional Conduct Guidelines. It turns out that the Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Professional Conduct are really just voluntary.

Now we come to the meat and potatoes of this message (finally).OK. Let's recap:

- Loose confederation of Lone Rangers.
- Plenty of able people just waiting for a chance.
- No rules.
- Sounds like a recipe for disaster unless ...
- Back to the Boy Scouts, except this time, their motto: Be Prepared.



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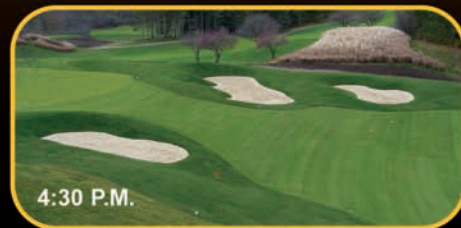
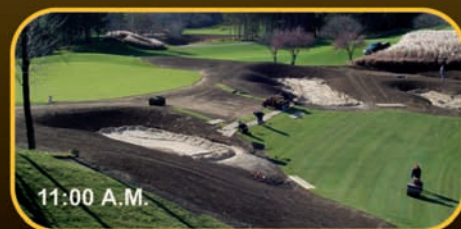
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