

Successful show indicates strength of industry

It's hard to believe the GCSAA convention has concluded and spring is around the corner. Warm weather courses are in the midst of the "season" and the professional tours are in full swing. Once again, it looks like the golf course industry is holding up in this uncertain economy.

The evidence of this strength became more clear in New Orleans. Here are my observations after talking with many suppliers, superintendents and others in the industry.

• Overall, the show was a huge success — particularly in comparison to 1991 when we were in the midst of

Desert Storm. People just felt better this year.

• The New Orleans site is excellent. I did hear complaints about security and the usual labor problems. But, all in all, exhibitors were pleased with the facility.

• I found there to be less traffic through the hall than in past years. Many exhibitors agreed there was less traffic but higher quality. Deci-



Charles von Brecht

sion-makers were on the floor.

• Several new products caught my attention. It's good to see the continued investment in R&D in large and small companies.

• As usual, the corporate hospitality was in full swing for media and superintendents. It's impossible to get to all the receptions, but the ones I did attend were first-class and very well attended.

• One new restaurant "find" for me: Chez Helene. (I understand it's a favorite of Bill Cosby and Madonna.) It's not in the best section of New Orleans, but it does boast true Southern cooking (not neces-

sarily Cajun). Be sure to take a cab; don't leave until your cab arrives for the return trip. You'll find quite reasonable prices, and the dress code is very casual.

The GCBA's executive director, Phil Arnold, has done a terrific job in the past year in following up on the late Don Rossi's original effort. The first builders dinner I attended was in Anaheim, where there were 100 or so in attendance, compared to well over 300 this year. Congratulations to the builders and their president for the past few years, Perry Dye. And best wishes to incoming president Jerry Pierman.

COMMENTARY

Americans are the Johnny Appleseeds of golf

If golf's roots are in Scotland, then its flowers are in America, and the seeds of the flowers are now blowing the world over.

Everywhere you go — whichever Hemisphere you travel in, Americans are involved in every aspect of the golf course industry.

American golf course architects and builders, superintendents and club managers have taken the art, mechanics and business of golf course development and operation to new heights.

They're acknowledged worldwide as the trendsetters in design; the leaders in construction technique and technology. They are forever unveiling breakthroughs in turfgrass research and plant breeding, and paving inroads into innovative marketing and operation.

American Robert Trent Jones Sr. set a globe-trotting standard perhaps no one will match, taking golf to areas that had never heard of the

game before. His son, Robert Trent Jones Jr., kept the family tradition going, designing the first course in then-Russia

(outside Moscow).

J. Michael Poellot and Arnold Palmer have taken the game to China.

Ronald Fream, Robert von Hagge and Jack Nicklaus have exported their creative talents around the world.

Others, of lesser fame, are being sought out by foreigners.

"I don't know of one American architect I've spoken to lately who doesn't have at least one golf course going internationally," Palmer design company president Ed Seay said in February.



Mark Leslie

And the grass-growing, disease-fighting prowess of American superintendents is like gold abroad, especially in Asia where turfgrass schools don't exist.

When government leaders talk about "American ingenuity" and lament the lack of exportable goods and services, perhaps they should turn their eyes toward the golf industry and get some hints.

Why are 85 percent of the golf courses being built in Asia designed by Americans? Why are American agronomists, superintendents, professors, course builders and managers so much sought-after?

Check the basics and you'll get the answer: strong, basic education in the fields of agronomy and design, and a long-standing heritage in the game.

While many Americans in other fields of work are running a distant race from the world's leaders, golf is a different creature.

Take a close look and you'll see:

- a firm underpinning of education in landscape architecture;
- top-notch turfgrass science programs in universities nationwide;
- ongoing research in plant breeding and environmental impact of chemicals; and
- a talent of artistry — best expressed in free-form — that Americans show in such wide-ranging fields as advertising and figure-skating.

Perhaps greatest is a heritage of the game of golf itself, if not usurping it from the Scottish then certainly staking a claim of close brotherhood.

Those professionals who are traveling abroad are like the gardener spreading the seed, tamping and watering it.

What blossoms is a flower the whole world can enjoy. And that will reflect well on all Americans.

GUEST COMMENTARY

Fore crying out loud: Golfers sure can be a hazard

By Danion Jacobson

A golf course is a battlefield. Golfers fight their opponents and unfriendly hazards while trying to beat par. On the other side of the game, superintendents direct the battle against nature — armed with chemicals, sprinklers and sweat — while trying to maintain a beautiful and healthy playing surface.

Caught in between, the grounds crew and maintenance staff have the job of pleasing both sides. But sometimes their job is complicated by another little war — one waged against them by discourteous and careless golfers.

"It seems like every time I turn around, a golf ball is headed straight for me," one member of the Grand View Lodge golf crew said a few years ago. His audience — members of the grounds crew at this central Minnesota course — was eating lunch at the maintenance shop. The main topic of conversation on this particular mid-summer's day was not the heat or the number of golf-

ers on the course. Everyone wanted to talk about Troy Casper's accident.

Earlier that day, he had been trimming grass around some trees between two fairways. Out of nowhere, a hard-hit ball smacked into his right hand, resulting in a lot of pain, a little swelling, but luckily, no serious injury. A minute later, an older man and his golfing companions came strolling down the fairway.

"He came over to me and started chewing me out for getting in his way... Didn't even ask me if I was hurt," Casper said.

The other employees just shook their heads. Even in the short time they had been in the business, many of them had been in similar situations.



Danion Jacobson

The nine-hole course at Grand View is typical of most small courses in the high-traffic resort community of the Minnesota Lakes Area. It relies on a beautiful landscape, tight fairways, and challenging greens to keep tourists coming back. Before the owners built a championship-size 18-hole course nearby, it handled more summer traffic than downtown Minneapolis.

The golf staff is typical. It consists mainly of seasonally employed high school and college students, who find the outdoor work preferable to flipping burgers for tuition money. Most have no prior golf course experience. However, one thing they are guaranteed is a fast education.

At the busiest times, workers start before 6 a.m. to get a jump on the golfers. Few grumble about the early hours once they experience what it's like being in the line of fire. The scenario goes something like this:

At 6:15 a.m., the novice

greenkeeper is working a mower back and forth across a green. He enjoys the smell of the fresh-cut grass, the cool morning air and the chirping birds in the nearby woods. But mostly, he concentrates on keeping straight cut lines.

Suddenly, he hears what sounds like a Sioux Indian war cry: "Fore!" He looks up to see a golfer on the horizon. The golfer is shading his eyes, looking at something...

But the sky is blank. Bang! A golf ball comes crashing into the mower's grass catcher and bounces off the green. Meanwhile, the greenkeeper, considerably shaken by the event, forgets to disengage the reel and sheers a path into the apron. The greenkeeper is left looking at the apron in disbelief, knowing he has a lot of explaining to do.

Members of this grounds crew dread the shooting gallery atmosphere that often hangs like a shroud over the course.

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Be kind, patient and courteous ... and wear your hard hat

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The fear of spilling gasoline on the green is minute when compared with the fear of getting coldcocked by an errant tee shot.

Grand View's superintendent, Tom Kientzle, had a standard line he would offer to his young employees whenever they complained about the near misses.

Having worked on a golf course since his mid-teens, Kientzle could spot a golf ball in the sky better than Kirby Puckett sees a baseball against the white ceiling of the

Metrodome.

"The odds of getting hit by a golf ball are greater than the odds of getting struck by lightning," he'd say. "I've been working on courses for a lot longer than any of you and I haven't been hit yet."

Later that summer, the odds turned. One day, he was trying out a new method of cutting the number 5 fairway.

On the green-side of a large water hazard in the middle of the fairway, he noticed some unattended youngsters playing near the pond.

He called them over to the tractor and began lecturing them about the dangers of loitering about on a golf course.

All this time, he failed to notice that a foursome had approached the tee. But he heard the warning cry a few seconds later.

The poorly hit ball barely cleared the pond. It bounced once and then smacked him in the stomach.

The kids' mouths fell open and one of them said, "I see what you mean, mister."

One of the first lessons learned

by the golf crew is in the area of public relations. Crew are told to acknowledge golfers and wave them on whenever possible.

Management is quick to say, "Be courteous: Remember, the golfer is the one paying your salary."

But where golf activity is often the greatest is the same spot maintenance workers spend most of their time: on the green.

With all of the care greens are given — from daily mowing to changing the pin position — it's near impossible on busy days to

keep all of the golfers happy and still get the work done.

Problems arise when, for instance, a speed demon intent on finishing 18 holes in half an hour, comes swinging onto the turf. Or when a normally placid golfer is having a bad game and in no mood to wait for a worker who ran into a rock in the process of cutting a new hole.

"What really gets me is the people who show no respect for the job you are trying to do," said Lindsay Jacobson, a stocky 16-year-old with three years of golf course experience.

He specifically mentioned the time he had come across a sweet-looking little old lady while mowing the longer fairways. He first met her on the 3rd fairway. Then when he cut across to do the 8th fairway, he saw her party on the tee and waved them on.

She walked over to him while he was waiting for them to play through. He thought she was going to ask him a question or maybe compliment him on how nice the course looked.

Instead, she said, "Are you just trying to be annoying? What are you doing? Trying to follow us around all day?"

Of course, due to the fact that humans spend a lot of time on them, golf courses mirror society at large. There are golfers who play by the rules.

They are the ones who treat the course with respect and are conscious of the safety of others around them. Then there are those who think a golf course is their own personal playpen. Regardless of the different personalities golfers possess, they all are given the benefit of the doubt.

The grounds crew is told to be tactful and courteous even if the other side isn't. But at Grand View, there is a line a golfer can cross that will get him or her either reprimanded or thrown off the course. Kientzle has no patience for a frustrated putter who takes his or her frustration out on the green with a putter or pitching wedge.

But as much fun as it is to talk about ill-mannered patrons during lunch break, the golf crew admits that for every bad sport, there are two good-natured counterparts. Casper remembers the time when the employee in charge of irrigation left the sprinklers running on the 1st green.

Casper came driving up the fairway to see an early-rising couple trying to putt in spite of the rotating fountains of water. Getting wet at that hour couldn't have felt good. So he promptly apologized for the inconvenience after shutting the water off.

"Oh well, we're awake now. That should help our score," the man said. The lady just smiled and gave him a compliment on the course. "Unbelievable," Casper remarked.

The grounds crew was ready to swap some more stories when a voice called out from inside the shop. "Hey you guys, lunch was over 10 minutes ago. Get back to work!"

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