

# Should course owners — public and private — pool resources?

By VINCE ALFONSO Jr.

If you operate a golf facility, you have heard the discussion many times before: Municipal, state park and military vs. tax-paying for-profit golf courses. You know the discussion I am referring to: Should we all sit down and share marketing, promotion and sales information as well as data that could help us cut costs and increase productivity? That's right. The stuff of which net profit is made.

We have to face this very simple fact: The taxpayer-owned sector is, indeed, in head-to-head competition with the taxpaying sector of the golf business. And there are two basic areas of conflict.

First, there's the tax and profit issue. The taxpayer-owned golf course does not pay property tax and is not necessarily trying to make a profit. The golf course owned by a taxpaying operator is paying property tax and is definitely trying to make a profit. Therefore, they do not start out on a level playing field.

Second, there's the accountability issue. Does the taxpayer-owned golf course make known to the public what it really costs to maintain their golf courses? Or, are a lot of their expenses buried in areas like the parks and recreation budget, the state-wide public land use mowing fund, or the military base motor pool operational budget?

The point is, would fees at these courses remain the same if the public knew just how many of their tax dollars were being used to keep their prices down? And furthermore, if full disclosure did cause prices to rise, wouldn't that force these courses to provide better playing conditions and better customer service in order for them to hold onto



Vince Alfonso Jr.

their customer base?

Naturally, it's not relevant for the taxpaying sector, unless publicly held, to make full disclosures as to what they spend and how much money they make. On the other hand, they are certainly already in the business of providing the best possible playing conditions and customer service at the best possible price. Remember, they're trying to make a profit and you can't do that without customers. And you can't have customers and make a profit

unless you can provide your patron with enough reasons to pay your price.

Yes, you have read between my lines correctly. As a rule, the taxpayer-owned course is not as well maintained or as interested in customer service as the privately-owned taxpaying golf course because nobody there has any motivation to make a profit.

Now that you know how I have defined the issues, let's get back to the discussion. Can or should we sit down together and really try to help one another? Is there a desire on the part of the taxpaying sector to sit down with the taxpayer-

owned sector and share information, ideas and resources? To be honest, I'm not sure I know the answer.

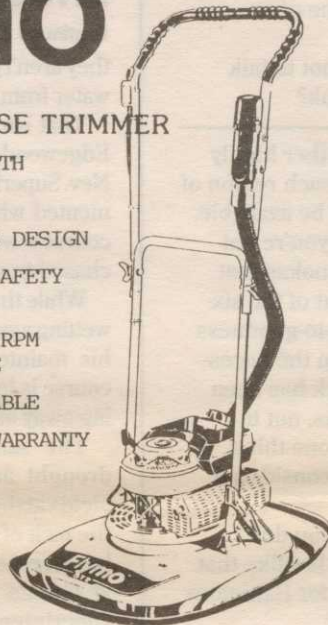
In 1986, The Nationals Golf Course Owners Association issued a White Paper to its membership at our annual meeting. This White Paper basically asked the NGCOA members how they felt about opening the organization to taxpayer-owned golf facilities. The answer was a resounding "No!" The NGCOA bylaws state: You must be a taxpaying, for-profit golf course in order to join, and that's the way they wanted it

Continued on page 10

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# Alfonso

Continued from page 9

to stay.

It's been six years since that White Paper and perhaps it's time to take another look at this issue. Maybe there are bigger fish to fry than things like: More economical mowing practices or more efficient ways of running the golf car or food concessions.

Maybe there are issues that cut directly to our survival as a business — like the environment, federal and state regulations and ADA.

Maybe there are things that are bigger than our concern over profitability, accountability, and who is paying taxes and who isn't.

Maybe there's a great need for the taxpayer-owned golf courses of this country to upgrade their customer-service attitude and improve their playing conditions — and maybe the NGCOA members

can help that along. Maybe some taxpayer-owned golf course personnel out there can teach NGCOA members a thing or two.

Maybe, just maybe, if we were all in one giant pool of golf courses, we could muster up enough clout to get golf's positive environmental story told as effectively as the opposition has been able to communicate its view.

Maybe we need to sit down and talk. Maybe there is a lot more to pull us together than there is to keep us apart.

I am going to work hard to reopen this discussion with the members of NGCOA, and I would sincerely welcome any input from all of you taxpayer-owned golf facilities.

Shouldn't we find common ground and work together on issues which may well affect the very survival of our livelihoods? Not to mention the great game itself, golf: The game of a lifetime.

Maybe life's too short not to talk about it. What do you think?

# Leslie

Continued from page 8

deliberately twisting facts to make a point that isn't supported by the evidence is, to me, inappropriate."

The golf course opponents have their hired gun.

So, where's Paladin?

The golf industry needs its own gunslinger, or perhaps several. Well-educated, articulate, scientists-cum-public-speakers who are good on their feet, armed with truth in their hands, and with wisdom on their lips.

I nominate Dr. Eliot Roberts, recently retired executive director of The Lawn Institute and former head of university turfgrass departments.

If he's unavailable, how about recently retired Drs. Joe Duich and Don Waddington from Penn State, Dr. Henry Indyk from Rutgers and Richard Skogley from the University of Rhode

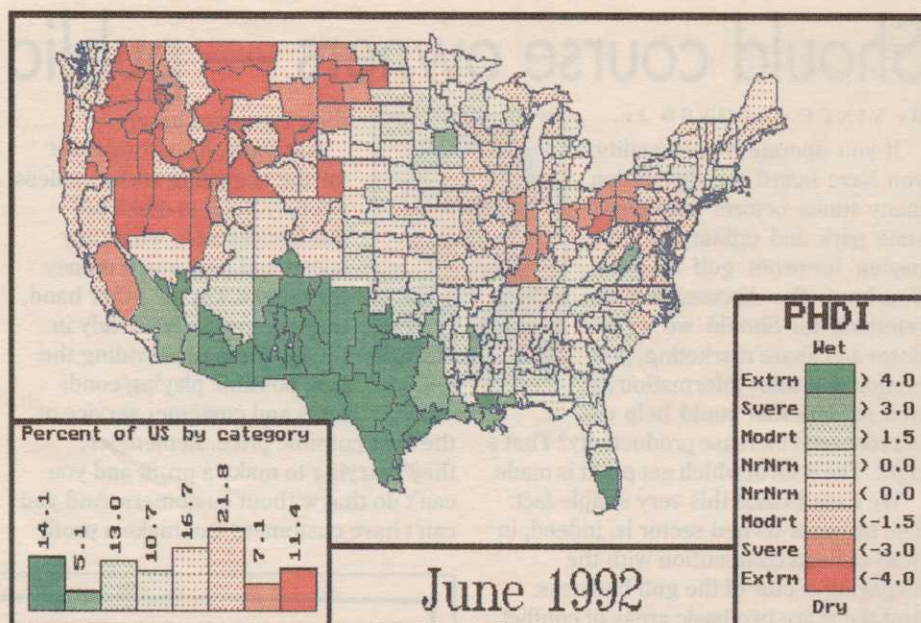
Island? Surely there are other highly regarded scientists — in each region of the country — who could be available.

Ladies and gentlemen, you're out there. You're packing bazookas that would make Silly Putty out of the six-gun toters. You're honest-to-goodness scientists with expertise in the necessary areas. Your life's work has been research to discover truths, not to oppose or to support any one thing, so your testimony would be considered credible and unbiased.

Please step forward. If you don't, your back yard may get a law like that which Klein helped write for Baltimore County. So, what about it?

"I think it's probably the best in the country," Klein said.

"It is almost physically impossible to build a golf course in Baltimore County," countered David Locke, a landscape architect and land planner. "I think it is ridiculous and extremely unreasonable."



## Effects of bone-dry May, June still linger

Continued from page 1

they aren't going to come. We can't buy extra water from the city. It simply isn't available."

That isn't the case 50 miles southwest at Edgewood-Tahoe Country Club in Stateline, Nev. Superintendent Steve Seibel has supplemented what little water is available in the course's wells and springs with liquid purchased from the local water company.

While the purchased water and additional wetting agents have added 10 to 15 percent to his maintenance budget, Seibel said the course is in great condition and "we're turning away as many people as we let play."

The same is true in Oregon. While drought and hot weather have reduced yields at the state's major grass seed farms, the lack of rain (40 percent below normal) has increased play and revenues by \$30,000 at Grants Pass Golf Club, according to superintendent Scott Shillington. That has more than made up for the extra \$2,000 spent on fungicides needed to fight back the more-intense-than-usual attacks of anthracnose, fusarium, pythium and dollar spot, he added.

Sufficient water has been available from the Rogue River to keep the course in excellent shape. Supplies could be shut off

in early September, a few weeks earlier than usual, Shillington said. That would not affect conditions, however, he added.

Other parts of the country have suffered along with the Northwest. Most of Ohio was "severely" to "extremely" dry through the first half of 1992, according to National Climatic Data Center, NOAA figures.

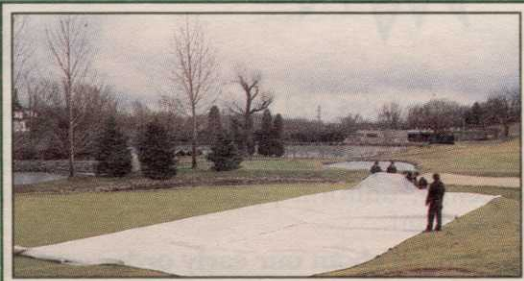
Shawnee Hills Golf Club southeast of Cleveland received less than seven inches of precipitation from April through June. That forced superintendent Paul Hudak into the unusual springtime practice of watering his course almost everyday from May 21 through July 9, when the heavy rains returned.

Shawnee Hills added workers to hand water certain sections of the course. Extra fertilizer and fungicides were needed to keep the grass green and ward off disease.

But the drier weather increased play, Hudak said. Shawnee Hills attracts older players who liked the extra roll the drier-than-normal fairways provided.

Head superintendent Mike Shannon of Teton Pines Golf Club in Jackson Hole, Wyo., has added two to three people, at about \$150/day, to hand water dry spots and aerify trouble areas.

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