

Random notes on 1997 & 1998: A snapshot of the future

Read the 48 pages you have before you and you'll get a pretty good snapshot of what took place in the golf course industry in 1997.

Now, after this information settles in — after you figure out how you're going to rig a bunker vacuum or plan that much needed tee-box renovation on a skintight budget — answer the following question: Where do you want your course to be in a year?

Make a quick list, since this is the time of year for lists. Don't focus on small material items, think about where you want to be positioned in your particular market. Do you need to pump up your marketing efforts? How do you reach out more to your region's youth, women? What steps can you take to become a staple in your region's activity list? Is there one easy step you can take to increase a member's enjoyment of the course?

Indeed, if you attended *Golf Course News'* Public Golf Forum, you'd have your 1998 wish-list displayed on a blackboard in your office.

When you have that list complete, take the most important step: Figure out why you have to do these things. This whole idea of "thinking outside the box" is something the golf industry hasn't done very well over the years. Do yourself a favor, take one risk this year, reach out to your customers and members.

This is a challenge to step outside conventional thinking on one project and see how it pans out for you. Get back to me at the end of '98 with the result.

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Favorite scene of the year: I took a jog through Fairmont Park in the heart of Philadelphia back in September. When I emerged from the pristine wooded path I found myself in the middle of a high-school football field circled by a cinder track.

I decided to take to take a quick turn around the quarter mile before I headed back through the woods. Then they caught my eye.

From under the bleachers came two young boys clad in the indigenous garb of the inner city — baggy jeans, untied high-top Air Jordans and oversized hockey jerseys. But they weren't coming to the field to toss the pigskin. Each boy had a driver and a bag of golf balls. I decided to take another turn around.

They teed up in the end-zone and proceeded to knock their drives down the field toward the other end-zone. The one closest to the base of the goal post won the hole.

In 1998, prepare for the change.



Michael Levans,
editor

Look back before you leap

A-h-h, it was a very good year, all in all. And, I believe, as we reach one milestone we should look back at what we've gone through as well as forward to where we're going. As George Santayana said: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

"Don't brood on what's past, but never forget it, either," admonished Thomas H. Raddall.

What can we learn from our personal — and the golf industry's collective — experience in 1997 that we can take with us to improve the year 1998?

From the positive side, many points, including:

- Women and juniors are dying to get involved in golf; those who accommodate them will prosper.

- Explore new avenues for financing. A lot more money is available in capital markets: real-estate investment trusts; public-private joint partnerships; stock issues; suddenly willing banks; and flexibility in supporting such alternative courses as Ratcliffe Golf Service's "poor man's country club," the Paradise Valley Par-3 that is linked to an apartment complex in Charlotte, N.C.

- Fewer golfers are objecting to rules mandating spikeless shoes.
- The ski industry is realizing that affiliated golf courses can provide four-season revenue as well as year-round jobs to their best employees.

- Great grasses — that is, disease-, pest-, drought-, heat- and cold-resistant cultivars — are entering the marketplace; but superintendents should be informed about the cost and extent of their cultural maintenance before buying them.

- Golf is sometimes the only option to develop previously "undevelopable" properties like the Superfund site at Anaconda, Mont., landfills, quarries, and land adjacent to airports.

- Scientific studies continue to pour in from universities illustrating golf's minimal, and oftentimes beneficial, impact on wildlife and the environment.

From the negative side:

- Building a golf course where 18 more holes saturates a market is not a good idea.

- Expecting that golfers will attend your new golf course just because it's there — without any marketing and advertising — is foolish.

- The "easy deals" are gone, according to management companies who, not long ago, were buying poorly operated facilities and turning them around quickly.

- Beware new government policies, such as updated versions wetland regulations and OSHA's attempt at ergonomics control.

There is a story of a person who expressed amazement at Johann Sebastian Bach's ability on the organ. Bach replied: "You simply have to hit the right key at the right time. The organ does all the rest."

Bach was a humble man, and humility is good. But those in the golf industry can not expect that hitting the right key at the right time will always render a successful song. They can, however, expect that looking back at successes and failures will better equip them for prosperity in 1998 and beyond.

This is a time to reflect. Happy holidays!



Mark Leslie,
managing editor

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GOLF COURSE NEWS

Believe it or not, horizons are expanding

In 1994, the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) launched new initiatives in the areas of professional image, golf and the environment, and chapter relations. A year later, it added career development to the mix.

To upgrade the superintendents' professional image and enhance career possibilities, the association began encouraging members to look beyond the position of golf course superintendent as an ultimate goal. GCSAA organizers reasoned, quite correctly, that the skills developed in becoming a superintendent were transferable to other jobs and even ownership positions within the golf industry.

"All the experiences I had along the way were important in getting me to this position," said Kyle Evans (*GCN* June 1997), who was assistant superintendent at one course and head superintendent at two others before becoming managing partner

of Belgrade Lakes (Maine) Golf Club, a new facility he and his partners plan to open next summer.

Evans' comments appeared in a regular feature we launched earlier this year titled "*Movin' on up*" in which we highlight the accomplishments of former superintendents who have climbed the golf industry career ladder into positions many superintendents may have formerly believed unattainable.

Evans made the ultimate jump to course owner. So, too, did Dick Schulz (*GCN* May 1997), operator of the Oaks Course near Atlanta. Making that leap required the most important asset any entrepreneur can possess — the willingness to take a chance.

"I'm a risk-taker," Schulz said. Added Evans: "You can't hit unless you step to the plate."

The growth of management companies has made a new position more common in recent years. The title is usually something like Director of Agronomy

or Director of Course Operations. This person oversees maintenance operations and personnel at all the courses a management company runs. If the company is large enough, that person may have regional directors of agronomy reporting to him. That is the case with Mike Heacock (*GCN* January 1997), vice president of agronomy with management colossus American Golf Corp., the Santa Monica, Calif.-based operator of 250-plus courses worldwide.

"To be an effective manager, you have to be able to stand back and deal with the individual superintendent whose one course is his professional world," said the AGC executive and former course superintendent, who also noted that being able to get things done through other people is a key for any successful multiple-course operator.

"People" skills are also important for Carefree Resorts Director of Golf Operations Ed Miller (*GCN* February 1997), who oversees The Boulders in Carefree, Ariz.; The

Lodge at Ventana Canyon in Tucson, Ariz.; and Carmel (Calif.) Valley Ranch.

"I look for the best talent when recruiting superintendents and then give them the authority to do their jobs," said Miller, a long-time superintendent himself. "One of the greatest challenges in this industry is recruiting the right person for that position."

General manager is another title superintendents are assuming with increasing frequency. David Van Auken (*GCN* November 1996) was hired as Timberstone's head superintendent in April 1995. Last September he was named general manager of the new 18-hole course on Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

"I was always pro-active," he said. "I always offered my input and made myself available to my employer, and it's paid off."

So, Mr./Ms. Superintendent, are you willing to take a risk? Can you get things done through other people? Then maybe 1998 is a good time to explore new possibilities.

—Peter Blais, associate editor