

1998: Golf's growth taken seriously

Putting this issue together is a blast. For the editorial staff, sitting down to peruse an entire year's work is not only satisfying, but it jars the memory and helps us to put what we do here at *Golf Course News* (GCN) into perspective.

This was a year that saw many facets of the industry finally pull together for the good of junior golf and the development of new players, the four-company turf maintenance equipment market winnow to three, the Asian market ride a wild economic roller-coaster, the rise of the single-rider golf car and El Nino cut a path of destruction, causing the world's superintendents to go the extra mile to bring their courses back to life.

We hammered away at the idea of player development this year, and will continue to do so. The January issue led with a package of stories on The First Tee and we followed related projects throughout the year in Virginia, Michigan and Texas. We'll continue to watch and report on The First Tee developments at every turn, for it's a program that the industry has needed for many years.

The industry saw the number of course openings surpass the 400 mark for the third year in a row. Even more impressive, the industry currently has over 900 courses under development, making that 400 mark an industry standard for at least the next two or three years.

I realize these numbers keep popping up, but it's crucial to keep them in mind, especially if you're about to turn your first spade of dirt. These numbers are going to define what new developments are and what future developments should be.

The golf industry is a business, a tough business that's getting tougher. Never before has the golf course owner and operator, public or private, been under more pressure to be a wise businessperson. Every single person involved in day-to-day operations, even the person running the hot dog stand, now knows that competition is tight and that customer you directed to the first tee will remember the help and will probably come back due to it.

Overall, 1998 was a damn good year for golf and GCN. This year we saw the addition of our Trevor Ledger, GCN's international bureau chief. Trevor has been keeping his eyes on the international market full-time for Golf Course News International, GCN's sister publication, since March.

We also managed to lasso the services of Andrew Overbeck, the ex-Watson Fellow who had the unique opportunity to travel Asia for 18 months visiting new golf course developments. Andrew's e-mail will be buzzing as he keeps us informed of conditions in Asia.



Michael Levans,
editor

The facts, mam, just the facts

One of my many duties here at *Golf Course News* is to seek out stories for the general News section pages. I comb through news clips, the Internet, press releases and telephone calls from readers to put together these 3-, 4- and 5-paragraph stories that generally appear in the first few pages of GCN.

As a highly trained and seasoned journalist, as well as a Jack Webb enthusiast, it's my duty to report "The facts mam, just the facts." But every once in awhile I'd love to tack on just one more little paragraph, making what I feel is a needed observation.

Well it's Year-in-Review time and the boss gave me the thumbs up. So here goes.

In June, we ran a story titled "Caddyshack course to get facelift," describing how new owner Wayne Huizenga was intentionally killing the grass at Rolling Hills Golf and Country Club in Davie, Fla., in order to begin a \$3.5 million renovation to the once-proud public course that was featured in the 1980 movie *Caddyshack*.

Florida Panthers Holding Inc., which owns six courses, is changing the shapes of the greens and sand traps, adding 10 acres of water and transforming the 27-hole course into an 18-hole championship track. Huizenga, owner of baseball's Florida Marlins, expected to open Rolling Hills in early 1999.

About time. The course where the best movie ever made about superintendents/caddies should be a shrine. Nice to know Huizenga realizes that. Now if he would just unload the Marlins, the world champion baseball team he also killed on purpose.

That same month, another news story appeared, "Mich. tracks spread like wild fire." The article quoted National Golf Foundation



Peter Blais,
associate editor

1998: A tough nut to crack

It's all well and good to say "If you can't stand the heat get out of the kitchen." But how do you advise people who don't realize what fire can be until they face it? That is what happened when 1998 came to town, like a sling-shooting cowboy looking for trouble.

The "heat in the kitchen" was a war zone of ice in the Northeast, a flood zone in the South and West, a fire zone in the Southeast. It was a series of calamities coast to coast, of challenges that tested golf course superintendents and operators to the max in many places.

When Bruce Berger, superintendent at Quarry Golf Club in San Antonio, Texas, said in the midst of a drought, "It sounds odd, but we would love a hurricane or tropical storm right now," little did he know he was about to get more than he, or anyone, bargained for.

When Ted Horton and friends at Pebble Beach Golf Links planned a new 5th hole, little did they know that El Nino would, in fact, cause some \$4 million in repair bills elsewhere on the course.

When golf course personnel in Florida laid contingency plans for the wildfires that swept through the state, little did they know that, as Michael Fabrizio of Matanzas and Palm Coast Resort in Daytona Beach said, "You could not outrun [the fire]."

Are we ever ready to the utmost for the "heat in the kitchen" that may await us? An old German proverb says: "God gives the nuts but He does not crack them." The heat of 1998 brought challenges that were, in fact, a proving ground of sorts. People had to use whatever tools they could lay their hands on (the nuts from the German proverb) to apply to the problems they faced.

"In a perverse sort of way, it [El Nino's storms] is exciting because it is a challenge in lots of problem-solving and I think that is what draws many of us to this business," said Bob Costa, vice president and director of golf course management for Lombardo Group in California.

How well superintendents responded usually determined how long their golf courses were shut down — and how well they slept at night a month later. In some cases it may have sent supers, who were suffering from burnout, over the top in looking for new careers. Dan Jones, well-known and recently retired superintendent at Banyan Golf Club in West Palm Beach, Fla., said, "I talk to superintendents in their 30s who say they won't last another five years." In their cases 1998 could have been the last straw. For superintendents who survived, good news may outweigh the bad this year.

• Agronomy Prof. Ronald Turco, director of Purdue University's Environmental Sciences and Engineering Institute, released a report saying: "In terms of golf course superintendents, what we've shown is that they can use the chemicals without fear of huge negative impact on the environment."

• Working with EcoSoil's Bioject system, Dr. Joseph Vargas of Michigan State University revealed a cure for *poa annua* and strongly hinted at a soon-coming method to kill *poa trivialis*.

"When I got into this business in the 1950s we were talking about how to get rid of *poa annua*. Here we are, 40 years later, talking about how to get rid of *poa*... If this works as well as it appears, it's huge [for the industry]," said Vargas about the natural, biological control *Xanthomonas campestris*.

statistics showing Michigan, with 64 courses under construction, was second only to California with 71 courses under construction.

Michigan topped the nation in 1996 and 1997 in NGF under-construction numbers. It also led the country in 1997 with 34 openings. With last year's openings, Michigan has 906 courses. Only Florida with 1,170, and California, 942, have more.

Can you believe just a few short years ago we were referring to Michigan as the buckle in the middle of "The Rust Belt"? If you listened to most of the so-called "experts," Michigan was ready to plunge into a permanent economic dormancy. The doom-and-gloomers were having a financial field day writing and speaking about the Midwest apocalypse. Now the state is leading the country in golf course and new car production. That's it. I'm swearing off prophets of doom forever.

An October story described how "A man died on the 13th hole of Colonial Charters [in Myrtle Beach, S.C.] golf course when he and his wife apparently were struck by lightning."

Horry County Coroner Robert Edge said the couple initially left the course for the clubhouse at the first sign of bad weather, but returned after the first threat passed. When the weather threatened again, the couple hid in a wooded area instead of trying to make it back to the clubhouse or a safer area, Edge said. The man died, though his wife survived.

With everything that's been written about the danger of lightning on golf courses the past few years, I'm always amazed when I read stories like this. But on a recent business trip to Palm Springs, the members of my foursome played out the last three holes at Rancho Las Palmas rather than running for cover the minute we saw lightning. Was it a "macho" thing? Was it a "That would never happen to me" thing? Yeah, you're right. We were just plain dumb.



Mark Leslie,
managing editor

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