

The golf industry's wild, wild ride



Michael Levans,
editor

The question I was most frequently asked on the show floor was the exact same question we ask each other here in the GCN editorial office at least once a week — how long can the golf course industry continue on this wild development ride?

I answered with a shoulder shrug and a faint smile, "I don't see it ending any time soon."

Our office is bombarded daily basis by every form of media available with news of new projects, groundbreaking and plans "hot off the drawing board." At the show, which offers us the old-fashioned medium of cocktail-party banter, I was told by some of the design game's biggest hitters that their offices have never been so busy.

One architect in particular told me that January was the biggest month for new business his office has ever seen...ever. When I posed the burning question he cocked his head and smiled, "I hope it goes forever."

- On a somewhat related note, I was happy to see a number of The First Tee banners fly high above the booths. It seems that the organization hasn't wasted an opportunity to spread the word about its mission of bringing golf to the inner-city to grow participation. Granted, it has its naysayers, but GCN isn't one of them. This program was too long in coming.

Two bits of required reading this month if you're interested in keeping the golf course architects busy into the next century: Mark Leslie's cover story on The First Tee project in Richmond, which was up against some ridiculous opposition, and Trevor Ledger's piece (page 13) on the emergence of "golf courts" in the UK. Play a regulation-length 18 holes in 15 acres? Give it a look.

- High technology continues to creep its way into the superintendent's worklife. John Deere and Toro were proudly highlighting their new GPS affiliations and exactly what it could mean for the future of the business.

As you've read in this column before, I believe that this advanced technology is going to grind ahead ever so slowly, persistently, until it's sitting in the shed or on the desk of every superintendent in the country. What did I hear at the show?

Robotic mowers? You bet. Integrated systems tying together ever facet of your golf operation from tee times to tee box fertilizer application rates? Yes. Real-time information from every piece of equipment you have on the course downloading to your CPU in order to give you a minute-by-minute update of what it's costing you to maintain your course? It's being done.

Never say never. High-tech is something that can't be ignored. Don't be left out.

- One last note: Many of you told us that we don't look a thing like our drawings (above). This might be the last time you'll see them.

Saving trees or kids?

The feeling that superintendents are the true environmentalists — and that some activists are either overzealous or mere pretenders — took voice in different, and sometimes surprising, venues at the GCSAA's International Golf Course Conference and Show.

During the Environmental General Session, PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem mentioned a First Tee project that environmental activists were opposing in one city. "The mayor," Finchem related, "said to them, 'You're in here talking about saving a couple of trees. We're talking about saving lives.'"

And Rick Geise, director of marketing for Griffin Industries, which put its thousands of acres at more than 20 locations into the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System, said: "Quite frankly, we've had trouble with environmental groups before. The Sierra Club and others say, basically, that all business is bad. We said, 'How can we be bad? We are, in simplest terms, recycling. We provide jobs and add to the economy, the tax base, everything. But some people say, 'It's got to be bad; we saw steam coming out of your building.'"



Mark Leslie,
managing editor

On the other hand, Geise said Audubon International President Ron Dodson told him, "I drove a car to work today, too. Let's be realistic." Realism. Hum. Interesting thought.

Served up with gusto, here are some other post-partem morsels from the Environmental General Session:

- Executive Vice President Jim Singerling of the Club Managers Association of America said association intends to take the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program facilitywide.

"We want to ensure that the whole facility is covered, not just the golf course," Singerling said. "We will be pushing that initiative over the next 18 months so the public sees the facility as an environmental asset."

- The superintendent is to the golf course what a chef is to a great restaurant, said LPGA Tour Commissioner Jim Ritts.

To which USGA Executive Director David Fay told the audience of superintendents: "You are the chefs. Twenty years ago, too many considered you the short-order cooks."

Ritts added that the LPGA's members acknowledge superintendents' contributions, and tournament winners always thank the course's super. "We think this will raise the level of respect for your profession," he said.

- PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem said the public must be told that "agronomically, these are not [course] conditions that can be continually maintained. It is an enormous amount of pressure on the golf course."

- Asking what to do to provide affordable, accessible golf, PGA of America Executive Director and CEO Jim Awtry said: "I cringe when I hear \$20 to \$25 green fees fits that criteria. I would not have been able to play growing up at the cost in the Midwest..."

"Twelve dollars per round could create some real incremental growth."

- Fay extolled The First Tee program, saying: "The public has embraced the concept. The private sector is lining up. The golf

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SPOTLIGHT ON ASIA

Thai 'fire sale' looks to sell off golf

By ANDREW OVERBECK

BANGKOK, Thailand — In the wake of the failed "fire sale" of non-performing loans Dec. 15, Thailand's Financial Restructuring Authority (FRA) called for a second round of auctioning that is scheduled for March 10.

There are 7,124 business loans worth 231 billion baht (\$US 6.4 billion) up for grabs in this round, including numerous golf courses and country clubs.

The Dec. 15 auction netted just 25.1 percent of the nominal value of assets valued at 156 billion baht (\$4.3 billion) and the golf course tranche did not sell. According to Greg Green of the U.S.-based Pavilion Fund, there are many reasons why the golf courses did not move the first time around.

"The properties were not looking very profitable. And unless you can buy them very cheaply, you won't make your money back for a really, really long time," said Green. Prospective foreign investors realize that golf courses have negative value at the moment due to the cost of upkeep and the fact

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ARTHUR DAVIS 1940-1999

GAINESVILLE, Ga. — Golf course architect Arthur Davis, 59, died on Jan. 31. Mr. Davis was a member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA) since 1974 and was involved in the design and/or construction of over 150 golf courses.

Born in Georgia, Mr. Davis attended Abraham Baldwin College in Tifton where he met ASGCA members Robert Trent Jones Sr., George Cobb and others, who steered Davis to golf course architecture. He received a degree in landscape architecture from the University of Georgia in 1963.

Davis began his career with ASGCA Fellow Willard Byrd, striking out on his own in 1967. In 1970, he formed a partnership with ASGCA member Ron Kirby, which soon included tour golfer Gary Player. In 1973, Davis established his own practice, which continued to be based in Georgia and eventually included his son, Lee.

Most of his work through the years was in the Southern Belt of the United States, from Georgia on the east to New Mexico on the west, but also included Asia, South America, Africa and Europe. His designs include Lake Lanier Island Golf Course (now Stouffer's Pine Isle) in Buford, Ga.; River North in Macon, Ga.; Cartersville Country Club in Cartersville, Ga.; El Paraiso in Marabella, Spain; and Alto Village in Alto, N.M. Mr. Davis is survived by his wife, Joyce, mother LaRue, daughter and son-in-law Cindy and Chris White; son Lee and three grandchildren.

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Ryder Cup prep

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weigh heavily on Spence's mind.

"Whether we acknowledge it or not, golfers always aspire to [have their course] be another Augusta National," Spence said, referring to the Georgia course's "perfect" conditioning. "But, you can play great golf and do a lot less manipulation than what we

do now [for tournaments]."

"The nicest thing that has happened to us," he added, "has been Ben Crenshaw's selection as captain... Ben will be the first to tell you that you don't need hand-mowed fairways, or greens rolling 13 on the Stimpmeter and rough that is 6 inches tall in order to identify the winning team of the Ryder Cup.

"So, we're trying to keep it moderate."

Spence's crews have undertaken a bunker sand replacement program, restoring some bunkers that "had gotten pretty ornery" or had "lost their old character."

But they will not hand-mow the fairways. Greens will roll 10-1/2 to 11 on the Stimpmeter, which is typical for a member-guest tournament at the club. Fairways will be cut a little lower than normal, but not much, perhaps 3/8 inch.

Tees will be cut about the same as usual. And the rough will be cut to 2-1/2 to 3 inches.

"The three of us [Crenshaw, Haigh and Spence] feel it will be best for everyone if we have a fair test, one that is not tricked up, and that no one feels we tricked up," Spence said. "Moreso for the spectators, who don't really want to see a great player in rough where he can't even see the golf ball just chop

it back onto the fairway.

"The Country Club is a second-shot golf course with long par-4s. The second shot is the essence of the game—how close you get to the hole on our small greens, which average only 2,800 square feet. And, if we don't give a player a chance, from a spectating point of view, that's going to take some of the fun out of the Ryder Cup."

Whereas, Seve Ballesteros in Spain and Lanny Wadkins in America have in the past tried to create conditions for their teams to win, Spence said: "We feel that in the Ryder Cup, the site can't be a factor. It can't be any less neutral a site than a Final Four [in college basketball], or a Super Bowl. In the U.S. Open it's a big factor; the golf course is right in the middle of it all. In the Ryder Cup, you don't want to be able to say the course affected the outcome, because this is team against team."

While corporate tents are lifted up and fewer members of the general public than at other events cheer for their respective teams, Spence said that in one way the Ryder Cup will epitomize all that is right with golf.

"With all the money we have coming into this event," he said, "these players don't get anything. This is all about spirit, pride and winning."

Leslie comment

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associations have seized on something that can have a substantial impact."

Elsewhere, in an engaging session by members of the American Society of Golf Course Architects:

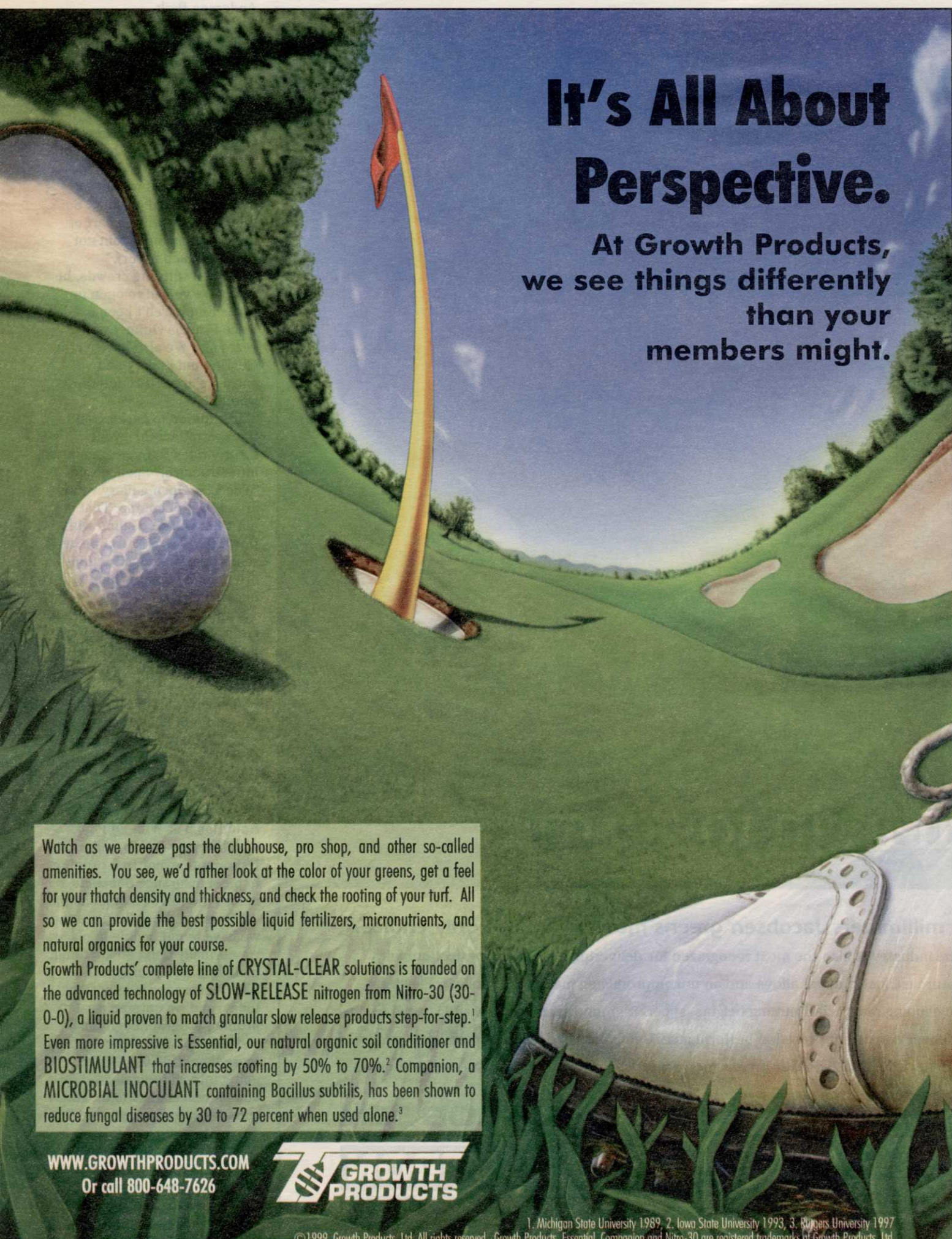
- In a friendly debate with design partner Dana Fry about \$1 million versus \$10 million golf courses, Mike Hurdzan asked: "For every \$1 million invested, you need to charge \$10 in greens fees. Which is better for golf: 10 \$1 million courses with \$15 greens fees, or one \$10 million course with \$150 greens fees?"

- Ed Seay, president of Arnold Palmer Golf Design, told the world who are the most important people in golf development, and it is none of any of the above names. Nor is it any of the great players, nor of anyone you and I know by name. Who is it?

"The person who decides permits," Seay said.

- Course designer Damian Pascuzzo added: "Sometimes it costs hundreds of thousands of dollars just to find out if you have a viable project. That's what environmental activism has done."

But the clincher came from the ever-succinct Seay, who said that if you're building in Arkansas "just lie about it and you'll get away with it."



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