COMMENTARY

Bringing limited-budget facilities into GCSAA fold is key to growth

By DAVID FEARIS

Most people run for the board with the idea of one day being president. From day one, you are being groomed for the position, so to speak. The president gives you committee responsibilities and you are in the loop on everything right from the start.

The Professional Development Initiative, for instance, began under Paul's [McGinnis] regime. That and other issues have taken up a lot of my time, as they will for [incoming President] Scott Woodhead. It's not like you come on as president and have your own agenda and that's it.

But if I had one thing I really wanted to see make some progress during my presidency, it was what's been called the Limited Budget Facility Program.

Right now 55 percent of superintendents nationwide are members of GCSAA. If you talk to other associations, they say that 55 percent of the market is pretty good.

Of the 45 percent of superintendents who aren't members, most work at limited-budget courses. Many are nine holes. Many are municipal.

My interest in those courses goes back to when I was a sales rep with The Scotts Co. Many of my accounts were limited-budget courses. I got to know the people at those facilities and gained a deep appreciation for their ability to do more with less.

Superintendents at limited-budget courses may not have a lot of money for fairways, but their greens are usually unbelievably good. You can put them up against any course. The superintendents are often very innovative and have a lot to offer.

So we formed a resource committee that first met in May 1999 with the idea of finding ways to get the superintendents at these courses more involved with both their local chapters and the national association. There were some non-members on the committee, which was a break with tradition. And there were owners, some whose superintendents were GCSAA members and some whose superintendents weren't. We brought them together in Lawrence [Kan.] and asked "What can we do to bring these people into the fold?"

There are three things that come up when you ask people why they aren't members of an association: time, money and clique-ness.

Time should never be an excuse. What's the old adage? "If you want something done, ask a busy person." When I was at Scotts I'd get that excuse from limited-budget course superintendents. I couldn't believe they didn't have the time to learn more about the business where they made their living.

As for the money, they'd say something like, "The club won't pay for me to belong."

"Well, did you ask?" I responded.

"They'd just say 'no' if I did," they'd reply.

Well, I'd go to meet with their employer, explain the benefits of belonging to GCSAA or the local chapter, and the owner would usually sign them up. One club even wrote it into the superintendent's contract that he had to go to the local meetings. He loved it once he got there.

But the thing that is the toughest to deal with is the perception, sometimes accurate unfortunately, that there is a clique. "That's for the metropolitan, high-budget country clubs and I just don't

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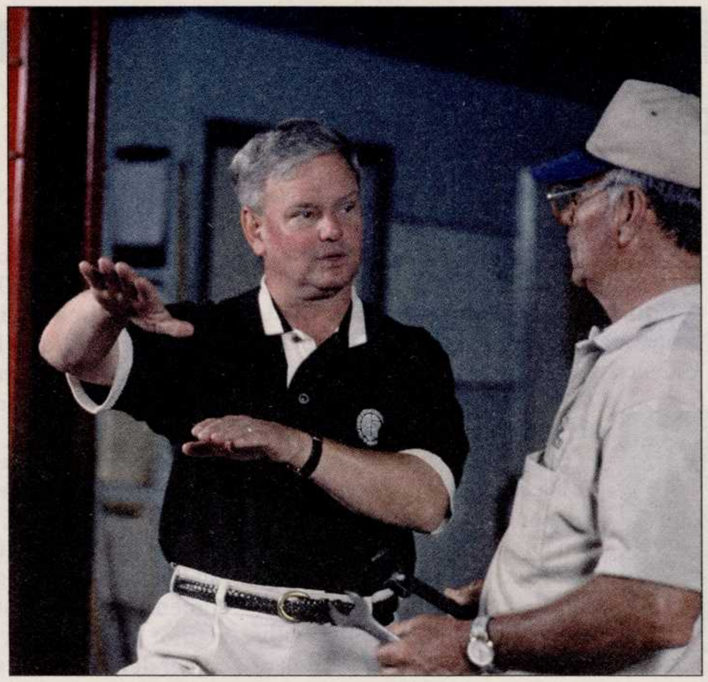
David Fearis is head superintendent of Blue Hills Country Club in Kansas City, Mo., and outgoing president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. He will continue on the GCSAA board of directors for the next year as immediate past president.



GCSAA outgoing President David Fearis (left).

New president says technology to change GCSAA

By PETER BLAIS

The "techno-president" is how incoming Golf Course Superintendents Association of America President Scott Woodhead believes he'll be remembered. "We'll try to make as much use of technology as we can to better serve our members," promised the 44-year-old head superintendent of Valley View Golf Club in Bozeman, Mont.

"There are some real possibilities with today's technology of doing some alternative distant learning that may allow us to reach the superintendent at the limited-budget course who doesn't have a lot of travel money but may have the time to put a CD-ROM into the computer and do a self-study course or tune into a video conference in the shop. We have an online class now and we'd like to continue to develop those."

Other changes will likely result from GCSAA's Professional Development Initiative (PDI), such as the revamping the association's educational program, Woodhead said.

"Right now our education is based on seminar, person-to-person group instruction," he said. "We're looking at alternatives, whether it be CD-ROM, videoconferencing, Internet, or correspondence courses.

"We're going from having instructors teach what they think students need to know to having the

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fit in," the low-budget superintendent would say.

The limited-budget initiative is a way to overcome that perception of cliquesh-ness. It is sort of a chapter outreach program.

As chapter members and local distributors you know the limited-budget facilities in your areas. Identify the superintendents at those courses. Then make a telephone call, or better yet, a personal visit. You do that and you break the barrier of the clique. You invite them to the meetings and maybe waive the chapter dues for a year, if that's what it takes to get them to come to the meetings. GCSAA is giving its chapters a free membership to award to a course that is identified through this limited-budget initiative. We waive the dues and hopefully the chapter does the same.

You make the new superintendent feel at home. You remember how you felt when you went to that first meeting? You didn't know anybody. You had no idea who you were going to play golf with. So, instead of playing in your regular foursomes, you put this new person in your group. You follow this up by offering advice if they mention a problem they are having at their course. Maybe you stop by their club for a visit. And let them know GCSAA will follow up with any information it has that may help them.

Hopefully they'll see that the local chapter is helping them and consider attending the national conference and show.

It goes back to this affordable, accessible golf the whole industry is stressing. The growth of the game won't occur solely at the $175 green-fee facilities. Somewhere there has to be a place where women, kids, minorities and Generation X-ers can go, learn the game and not pay an arm and a leg for it. Limited-budget facilities are where this can happen. I'll bet 90 percent of superintendents can trace their roots back to facilities like these, either playing or working. If the game and out industry is going to grow, it's going to happen largely at these limited-budget courses.

MacCurrach

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overloading the capacity of the company," MacCur-rach said. "I tell our clients and architects we are a good five-job company. If we have guys on five different sites, we're good. If we have guys on six different sites, we're not so good, we're okay. If we get stretched to where we are finishing one and starting one, and we get some overlap where we have guys at seven different locations, we're not a good company.

"Growth-wise, we've been extremely controlled. My nightmare would be to get a telephone call from an owner someday saying, 'We're not getting enough production from this.' I just never get those calls.

"We don't bid a lot of work. If we show up at a bid meeting, it's because we want the job. I don't throw in a bunch of complimentary bids. Our batting average on bids is pretty good because we don't bid a lot of jobs. We have a lot of negotiated work coming our way. Some of these architects are starting to lean toward us on some of their nicer jobs. That's a blessing."

MacCurrach has never set goals in terms of total revenues or employees. At the end of each year, he said, he meets with his accountant and is always amazed at how much money the firm has made.

"We've always focused on the journey and not the destination," he said. "We don't have a five-year or 10-year plan around here... If I lose a bunch of people, I'll take on less work. Our capacity of personnel drives the volume of work we do. We'll never overextend the capacity of this company."

GDC

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"We're at a comfortable size for us right now," Miller said. "We can run up to 90 employees and as many as four full-time jobs. We don't want to get much bigger. That way we can retain hands-on control. When the architect's on site, I want to be there, too."