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AU REVOIR, STEVE

T rue to form, Steve Mona called me exactly at the appointed time of our scheduled call. I'm sure he's been late for things during his 14 years at the helm of the GCSAA, but I've never witnessed it.

He's doing his farewell tour with the media and the GCSAA's various constituencies before he moves on to bigger – or at least new and better paying – things this spring. I'm sure you've read or will read several articles in which he recaps his time in Lawrence. It's a no-brainer topic for those of us in the media.

So I contacted him to get a different take on his transition from the world of turf to the World Golf Foundation. As usual, despite me not always being a cheerleader for everything the association does, he obliged me willingly. I was certain he'd have prepared notes for our call. I also knew that he'd have three things in mind. Having three talking points is, perhaps, Steve's trademark.

A little history: I knew Steve before he moved to the Emerald City in 1994 to take the reins of a troubled association for which I had then worked for seven years. I met him at various golf events in his role as head of the Georgia State Golf Association. All I knew before that was I liked him. He was smart and looked like Opie from Mayberry.

The GCSAA was going through a tumultuous transition at the time. The previous c.e.o., John Schilling, was on his way out. John was a good man who'd taken an association on the verge of bankruptcy, legal peril and general calamity and built it into a quite respectable and profitable middle-size player in the industry. Unfortunately, he had worn out his welcome, and the board was seeking a replacement.

I'll never forget the weekend of the contentious and bizarre first-ever chapter delegates meeting at the fancy new headquarters building in Lawrence. I was the only staff member allowed in the building – and that was just to give tours to delegates – and I was hiding up in my office trying to ignore the hollering and harrumphing oc-

curing downstairs. All of the sudden, I saw someone familiar walking by my office with a couple of GCSAA board members. It was Steve Mona. The proverbial lightbulb went off over my head, and I realized a new era had begun. That new era included:

- A much more buttoned-down, business-like atmosphere;
- Growth from 70 employees to a high-water mark of more than 120 employees;
- Commensurate growth, then leveling off, of revenues and membership;
- An emphasis on chapters and their needs;
- The evolution of the GCSAA Show to the GIS;
- Massive expansion of the GCSAA's foundation, now called the Environmental Institute for Golf; and

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• A governance transition from the board/committee-driven model that started in 1994 (which was killing the jobs of many volunteer leaders) to a staff-driven model with metrics and benchmarks.

But, the era included several challenges:

- Awkward relationships with the industry that pays the bills for its operations;
- Increased competition from independent magazines and decreased spending on marketing by manufacturers;
- Turnover among the staff, particularly the sales and marketing group that fuels the operations of the association; and
- An ongoing sense the staff remains insulated from the real world of the rank-and-file members.

But when we talked a few weeks ago, instead of reviewing the collective organizational accomplishments or shortcomings of his tenure, I asked Steve what he felt most proud of in terms of his personal leadership. Predictably, he talked about three things:

First, the association's stature within the golf community: "It has improved dramatically. It's gratifying to see the respect the association commands now and how that's helped how our members are perceived. I've said it a million times – a rising tide lifts all boats."

Second, the way the staff relates to members: "We have 110 people who get up every day thinking how they can help members. When I go to a superintendent gathering, 99 percent of comments are about how great the staff is and how responsive they are."

Third, successfully recruiting major figures from outside the golf course maintenance industry: "We were able to look outside and find people (Greg Norman, Herb Kohler, etc.) who were very interested in what we were trying to accomplish and were eager to help. The fact that we now have so many friends from so many walks of life throughout the golf world is gratifying."

Steve is the last person to claim his time at the GCSAA was perfect. The last several years – he was challenged to meet the board-mandated benchmarks and began to explore other job opportunities – probably weren't comfortable. But the organization stabilized, grew, matured and prospered under his leadership. Every member benefited from that.

He'll be at the Golf Industry Show to cap off his farewell tour, but his successor might not be named by then. He frets a little about causing a hiccup in continuity of management even though he gave the board six-months notice. Nonetheless, he seems ready to go.

"It's the right time for someone else to come in with new ideas and reenergize things," he says. "That said, a huge part of my heart will always be with the GCSAA and our members."

And part of ours will always be with you, Steve. Thanks ... and au revoir. **GCI**