

INDUSTRY VETERANS DISCUSS CHANGE NEEDED FOR THE FUTURE OF THE GOLF BUSINESS

BY MARGARET HEPP

It's been 20 years since Bill Aragona, vice president of the National Golf Course Owners Association, manned the pro shop, but on a Friday morning this past April, Aragona arrived at his Boulder Creek (Calif.) Golf and Country Club to find customers lined up outside and no staff in sight. Aragona jumped into action, using paper tee sheets until the regular crew arrived.

"I guess I still have it," he says. "I'm fired up right now. I'm a people person. That's why I got in the business. I like being out in front."

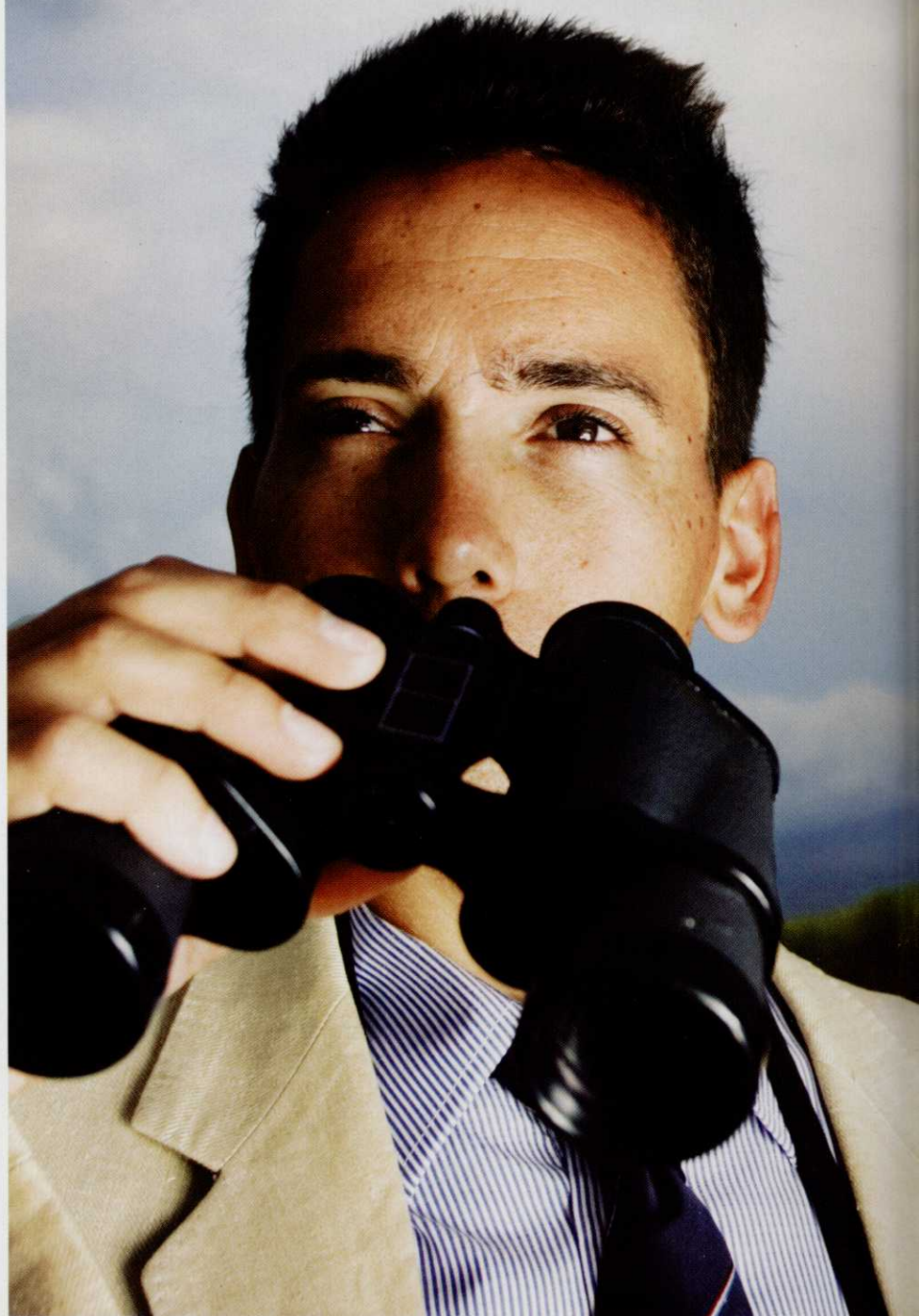
Aragona is one of countless industry veterans who've fallen prey to an evolving industry, working 60-plus hours a week, many of those behind a desk. It hasn't always been this way. Technological advances of course equipment and management tools haven't quite caught up to the burden placed on courses by advances in the game itself. It's tempting to scrutinize past mistakes and insufficient resources, but the pertinent question now is where to go from here? Time, cost and labor have been pushed to the extreme. Rounds are down. Most superintendents can't possibly work more hours. Will course technology catch up with demand in the next 20 years? Will courses themselves get longer? Browner? Drier?

Golf is a \$76 billion industry in the U.S. – \$2 billion more than the motion picture industry and \$25.8 billion more than the newspaper



Internet marketing is the key to golf course success, says Bill Aragona, vice president of the NGCOA.

LOOKING AHEAD



industry – and is growing at 4.1 percent per year. It impacts 2 million jobs and \$61 billion in wages, according to the Golf Economy Report commissioned by Golf 20/20. With a total economic impact close to \$200 billion, golf is a cornerstone of American leisure, but its caretakers – golf course superintendents, managers and owners – can only do so much to keep the game on track. Considerable changes, some long overdue, need to be implemented during the next 20 years if the industry wants to secure a successful future.

THE PRICE IS RIGHT

Twenty years from now, half of the golf in the U.S. will be played by retirees, says Jim Koppenhaver, founder and president of Pellucid Corp., a marketing firm for golf professionals.

“The thing we keep telling our clients is they’re giving discounts to all those seniors, so as fewer seniors play more rounds, there’s a huge lookout on the revenue line,” Koppenhaver says. “The number of rounds at a facility might be up, but it might actually be making less money.”

The age qualification for full retirement and

social security increases every year. By 2028, it’ll be near 70, Koppenhaver says.

“You need to be smart about your senior rates,” he says. “You’re not going to be able to give all these guys the full benefit at the earliest possible age.”

The challenge is to keep current golfers in the game and to price rounds in a way that’s appealing to the customer and profitable to the course. Koppenhaver and Joe Beditz, Ph.D., president and c.e.o. of the National Golf Foundation, emphasize the need for prices that won’t knock players in the \$35,000 to \$50,000 income range out of the market.

“Successful golf courses manage their prices to allow people who need lower prices to play at times that don’t hurt their business,” Beditz says.

NET PROFIT

With increased competition among courses and clubs, it’s essential to get the word out about your facility. Just how important is marketing? Beditz puts it this way: “My son asks the dentist if it’s important to floss his teeth. The dentist answers,

only the ones you want to keep.”

With golf, it’s all about the long-term payoff. Aragona relies on Internet marketing to keep his course at Boulder Creek alive and well.

“We’re neophytes, but we’re learning as we go,” he says. “We’ve built up our database to 3,000 or 4,000 people, and when we throw stuff out to them, they react. We’re using a third-party booking service, which features our golf course now. It opens us up to many more people, maybe half a million golfers in our area. The traditional print marketing isn’t the bang for the buck it was before.”

Aragona used to publish print coupons, but he’s found specials on the Web are easy to track and eliminate busywork.

“Of course, I can only speak for myself, but we’ve had pretty good success with it,” he says. “The Internet is changing the way America does business.”

GREEN MILES

One thing is certain about course length: Few industry professionals are in favor of its increase. Doug Carrick, treasurer of the American



With a total economic impact close to \$200 billion, golf is a cornerstone of American leisure, but its caretakers - including Joe Beditz, Ph.D., president and c.e.o. of the NGF; Jim Fitzroy, CGCS, at the Presidents Golf Club in North Quincy, Mass.; Bob Pinson, president of the GCBAA; and Mike Kenna, Ph.D., director of research for the USGA Green Section - can do only so much to keep the industry on track.

Society of Golf Course Architects and founder of Toronto firm Carrick Design, believes even architects would like to see a ceiling imposed on course yardage, but he acknowledges it's a formidable challenge.

"It's a tricky thing to do," he says. "Once players have a club or a ball that goes 20 yards farther, how do you take it away? We need to get all the minds in the golf industry together, including the manufacturers, and make them understand."

It should become easier to make golf courses shorter, considering the impact of course length on the industry.

"We're using more land to build golf courses," Carrick says. "We're stretching yardage well over 7,000, even though the average person is playing in the 6,200- or 6,300-yard range. That means it's taking five and six hours to play golf instead of four."

Bob Pinson, president of the Golf Course

Builders Association of America and founder of Course Crafters, also favors shorter courses, especially to shorten the time it takes to play. He encourages industry professionals to protest increasing course length.

"As builders, we're going to have to start shouting wherever we go," Pinson says. "That's what the GCBA is trying to do. It's got to come from the architects. I'm not trying to put the monkey on their backs. We're all in this together. But they're still looking for clients, and the clients are telling them what they want."

Regardless of course length, Jim Fitzroy, CGCS, at the Presidents Golf Club in North Quincy, Mass., and GCSAA board member, takes pride in the industry's ability to retain open green space – a position that comes with great responsibility.

"We have a wonderful message to tell," he says: "The land area of golf courses in this country is equal to the land area of the state of

Delaware and the state of Rhode Island, so we've preserved a vast amount of green space. We just need to make sure we're the best possible managers of that space."

CONDITIONED FOR CHANGE

Changes in course conditioning will be a crucial part of the future, says Mike Kenna, Ph.D., director of research for the USGA Green Section.

"As far as playability, the golf course will be just as fun and challenging," he says. "It's going to be a firmer surface than what we play on today. That's primarily going to be because of how we manage water in the future."

Kenna believes the trend will be to maintain healthy turfgrass with adequate moisture.

"Right now, golf courses are generally well-watered to overwatered," Kenna says. "Golf courses aren't going to be as lush and soft as they are today."

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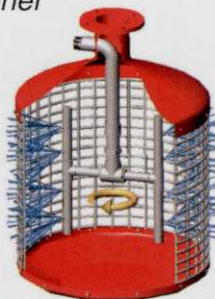
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golf courses in North America and those in Europe.

“In North America, golfers have come to expect perfect conditions and lush green golf courses, but it’s certainly different when you travel overseas to the U.K. and parts of Europe,” he says. “There’s a different approach

and attitude toward maintenance and playing conditions, which are every bit as good, maybe even better. The courses tend to be a little drier, a little browner – and the ball rolls. We’ve lost that in North America in the way we maintain and irrigate our golf courses.”

Carrick admits browner courses require an

aesthetic adjustment, but he believes there’s no sacrifice when it comes to the quality of play.

“We’re used to highly manicured courses, lush and green and beautiful,” he says. “In the U.K., courses look a little more rugged and not as well maintained, but from a play standpoint, they still play well. It’ll be interesting to see if golfers in North America can accept that style of golf course. We’ll see it 20 years from now.”



INNOVATION IN HYDRATION

Kenna predicts the amount and quality of water available for golf courses is going to be reduced in the future. More recycled waste water, as treated effluent or sewage effluent, will be used.

“Those are the two water sources that we’re going to have available for golf courses,” he says. “It’ll be a necessity, but this’ll happen slowly during the next 20 years.”

Carrick sees water as the biggest area of opposition to new golf course development. He’s seen much more storm and effluent water recycling.

“We’ll continue to see less reliance on water in new course development,” he says.

The conservative mindset is new to many in the industry. When Pinson started Course Crafters in 1992, the sky was the limit when it came to executing golf course designs. Pinson, whose company is headquartered in Georgia, has seen monumental changes since then in the way water is used. He believes regulations will only become more stringent during the next 20 years. He says televised tournaments at courses such as Augusta National influence what members think they should see on their own courses, but such conditions are unnecessary for everyday play. Pinson hopes to see a change in the future.

“You’re going to see irrigation designers, and irrigation design, more geared toward saving water,” he says. “If you go back to when the game started, it didn’t even have irrigation. If it’s not a playable area, it doesn’t need to be plush. If you hit your ball over in an area where the grass is knee-deep and there isn’t any irrigation, it means you’re not supposed to be over there.”

In Georgia, as well as in other states throughout the country, regulations prohibit golf courses from watering anything but tees and greens. This is a step in the right direction for the industry,

Even golf course architects want to see a cap placed on course length, says Doug Carrick, secretary of the ASGCA.



Jim Koppenhaver, president of Pellucid Corp., emphasizes the industry's need to keep current players in the game and increase their rounds.

WORTH ITS SALT

Another change in the future is that the overall tolerance of turfgrass species to salt will increase. Kenna says that's primarily because the water available for irrigating golf courses is going to have more salt in it. The management of golf courses will require grasses with a better salinity tolerance, and golf course superintendents will have to do a better job of managing salts in the soil.

"Anything we can do to provide turfgrass species that at least have better salinity tolerance is a must, and it's something our research funding goes toward," he says.

Seashore paspalum and inland saltgrass are two species the USGA has researched because of their excellent salt tolerance. It's also working

to increase the salt tolerance of bentgrass, creeping ryegrass, Kentucky bluegrass, Bermudagrass and zoysiagrass.

"It's a little easier to find a species with excellent salt tolerance and then try and domesticate that, but those species aren't going to work everywhere in the U.S., so we have to work with the other turfgrass species also and increase their salt tolerance," Kenna says. "We have projects that deal with every turfgrass species on golf courses, and we're trying to increase the salinity tolerance of all of them."

LOOKING AHEAD

For many in the industry, it's difficult to imagine working under present conditions for the next 20 years. But with the help of technology, research, the proper tools, a good marketing strategy and a little luck, golf course managers will navigate successfully through the next 20 years with a profitable business. **GCI**

Pinson says.

"It's a win-win," he says. "Is it going to be as plush as a PGA Championship course, or The TPC or Augusta National? No. But if you can pay \$20 to play there instead of \$100, those are the kinds of things that benefit everybody. It benefits the environment, and we've still got water to drink."



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