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EXCELLENT ORLANDO ADVENTURE

A few weeks ago, I was standing in line at the Orlando Convention Center waiting to pick up my GIS media badge when I felt a tap on my shoulder and was a bit shocked to find my old friend Bubba standing there with a silly grin on his face.

Bubba, as you may recall, is a down-to-earth, grass-growin', tractor-hat wearin', tobacky-chewin' throw-back superintendent. He's the kind of guy who's happier tearing apart a Cushman engine or back-lapping reels than donning his clip-on tie and going to a bunch of seminars at the big show. Bubba is, in a word, a caveman. But he's a world-class caveman with a Midas touch when it comes to turf.

"What the heck are you doing here?" I asked incredulously. I knew he'd never been to a national show before.

"Gotta get my certification," he replied while fumbling with his clip-on tie. "The new wife thinks I'd be more respectable with them extra letters behind my name."

"How many 'new wives' is that now?" I asked.

"She's number four, but I think she's really the one this time. She wants to get herself ... er, enhanced ... and the procedure ain't cheap. The club said they'd bump my pay if I got certified, so I'm one certification-motivated sumbitch."

Bubba looked me over, and I could see the gears turning in his head. "Jonesy, what the heck do you do at these GIS shows?" he asked warily. "You probably go to all sorts of press conferences the companies hold and try to dig up stories to write for those magazines, right?"

"Well, not quite," I replied.

"So you're exhibiting in one of the booths?"

"Not exactly."

"Oh, then you're attending a bunch of seminars to learn more about agronomy, right?"

"I gave up on trying to pretend I was a turfhead years ago, Bubba."

"OK, so what the heck are you doing here?"

"Observing," I proclaimed.

"So you aren't really doing anything except hanging out, talking to people and waiting for someone to buy drinks?"

"Correct," I replied. "Care to join me?"

Thus, Bubba decided to blow off all his seminars and became my first-ever show intern, essentially observing how I observe. Here are a few things we observed together as we wandered around the 2008 GIS in Orlando:

Within minutes of leaving the registration area, we bumped into Steve Mona, the soon-to-be-former c.e.o. of the GCSAA. Steve and I had a nice chat, and Bubba awkwardly shook his hand. Once Steve excused himself, Bubba asked me why a great guy like Steve was leaving the national.

"Because he's done what he can in Lawrence, and it's time for him to move on," I said.

Bubba looked puzzled: "Why would he give up a cool job like that?"

"Because 14 years as the head of a national association is like 28 years as the superintendent at the same facility," I replied. "You run out of ideas and, more importantly, you run out of political capital. When the board members who hired you are all gone, it's time to think about moving on. Oh, and the PGA Tour is going to pay him a heckuva lot of money to run this World Golf Foundation thing."

Bubba smiled and nodded, definitely understanding that last part.

Next, my new intern and I wandered onto the show floor. Bubba immediately started collecting his stuff – little green basketballs, orange and green golf caps and booth swag of every imaginable sort. Once we'd walked around for a while, I asked him how many of these companies he actually bought things from for his golf course.

"A few," he said. "Mostly I buy stuff from local people my area that I know and trust. If they recommend it, I'll usually try it."

Hmmm ... I thought as I looked around at the hundreds of booths staffed by hopeful but often clueless salespeople ... maybe the intern can teach the jaded old veteran something after all.

As we walked, I asked Bubba what he thought about Orlando. "Nice weather, plenty of stuff for families, but kinda hard to get around," he said. I told him the show was in New Orleans next year. "Isn't the city still underwater?" he asked with concern. "Parts are still pretty screwed up, but the French Quarter and Bourbon Street are back and better than even," I said. "Count me in, then," Bubba said. "It'll be my contribution to the city's recovery. So, is there anything fun to do in New Orleans?" I just smiled and told him to meet me at the intersection of Bourbon and Bienville a year from now, and I might be able to show him a few interesting places.

After a long day of "observing" and meandering around the trade show, we decided it was time to relax and visit a few of the evening hospitality events. There were plenty of corporate parties to go to – mostly sort of stuffy affairs held in hotel ballrooms – but the real fun was at the big chapter receptions. After taking a series of trains, taxis, helicopters, monorails and ox carts, Bubba and I successfully managed to find and crash parties for the California, Florida, Ohio, Carolinas and Wisconsin chapters.

As we sat at our last event of the night, I decided to test my not-so-young intern: "Bubba, why do these chapter events feel different than all the other ones we've been to tonight?"

The big man pondered for a minute. Then, as if a sunbeam had broken through the clouds, he cracked a broad smile, yanked off his clip-on tie and threw it high in the air before exclaiming, "Because it's like being in their family, Jonesy!"

I realized my intern had become wise beyond his experience. "You've passed the test, grasshopper. Get yourself another beer, and tell them it's on your wife's plastic surgeon." **GCI**