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A TALE OF TWO C.E.O.S

It was with much pomp and fanfare the GCSAA announced the selection of a new c.e.o. – Mark Woodward – a few weeks ago. And, on almost the same day – in a few terse sentences – it announced the passing of one of Woodward’s predecessors. Both of these occurrences merit further discussion, and neither is as simple as it seems. Let’s start with the present before we delve into the past.

Woodward is a great guy. He’s done it all professionally and is about to host the U.S. Open before he completely assumes the reins of the GCSAA. As a top-flight municipal golf manager, he brings a different perspective to the historically club-centric association. He also might help stir more interest in West Coast issues within a staff that’s always had a bit of an East Coast/Midwest bias. He knows the politics of the board and chapter delegate system intimately. Unlike previous executives, he doesn’t face a steep learning curve about agronomy and the business of golf. He has the potential to be a very effective lobbyist because he can speak credibly and realistically about practices and products. He’s an excellent choice for many reasons.

But (and you knew there was a “but” coming, didn’t you?), as uniquely qualified as he might be for the job, he’s also uniquely challenged. Here’s a mix of my concerns and those of superintendents I’ve talked with:

- From volunteer leader to chief executive, he’s now a staff member serving at the pleasure of a board that still has several members over whom he once presided. Everyone who presides over a board will have personal baggage with other board members, chapter delegates, influential members and maybe even key staff. Will that political baggage hinder his effectiveness for the next four or five years?

- You don’t advance to the top of the political pyramid without having strong opinions about what’s right and wrong for the association. However, the role of the c.e.o. is to manage the process and gently guide

the board. Woodward won’t be a member anymore. Now, he’ll work for the members. Will he be able to resist the temptation to say, “I used to be your president, and here’s what we should do”?

- Steve Mona came in as a golf administrator already known and admired by other national golf association executives. Woodward comes in as a ... well, as a superintendent. I have to wonder if other allied leaders are shaking their heads in puzzlement at this choice. Mona’s biggest contribution to the association was the credibility he gave the greenkeepers in the larger golf industry. Some members I’ve talked with believe this is a step backwards.

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Honestly, I wish Mark the best. His biggest assets are a first-rate staff, a highly profitable trade show and a good policy infrastructure with plenty of standard operating procedures. But (there’s that word again), the GCSAA needs a strong administrator if it wants to progress to a new level within the industry. Can any former superintendent and past president do that? We shall see.

Now, let us turn to John M. Schilling.

There are probably younger readers who’ve never heard his name before. But even among older readers, Schilling and his time running the association largely have been forgotten – and intentionally redacted by the association. Read the association’s official history. There’s a big, gray, decade-long hole before Mona arrived to save the day. So I guess I’m writing this for posterity because the GCSAA sure as hell won’t.

John was a passionate, funny, intense man who worked his ass off for the association. He started as a photographer (back when cameras had film, and film had to be developed) in the ’70s. He worked his way up through public relations and magazine roles (at a time when there were only 15 or 20 people on staff). When he assumed the “executive director” title in 1983, the association was bankrupt almost, faced a chaotic legal situation and was on the verge of collapse.

In 10 years, Schilling and a relatively small group of staff built the trade show into one of the nation’s largest; established an education program that’s the envy of associations everywhere; developed programs in PR, lobbying, scholarship and research; and grew overall revenue and membership by percentages that would boggle your mind.

I worked for John from 1987 to 1993, so I’m not unbiased. Let me just say this: His biggest strength was personal loyalty to people who were loyal to him. But that was also his biggest weakness. He remained too loyal to a few individuals among the staff, and it was his downfall.

It was an insular culture of hard work and hard play. We drank, smoked and played politics. It was a cowboy era, and, like the Old West, the rules were different. After a decade of fun, fighting, late nights and risky business, Schilling left because he felt his friends were being mistreated. It was a difficult exit for a good man.

I bumped into him a few times after that. He kept busy in various businesses and enjoyed his semiretirement and family. He honestly held no rancor toward the association for the way he’d been treated at the end. He was at peace with himself and his time at the GCSAA.

I’d always hoped the GCSAA leadership would thaw its frosty stance toward him and officially recognize that his contributions vastly outweighed the speed bumps at the end of his tenure. Unfortunately, John didn’t live to see that day and he died unmourned and unappreciated by the very group he was instrumental in building. What a pity – and a cautionary tale for our new c.e.o. **GCI**