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BUMMED OUT?

For most of my adult life, it's been my habit to wake up early, make a pot of coffee, fire up a Marlboro and read the morning paper from front to back. But lately, it's gotten to the point where I pretty much just read the comics page and the sports section because the rest of the thing just bums me out.

As I write this in late September, we're in the midst of a global financial free fall. Major banks, investment firms and insurance companies are collapsing more dramatically than Greg Norman at the 1996 Masters. The stock market resembles the flight path of a Duncan yo-yo. Hundreds of thousands of jobs are going away, and, as Springsteen sang, they won't be comin' back.

Pump prices are still ludicrous, and who knows what natural gas will cost this winter. An unprecedented number of people face the prospect of losing their homes to foreclosure. Many more of us are discovering the equity we thought we had in our homes just went bye-bye.

We're in the midst of a presidential election that held early promise for rationality but has degenerated into yet another slimy and slanderous exercise focused more on trivial crap (remember "lipstick on a pig" and "sex ed for kindergartners"?) than on the serious, urgent issues we face.

And then, of course, there's the war. Almost 200,000 young men and women are doing their duty in the midst of a godforsaken desert hoping against hope they'll make it through the day without getting blown up by some lunatic.

Finally – at the risk of being trivial myself – there's the state of our humble little industry. Rounds are down or flat. Club memberships are dwindling. Nongolf revenue, such as food-and-beverage and events, are falling, and nobody these days is rushing to the pro shop to buy the latest, greatest \$800 driver.

An unprecedented number of facilities are for sale, in receivership or simply closing up and hoping to sell off the land.

Municipalities are bailing out of golf because they can't justify losing hundreds of thousands of dollars annually on an enterprise-based recreational activity. A ton of courses under management company umbrellas ultimately are owned by the aforementioned investment firms (e.g., Goldman Sachs), and who the hell knows what will happen to them.

To top things off, Tiger's making babies instead of birdies and – sans fist pumping and red shirts on Sunday – the glamour part of our game that engages and attracts many players is as bland as day-old tapioca pudding.

In short, it's easy to be bummed out about our nation and our industry right now.

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As a citizen of this nation, I have my opinions about the economy, politics, the election and the war. I won't bore you with those. But, as a citizen of the golf business, I feel compelled to share my opinions about our situation ... and why, just maybe, there are many reasons not to be too bummed out. So, here's the good news:

- Real estate will bounce back. It's a nearly immutable law that land values and housing prices might wane for a year or two, but eventually they will start to climb again. As goes real estate, so goes real-estate-driven golf.

- A shocking number of people still are playing regularly. The weather is still a far bigger factor in rounds played data than the economy or anything else. Golf is a lifestyle for a huge number of people, and they might be buying used Pro-V1s at Target

instead of new ones at the shop, but they're still playing.

- Check out the October issue of *Golf Digest* for an article that argues there's never been a better time to join a club. It's true. People who've always wanted to join are seeing ground-floor opportunities to become private club members. Smart clubs sense this and are starting to market more aggressively.

- The overall market is slowly correcting itself. By gradually reducing the number of ill-thought-out facilities and poorly operated courses, the market will emerge stronger than before. There's no reason to believe there's a "crash-and-burn" event on the horizon (or, conversely, any huge upswing awaiting us). Even if demand is flat, supply is gradually falling, and we'll eventually get back to par, economically speaking.

- Smart operators will view this climate as an opportunity instead of a problem. As I've said before, when the going gets tough, the tough steal market share. Look for simple opportunities to add value to the golf experience. Get aggressive about direct marketing and media relations within 45 miles of your facility. Create a world-class corporate outing package. Make yourself the premier league location in your area. Emphasize service with your staff. Quit bemoaning the situation, get off your butt and take business away from the competition.

- No Tiger? No problem. Did you see the Ryder Cup? Think the dynamic duo of Anthony Kim and Boo Weekly didn't help us with a couple of important demographics? Anytime we can appeal to Generation Y and the Skoal-chewing fans of the Blue Collar Comedy Tour in one event is a big win for the industry.

We're incredibly fortunate to be in a business that combines the beauty of the outdoors with a compelling and addictive game. We're equally fortunate our business model – even if imperfect at times – is inherently solid. Those who hunker down and wait for things to turn around will survive. Those who take the bull by the horns and manage for growth will thrive. Which path will you take? **GCI**