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THE UPSIDE OF A RECESSION

The day I've been anticipating came on Dec. 31, 2008 – the day I retired. After 36 years at the same golf club, another six years as an undergrad and grad student in turf, and two years as a draftee soldier in the Army, it seemed to be a good time to do so. I've been dreaming for quite a while of an endless string of unstructured days to do as I please.

I'm 62 years old, in good health and have had notebooks full of things I've wanted to do for years. What could be fairer than to hang up my cup cutter at this time?

For the past two years, club officials helped me develop a plan to bring my rewarding career to a close. For more than a decade, my wife and I have worked closely with a financial planner. We had a plan, goals, discipline and the opportunity to be in great shape for retirement. We are savers and have avoided impulse purchases – imagine living in Wisconsin not having a boat or a snowmobile.

Our three children are grown, educated and married. Our house has been paid for. We own our vehicles and don't owe anyone anything. I vote in all elections, keep my lawn mowed, shovel snow from the sidewalks immediately, follow rules and attend church on Sundays.

I was prepared and ready to move on to the next era of my life at a time when others were sort of sorry to see me go rather than wonder how they were going to get rid of me. I was a happy man.

And then the massive economic tsunami hit, seemingly out of nowhere. Few have escaped damage from what has turned out to be a global financial crisis. The Dow is down about 40 percent from its high point in 2007, the country has lost nearly 500,000 jobs a month since September, there's a home mortgage crisis of huge proportions, and the credit markets are in turmoil. The auto companies are hanging on by a thread and asked for an enormous handout from the taxpayers.

These are uncertain times for our coun-

try and downright scary for those who are already retired or, like me, newly retired. My wisecracking brother jabbed me, saying, "You sure know how to pick a prime time to retire!" And yet, at the risk of being called a Pollyanna, I can't help but feel optimistic. I'm sure the beginning of a new year helps, as does a new president. A look at history offers the reassurance I need.

Since my birth in 1946, the U.S. has experienced 10 economic downturns – recessions, if you will – before the current one. Half of them occurred before my first day as a golf course superintendent, Jan. 1, 1973, so I can't relate to them.

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The other five recessions happened during my career, and, honestly, I have only a vague recollection of each one's impact on our golf course budget. Those recessions were in 1973, 1980, 1981, 1990 and 2001. Granted, none were as deep or as severe as the current recession, but it's worth noting each was followed by a period of recovery and expansion that lasted several times longer than the preceding recession. I looked back through my file drawers full of budget data, and in the case of our modest golf club, each year of a recession was indeed followed by budget increases. If history counts for anything, my experience in golf has to offer some consolation.

The real issue today is that the current economic mess comes at a time when golf is already struggling nationally with decreased interest and fewer rounds played. It's a tough environment made worse by the economy.

Predictions are that we'll come out of this in late 2009 or 2010. The optimist will conclude that if we can tough it out for a year or so, we should be in for an extended period of prosperity after that, a time when retirees especially can again enjoy the fruits of their lifelong labor. Let's hope so for golf, too.

There are many positives we can take from our current economy, if willing. Course maintenance can be reduced without reducing the enjoyment or camaraderie for players, at least for the short term. I ask myself every once in a while why we ever mowed fairways seven days a week with baskets and triplex greensmowers. And did we actually need those 25 cards in the timcard rack? There are untold questions like those we can all ask.

Material inputs can be reduced somewhat. There might not be a better time to get golfers to reconsider the definition of quality playing conditions. More careful borrowing, stretching machinery life a little longer, and considering a joint ownership arrangement with other courses of some specialized pieces of equipment could all be helpful. We can remind ourselves there's a difference between what we want and what we need.

Superintendents have proven themselves to be excellent, practical and sensible managers. Put in the circumstances we now face, almost all will come through stronger, savvier and perhaps even more imaginative than in the past.

And from old John Wordsworth comes this poetic advice he offered in 1807:

"The world is too much with us;

late and soon,

Getting and spending,

We lay waste our powers;

Little we see in Nature that is ours;

We have given our hearts away,

A sordid boon!" GCI