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## PLAN C FOR THE GCSAA

One of the highlights of the Golf Industry Show is the celebrity factor. Last year, many attendees were wowed by the appearance of Greg Norman to accept the prestigious and much coveted Old Tom Morris Award. (Many were far more impressed by having the amazing Chris Evert accompany the Shark. My only disappointment was she didn't wear one of those short tennis outfits from her halcyon days in the '70s, but I digress.)

Yet, here in 2009, just when a bruised and battered golf business needs something special to get the industry jazzed about a show in a beaten and broken city, the celebrity "accepting" the major award is neither alive nor famous.

As you've likely heard by now, the most important honor in the profession will be presented this year to Col. John Morley – a guy most of you probably have never heard of – who's been moldering in his grave for 60 years.

It's not that the Little Colonel, as he was nicknamed, doesn't deserve some props. He was an overachieving Ohio greenkeeper and club manager who pulled together a bunch of his buddies from throughout the region to form the first primitive unified association for golf course grass growers. He poked and prodded peers from top private clubs to come to Sylvania (Ohio) Country Club in 1926 to sign off on a charter for a national organization. He was the first president of the association and one of its key leaders for two decades. The grateful members back then gave him two distinguished service awards for his contributions before he floated up to the great maintenance facility in the sky in 1946.

I know this because, for a few years while I was on the GCSAA staff, I was involved vaguely in handing out a specious piece of artwork called the Col. John Morley Award. This thing – an often mediocre painting depicting the outgoing GCSAA past president's favorite hole at "his" golf course – was presented to his employer

(usually a half-drunk green chairman) in gratitude for allowing said past president to put in about 12 billion hours away from the facility over the span of seven or eight years on the national board. The idea was that the deeply appreciative club would display it proudly in its lobby (or, more likely, stick it behind a pile of boxes in the assistant chef's office) in honor of their superintendent's national leadership role.

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The only problem was that, during the past few decades, GCSAA presidents developed a nasty habit of changing jobs – maybe several times – during their tenure on the board. Obviously, this was a considerable downside of serving on the board, and it's been unpleasant for the individuals involved. However inconsequential it might seem in terms of the forced unemployment of several well-known leaders, this trend had one other ironic side effect when it came to the Col. John Morley Award. The uncomfortable question became: Which of the much-traveled past president's former employers should be featured in the painting? Should it be the course he was at for the first three years on the board? Or the one he was at for the next two years? Or the facility he desperately latched onto a couple of weeks before the national conference after he'd decided to "pursue other opportunities" for the third time?

My theory was the award should become the Col. John Morley Memorial Collage of all the past president's previous employers.

You could give the poor sap a composite painting of the two or five or seven different courses he'd worked at while he'd move through the chairs, and he could deliver copies to all of his former bosses. Somehow, this notion didn't go over well with the elected leadership.

Anyway, back to the topic at hand – the most coveted and incredibly prestigious Old Tom Morris Award, which was created in the early '80s to do two things:

1. Lend an air of credibility and celebrity to the event and the profession at large; and
2. Put butts in seats at the incredibly long and often excruciatingly boring annual "gala" that used to cap off conference week way back when.

Thankfully, they don't have the gala anymore, but many are still motivated to sit through the endless opening session to see a famous person accept the award. But, the original rationale still holds true. If a former U.S. president (Gerald Ford), a legendary entertainer (Bob Hope) or the most famous golfer in the universe (Arnold Palmer) was going to show up, the media would cover it, and attendees would skip a trip to the bar for a chance to say they'd been one of a couple thousand or so people who were there when the renowned so-and-so accepted the Old Tom Morris Award.

The problem is that many golf celebrity types usually have better things to do than show up to collect another award and allow their "brand" to be used for free for a group's PR purposes. In short, the number of famous people willing to whore themselves out for nothing has dwindled down to next to zero.

Thus, I'm sure the GCSAA board faced a difficult decision once again: Does it offer the award to some notable who's likely to turn it down, settle for some B-list celebrity who happens to be head-over-heels in love with the game and is willing to come for nothing, or go to plan C – give it to a dead guy who doesn't want money and, most definitely, doesn't have anything better to do?

Looks like it was plan C this year. **GCI**