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FEAR AND SCRIBBLES

For 15 years, I've returned from the Golf Industry Show and penned a column about how my recollections of the event may have been slightly blurred by the copious amounts of beer constantly being handed out and how, usually, I had to spend weeks reconstructing the notes I'd jotted on the back of cocktail napkins, business cards or whatever happened to be at hand. I've always called the piece, "Beer and scribbles."

This year, though the beer was just as plentiful as ever on Bourbon Street and elsewhere around New Orleans, I decided the more appropriate theme was "Fear and scribbles."

For the record, I still scribbled plenty. I came home with hundreds of notes and quotes jotted illegibly on my shirt cuffs, forearms and even the soles of my shoes. Thankfully, my nephew works for the CIA, and he used one of the agency's cryptology supercomputers to decipher my ridiculous scrawls. Here's what I found once my notes and hazy recollections had been translated back to English:

Almost everyone I talked to, from newbie assistants to seemingly well-established superintendents at top 100 courses, expressed some sort of concern about their economic well-being. In short, if I fed anyone a couple of beers, they admitted that they're scared right now. Why?

They're scared because of the general perception golf is in the tank. Everyone says the economic health of the golf industry is lousy, so that must be true, right? They often said they thought even if their facility is OK, golf as an industry is crashing around them.

They're scared because they believe their facility – like so many – is so hopelessly mismanaged they can't possibly survive a downturn. "My GM is an idiot," was one common refrain. "Our owner is close to bankruptcy, and he couldn't care less about what happens to the course," was another.

They're scared because their facility is

tied closely to a particular industry that's really sucking wind (e.g., banking, automotive, etc.) so badly they feel like they're standing on the beach watching, transfixed, as the massive tidal wave of destruction inexorably roars in.

They're scared because the housing development their course anchors is struggling, and the developer is trying to sell lots and spec homes when there are no buyers.

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They're scared because they work for a government entity (city, county, etc.) that's cutting budgets or even trying to dump their money-losing courses. Municipalities have no pity and no particular fondness for red-ink recreation right now.

They're scared because they've grown roots in their current job and have no idea how, or where, to find a new one if things head south.

They're scared because everyone's scared, and no one knows how this thing will come out.

Fear was the predominant theme for the meager 2,900 or so superintendents who came to the Big Easy. I won't even get started about how the suppliers and distributors felt while staring blankly at an empty show floor in the New Orleans Convention Center Friday afternoon and Saturday. Their fear was palpable as they looked around and realized there was no one to sell to.

(One aside: The lack of attendance on Saturday was a fitting funeral for the terminally ill, three-day trade show schedule.

The half-day on Saturday has been on its deathbed for years. Attendees simply couldn't justify wandering around the show that long. Most meandered and saw a few key suppliers for a few hours. Frankly, the last day in New Orleans was the worst I've seen in the 23 shows I've attended. But, hallelujah! Beginning next year, GIS will go to a new schedule that will feature education on Monday and Tuesday, exhibits on Wednesday and Thursday, and education on Friday. The theory is that buyers will stay over and walk the show floor if tempted by good educational offerings on Friday. I'll leave it to you to be the judge of whether or not the new schedule will work.)

This is an appropriate time to quote Franklin Delano Roosevelt: "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." Facilities are failing, but many needed to fail. Most were badly conceived, overfinanced daily-fee facilities or private courses that never came to terms with new competition and the new reality clubs need to operate differently in the 21st century. Don't fear failure, recognize it's an opportunity to position yourself for the future.

Budgets will be cut, but welcome to 2009. Don't fear reality, deal with it.

Jobs will be scarcer, and raises will be few and far in between. The truth is we have oversupplied a finite number of good jobs with far too many good candidates. The fact is we have more people than jobs and more courses than golfers. Welcome to Darwinian golf ... survival of the fittest courses and the fittest superintendents. Don't fear the challenge, embrace it.

Whether or not the GIS was a success isn't the issue. The real point is you can't let fear dictate your career and life. Now's the time to take action to ensure you're not a victim. If you allow yourself to be crippled by the idea something bad may happen to your facility or career, it surely will.

One of the last things I scribbled on a cocktail napkin during a "research" trip down Bourbon Street on the last night of the show was, "Who wins? Who loses?" All I can do is ask those questions. It's up to you to answer them ... fearlessly. GCI