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DEFINING NORMAL

Every February for 24 years, I've jetted off to the national (or the GCSAA conference or the GIS... or whatever the hell we're calling it this week), excited to see old friends, learn new things and do some "bidness." Over the decades, it's become a normal part of my life. But, there was very little "normal" about this year's big (sort of) event in San Diego. Allow me to count the ways.

MY SO-CALLED LIFE

OK, let's get this out of the way first. Here was the typical conversation I had with many pals at the show:

Pal: "Hey Jonesy! You're looking skinny. How'd you lose all that weight?"

Me: "It's called the 'divorce diet.' It's a very effective way to shed fat, but the side effects include abject poverty and loneliness."

Pal: "Oh, sorry to hear that. Let's go get a cocktail or 12 and commiserate about it."

Me: "I quit drinking, too."

Pal: "Oh jeez, look at the time... I'm late for...er...being someplace else."

Actually, that's weakly funny but not fair. Yes, it was the first time I attended a national as a skinny, single, sober schmoozer. But, all of you were amazingly supportive and I'm extremely grateful for the wonderful things going on in my new life now. More about all that later in this space.

THE SHOW

The business engine that powers the GCSAA and its partners was leaner and meaner this year, as exhibit space and exhibitor attendance was down. That was no surprise given the economy. What was surprising was the claim that there were more "qualified buyers" this year than in New Orleans. The nice folks from GIS proudly announced that there were 7,000-plus

people registered for the show who were authorized to buy stuff.

I'm not going to win an argument with their bean counters about this, but I polled a bunch of chapter leaders and *not one of them said more of their members made the trip*. I know for a fact that the number of superintendents from the largest chapters (except, of course, California) was waaaaay down. And, when I asked big exhibitors whether they felt superintendent traffic was better than last year, they just rolled their eyes.

The bottom line is that show organizers can pretend that the national is still a must-attend annual event for everyone, but it just isn't. Regional shows offer nearly all the same products and technical insights. Plus, there's this thing called the Internet that's open 24/7/365 to answer questions, kick virtual tires and provide education.

Sure, I talked with superintendents who were there to take courses that are only offered at the national or who had specific products they wanted to research, but the vast majority were there primarily to see their buddies, quietly poke around for a better job and have some fun on the club's dime. Sue me for telling the truth, but that's why most people still go.

THE HOT TOPIC

The No. 1 question I was asked in San Diego was, "When will things get back to normal?" The answer I gave was, "Define normal."

Was it normal to build 400 courses a year? Was it normal for clubs to have hundreds of wealthy people literally waiting for someone to die so they could enjoy the privilege of paying \$50,000 to join? Was it normal for every technical school in the nation to start cranking out kids with turf degrees, flooding the market with job seekers? Was it normal for a zillion

little companies selling some secret-recipe bio-potion or magic labor-saving widget to start throwing money at trade shows and sponsorships? Was it normal for golf to be immune to the same chemical industry devaluation that hit agriculture years ago? Was it normal for so many high-end courses to blindly pursue a damn-the-torpedoes, money-is-no-object, green-at-all-costs philosophy about maintenance?

Last month, I interviewed Bruce Williams and something he said struck me. He noted that many courses were struggling to find a "new sense of normal" given the current climate. That's a pretty succinct way to put it, but I'll take it one step further by saying that there is no "normal" in our lives anymore. Change is the only constant. The only thing you can do is keep your eyes wide open, assess everything that comes your way and watch out for the newest sense of normal to come slinking over the horizon.

SPEAKING OF CHANGE

You may have already noticed one change this issue: The folks at GCI have put me in charge of the magazine. Yes, the lunatic is once again running the asylum.

I tried to put my intentions for GCI into words in my editor's note at the front of this issue, but here's the skinny version: We're only as good as the feedback we get from you. Call me, write me, buttonhole me at a conference, hit me with a stick. I don't care how you do it; I just want to know what you think. My job is to try to make a really good publication into a force that leads the market and makes your life easier and better. Your job is to tell me how.

The bottom line is simple: There's no room for a normal magazine in this very abnormal world. And I'm just abnormal enough to relish the challenge of giving it to you. **GCI**