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CAROLINA ON MY MIND

People often marvel about how much I travel for business. I probably hear “I bet you get to travel a lot with your job” almost as often as “Do you know you look like Bill Cowher?”

(Column Interruption: I got a short break from hearing the Cowher thing recently. Last month, to inspire the hapless little-league football team I coach, I bet them that I'd shave my mustache off if they won a game. The little ragamuffins promptly pulled together and stomped a rival team for their only win. So off came the 'stache that I'd worn for pretty much my entire adult life. Not only did I not look like Bill Cowher, I looked like an alien. My lip weasel has since returned.)

Anyway, the outward glamour of business travel disguises the grind of standing in airport security lines, eating cruddy food, dealing with rental car morons and never knowing what to expect when you check into a hotel.

(Column Interruption: My all-time favorite hotel horror story occurred when I checked into a Marriott in Miami a few years ago. I noticed the carpet in part of my room was soaking wet and the place smelled like cleaning solvent. I looked behind a curtain and there was an ominous red substance splattered on the wall. Turns out some guy had blown his brains out in the room the night before and the Marriott guest suicide clean-up crew had not exactly done a thorough job.)

Yet, despite my whining, I cannot deny that I get to go some nice places as part of this job. Nor can I deny that Pinehurst is one of my favorites.

There is an aura about the entire Pinehurst experience that is hard to describe. The Carolina Hotel – one of the grandest old places in golf – drips with history and ambience. The people are fabulously friendly and interesting. It's like they jam an IV drip of Southern hospitality in your arm the moment you walk in the door.

But, there's far more to Pinehurst than fantastic golf and idiosyncratic antebellum charm. Look underneath the gorgeous veneer and you'll find a steely modern business model that should be the envy of everyone in golf.

I was reminded of that when I interviewed Bob Farren, Pinehurst's director of grounds and golf course management, for this month's Q&A (page 18). I've known Bob for 20 years but I think this was the first extended conversation I've had with him. Over the years, whenever I've talked with someone from Pinehurst's management team – from Bob Dedman Sr.

hurst gets branding better than just about anyone else. Everything they do supports the brand: Quiet, casual yet elegant, historic but fun. Changing the look and playability of No. 2 is not a renovation or restoration... it's a rebranding of the entire facility. The bottom line is that after redoing No. 4, building No. 8 and playing around elsewhere, the place was in danger of becoming homogeneous. Why would you want eight courses that were kind of all the same?

As ROI-focused as they are, this was a “gut” decision. Neither Mr. Dedman or his father ever shied away from tak-

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and Jr. to Brad Kocher to Paul Jett to Bob Farren – I was blown away at how smart and focused they are.

(Column Interruption: No, I did not ask Bob Farren about Paul Jett's departure. Nor did I ask Paul. None of my damned business, thank you very much.)

Here's what I was reminded of about Pinehurst's philosophy in my conversation with Bob:

They measure the right things. Beneath the casual Southern gentility beats the heart of a ruthless Yankee accountant. They know to the penny their revenue and profit per guest and what their maintenance cost per round and per hole is on each course. As Bob pointed out, return on investment and economic sustainability should be the primary metric used in deciding how every dollar is spent.

They understand branding – not just marketing. As much as I love the aggressive advertising and promotion done by the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail and the Myrtle Beach folks, Pine-

ing calculated risks when their heart tells them it's the right thing to do to profitably steward Pinehurst. Personally, the decision to turn back the clock, leverage the trend toward minimalist/naturalist design and retake the attention of the golf world is nothing short of brilliant. Do you seriously believe any of their core customers will refuse to play No. 2 because it looks “messy” compared to a year ago? Can you imagine the buzz this will create in the run-up to back-to-back Mens/Womens U.S. Opens in 2014?

(Final Column Interruption: No one has ever hosted back-to-back majors before. This is borderline crazy. But, if anyone can do it, it's Bob and his team.)

As much as business travel grates on me, you will never hear me bitch about a chance to head to the Sand Hills and point my rental car toward the Village of Pinehurst where beauty, elegance and great golf blend with a savvy and sophisticated business approach everyone should study. **GCI**