



## GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS

The new year is the usual time for people to look around, look at themselves, and think seriously about the future. In the golf business, the year begins with the PGA Merchandise Show and the Golf Industry Show. I just came back from Orlando, and while that huge massing of the industry is about much more than just superintendents and others in our industry, what happens there affects us mightily.

Those at the top of the mountain feel that golf is turning around. I am down in the valley and I get a different view. Those breathing the rarefied air need to come down from their pedestals and get a reality check. What I see is disturbing, and it impacts us at the ground level.

There was a lot said and seen at the show sure to impact our jobs and lives in the months to come: some good, some not so good. Here's my take on the industry's big issues and concerns.

**TIGER WOODS NEEDS TO START WINNING AGAIN.** His presence at tournaments and his ability to play well generate excitement and enthusiasm at all levels. He stimulates interest and despite everything is good for the game. That said, a word of advice for the game's greatest golfer: Hey Tiger, please be a little friendlier out there. A bit of Arnie wouldn't hurt.

**CHINA.** I've been there, enjoyed the country and its hospitality, and am thrilled a country of 1.6 billion is excited about golf. But China is not going to save the game. How will it help golf here at home? How many people can we send to China for jobs? Giving work to a dozen American architects isn't going to do much for our trade imbalance. We need to worry about our own backyard right now and less about China.

**GOLF'S GOVERNING BODIES.** I tend to be

critical of the game's leaders based on the progress I've seen during the past few years. What I've been hearing lately is about what I've come to expect. In short, there's some good and some not-so-good. On the good side, the USGA, PGA of America, PGA Tour and the rest keep making announcements about programs and ideas to grow the game. I'm all for throwing as much against the wall as possible and hope something sticks.

That said, the PGA of America's roll-

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out of Golf 2.0 told us once again what we already know: Golf is expensive, takes too much time, and the number of players is dwindling. There may be some successful ideas to come; only time will tell if any of the new programs and initiatives move the needle.

Most disturbing is the attitude of our industry's leaders, who remain unwilling to reach out to others in this time of real need. There's too much talking to the same people, too much preaching to the choir. We need more action and fewer words. Leadership needs to come up with real solutions, and nowhere is that more important than in our corner of the industry: We need more ideas and more help for superintendents who are losing their jobs and budgets. So the rest of my thoughts look specifically at our world.

**EXPECTATIONS.** In this time of reduced

finances and dwindling maintenance budgets, those who play the game need to reduce their expectations for conditioning. If a superintendent's budget is cut by 15 percent, the membership needs to reduce its expectations of conditioning accordingly. It would be nice if the board at your club didn't just call you in and tell you the budget has been slashed: The board should tell the members/golfers that, too. Don't be afraid to ask the board to make sure everyone playing the course understands what has happened. You don't want to get too defensive, but you also want everyone to know that it isn't your fault. And when the year is over and everyone says how pleased they were with the course conditions in the season just passed, find a way to tactfully remind them of the magic you did with a 15 percent smaller budget.

**SUPPORT TURFGRASS RESEARCH.** I don't just mean at the top, but at local and regional association levels, too. We need to find ways to raise money for research relevant to our geographic areas. We can't depend on the USGA and other national organizations to fund research about our own backyards.

**WEATHER AND PEOPLE.** Here's a statement that won't shock any of you: The average player/member doesn't understand that the biggest elements over which we have the least control are weather and people, including owners, golfers, staff and environmentalists.

Nothing affects the superintendent as much as the weather. For proof, just look at what happened last year. We had to deal with droughts and monsoons, which not only hurt courses but caused many of our own to lose their jobs. Do your golfers understand that too much water on the course is as bad as too little? What are we doing to educate them?

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**GOLF COURSE**  
INDUSTRY

**ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATIONS ARE CHOKING OUR INDUSTRY.** We must continue to raise the level of understanding about how golf courses can positively impact the environment and our communities. Local superintendents are trying to raise awareness, as is the industry's lobbying effort. This must continue and we must all get involved. Remember: A healthy golf course is better than a neglected cornfield.

I'm over 50 so perhaps the following hurts me more than it hurts you. Still, it's penny-wise and pound-foolish for clubs to view hiring a younger superintendent as a cost-savings measure. Nothing against the up-and-comers, but some top-flight supers with years of experience, knowledge and tenure are being dismissed or their positions eliminated for financial reasons. And I know from my perch as a consultant who helps clubs hire new supers that the options for us older guys are limited.

**TECHNOLOGY.** The gizmos and gadgets being introduced to the game are fun, but will they really help? Will apps engage more golfers or simply create more slow play? How much information can we absorb, and more important, how much will truly help how we play? Now contrast what's happening technologically in the world around us with what's happening at the governing bodies, which are considering putting more restrictions on equipment—shaft length, grooves, ball distance, belly putters, etc. How will less technology help the average golfer? How will that help bring new golfers to the game? If they see reasons to limit the power of the pros, I'm all for it; but not for the vast majority of golfers, the public.

As I said at the beginning, golf isn't all doom and gloom. I'm encouraged by the international emergence of golf. I think it's great that professional events are being won by golfers from all over the world. Golf in the Olympics could be a real boon to our business. At the PGA Show, architect Robert Trent Jones, Jr., said he was really excited to know that golfers from Latvia and Sweden will be competing against one another in Rio on a world stage. He's right.

One element of the new Golf 2.0 campaign that impressed me was the addition of the Boys & Girls Clubs of America. That's 4 million kids we can introduce to golf now and keep as golfers for their entire lives. If we can get a few of them to love the game the way we do the long-term outlook for golf will become much rosier. GCI