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A BUCKET LIST FOR GOLF

What I hope golf does before I die.

This month's cover image got me thinking about my bucket list. The more I thought about it, the more I decided I wanted a different kind of list. Here's why.

Most bucket lists are about special or rewarding events – exotic trips, meeting celebrities or heroes, climbing Mt. Everest, etc. Google suggests that “visiting the Great Wall of China” and “swimming with dolphins” are among the most common desires.

I've already been pretty fortunate about a lot of that stuff thanks to golf. Since the day I wandered into GCSAA headquarters in Lawrence 27 years ago and got hired for a \$16,000 a year writing job, golf has given me the opportunity to meet presidents, European royalty, superstar athletes, billionaire CEOs, movie stars, musicians and mobsters. I've been all over the planet and seen some incredibly beautiful things. I've been blessed to have played bad golf at most of the top 100 courses in the U.S.

All because of golf. Go figure.

Our good friend Monroe Miller called the other day and, in the course of a conversation about a mutual friend from overseas said, “Isn't it funny how golf shrinks the world?”

He's right. This crazy little business is a bond that unites all of us. It's a community based on a mutual love for the beauty and challenge of this damned silly game.

That's why, as I thought about creating a bucket list, I decided to make one for golf. Here's my wish list for what golf can aspire to be in the future:

First, I want to live to see golf be perceived as a game for everyone. I'd love to live in a world where golf wasn't primarily viewed as a pastime for wealthy white people. The reality is today that few real barriers exist to

people trying the game. It's dirt cheap to play nine holes a lot of places and I'm pretty sure that 99.9% of courses only care about the color of your money, not your skin, anymore. The reality is that the doors are open to all...we just need to invite them in and treat them nicely.

Speaking of which, I hope one day golf will be known for excellent customer-service standards. I still play a lot of “secret shopper” golf at daily fees around the country and I continue to be gobsmacked at the don't-give-a-crap attitude I see in many pro shops. I also see fundamentally lousy stuff (broken ball washers, overflowing trash cans, bunkers that haven't been edged since the Clinton administration...) on the course, as well. Why is it the average Starbucks offers vastly better service than the average pay-to-play golf course? I hope customers wise up and choose quality service instead of continuing to keep crummy operations alive.

I hope to see a day when golf is recognized for what it is: excellent outdoor recreation and exercise. Carts are great for many folks, can help to speed play and, of course, create revenues. But the perception that golf is just for fat-asses riding around drinking beer in carts belies the fact that you can burn a lot of calories and get a good aerobic workout by hoofing it. People need to think about golf as a fitness activity that happens to allow you to get healthy in a beautiful environment.

I dream that someday, Mr. Supply and Mr. Demand will meet each other again, shake hands and stay friends for a while. I'm optimistic that the upswing in housing values and new construction in key markets will help to convert some bad operations to a “higher, better use” (as Henry Delozier

refers to bulldozing an underperforming course to build homes or a community park or whatever). We shot ourselves in the foot with over-building and we've been limping around and bleeding for 15 years. We need to eliminate the weakest links (get it?) and find a healthier economic balance that doesn't involve suicidal online discounting.

I fervently hope I live to see a solution to our water challenge to ensure golf is played on natural grass for another century or so. The incredibly sophisticated technology being developed by the irrigation geniuses will help, but we have to find new turf species (or soil treatments) that allow us to present healthy, great courses without using an unwise amount of water. I think the race for more intelligent water practices will really be on over the next 20 years as irrigation costs soar. We have to be proactive or we'll be regulated out of existence.

One thing I think I can check off my bucket list is to witness a time when golfers begin to appreciate superintendents. I'm sure a lot of you have horror stories proving I'm wrong, but the majority of golfers – particularly club members – understand and appreciate the role of the maintenance team. All of the years of PR by GCSAA, local chapters and individual superintendents who have stepped into the spotlight of major championships has really helped. It's not a perfect world and we still have a long way to go, but we've put Carl Spackler in the rearview mirror and are speeding toward broad recognition as world-class professional stewards of the land.

So, what would you add to golf's bucket list? Shoot me a note and let me know and we'll share them in a future issue. **GCI**