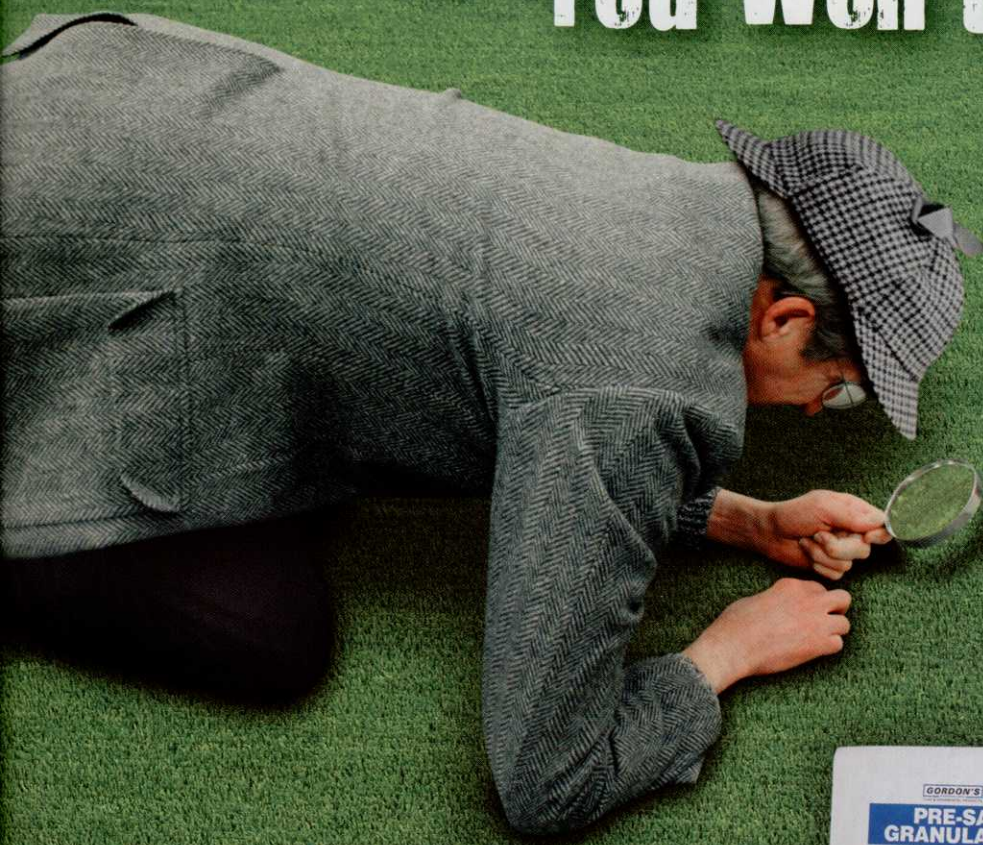


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Facilitating the FUTURE

Joe O'Brien
talks about The
First Tee, fond
memories of the
GCSAA and being
reunited with
Steve Mona

BY PAT JONES

For a guy who says he didn't like teaching, Joe O'Brien sure seems like he's spent his life doing it. For almost 17 years at the PGA of America, he put together programs to help teach golf professionals how to do their jobs successfully. For seven years as the c.o.o. of the GCSAA, he helped teach the association's staff and leadership a new way of doing business. And for the past six years, he's been a driving force in teaching values to children through The First Tee organization.

O'Brien is an Illinois native who grew up loving and playing every kind of game that featured a ball. He attended the University of Illinois, graduated with a B.S. in marketing (he later earned an MBA at DePaul) and ended up as a high school teacher in the Chicago area at age 25. He wasn't thrilled with it and decided to pursue a career in sports.

He applied to professional baseball clubs and different golf associations. He lucked his way into an interview with Gary Wiren, Ph.D., the legendary PGA executive. The PGA wanted to expand and upgrade their education programs and needed someone. O'Brien was out of teaching ... and back into teaching.

He spent almost two decades building and refining education and training programs for the PGA and becoming a fixture in the industry at conferences and

events. He left the PGA for Marriott Golf for four years during a time when the hotel company was attempting to expand dramatically into facility management. After that, he did a brief stint with a D.C.-based hotel association before learning the GCSAA was looking for a new executive team. He was a finalist for the c.e.o. position along with Steve Mona and a couple others. Eventually, the GCSAA board made the wise decision of putting Mona in the "Mr. Outside" leadership slot and making O'Brien "Mr. Inside" to manage the daily operations.

Most superintendents probably remember O'Brien best for his work facilitating dozens of committee meetings. His constant curiosity and willingness to guide members to good decisions was a hallmark of his time in Lawrence, Kan. He also ended up as the GCSAA's point-person on environmental issues – a topic he admittedly knew little about at the time – and did such a good job steering the association's efforts the board rewarded him with the President's Award for Environmental Leadership, an unprecedented honor for a member of the staff.

He left the GCSAA in 2001 and landed at the still-young, still relatively undefined First Tee. His role – to develop programs and educational concepts for the



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7:08 AM...



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EXECUTIVE PROFILE

organization's 200-plus chapters – fits the teacher in him perfectly. Now, as The First Tee celebrates its 10th anniversary and attempts to expand programs to offer golf as a curriculum for grade-school students, O'Brien is back trying to teach stuff to kids – but this time, his classroom has 1.5 million students throughout the country.

WHAT IS YOUR JOB EXACTLY?

I'm responsible for developing education programs for the First Tee executives and chapters. That includes things such as curriculum for the kids and certification for our adult volunteer leaders. I'm also trying constantly to take the pulse of the chapters and the industry. I'm always checking financial reports, surveys, trends, etc., looking to see how we're doing. We're constantly benchmarking. When we were growing rapidly

was an important part of their lives as kids.

WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE TO MAKE THE GROUP ULTRASUCCESSFUL?

The First Tee is basically just a network of chapters. If I could change anything, it would be to consistently attract executives and develop boards that are all high quality. We're only as good as our chapters, so the leadership at that level is critical.

TELL US ABOUT THE GRADE-SCHOOL GOLF CURRICULUM PROGRAM.

That grew out of the Golf 20/20 initiative a few years ago. The idea was to provide a curriculum for phys ed teachers to use in the schools to introduce kids to golf and its values. It was successful immediately. Even teachers that had

“Just by understanding the program, they can influence people. Superintendents have more influence than they might believe. They can help spread the word.”

- JOE O'BRIEN

quantitatively, there still was some question about how we were doing qualitatively, so we have metrics to look at that as well.

WHAT SURPRISED YOU WHEN YOU FIRST JOINED THE ORGANIZATION?

It's completely different from a junior golf program. We teach honest-to-goodness character development. We don't teach values, but they learn values. Take a typical junior golf program and turn it upside down. That's us. We're more focused on the development of children than the development of golfers. Kids who get into formal programs are more than six times more likely to play as adults, so eventually it will have an effect. But that's not the point.

We've had three different universities measure the skills and behavior we've helped the kids develop. It works.

I was also pleasantly surprised at how many successful people view The First Tee as their way to give back to golf. They genuinely want to make a difference through the game of golf because it

never played golf enjoyed it. So, it got big quickly, and Golf 20/20 moved it over to us to manage and grow. The PGA Tour events got behind the idea and helped fund it in their communities, and we've had good local and corporate sponsorship as well. It's a main priority for us now.

This is different than our general goal of character development. The point of this is to equip kids to enter the world of golf with acceptable skills and etiquette. It's different from other sports taught in schools, and that was difficult. You have to deal with safety issues and a variety of other challenges. But, it's definitely taking off – we've reached 1.5 million kids. Our goal is to reach to 4.5 million kids eventually. We're pretty good at making our goals.

I WAS SURPRISED YOU GUYS HAVE A SMALL STAFF.

We don't need much administration. Our job is to help chapters find kids and engage them. We're focused. We're also lucky that we can rely on the PGA Tour and World Golf Foundation for that.

HOW DO FIRST TEE CHAPTERS DIFFER FROM THE TYPICAL SUPERINTENDENT OR PGA CHAPTER?

Our chapter boards have an amazing amount of diversity. We have people of color, different genders, tons of folks from different business and personal backgrounds, including PGA or LPGA members and some superintendents. There are also many people with influence in the community. It's a melting pot of all sorts of different people who share the same vision. We're trying to give them direction. Obviously that's a lot different than the GCSAA or some of the other groups whose boards are largely similar professionally.

We held a network meeting for our chapter leaders in November, and I kept thinking it would be impossible to find 700 people in the same room that spanned the ranges of gender, age, ethnicity, wealth, etc., as we had at that event. That diversity creates challenges for us in terms of educating and equipping the chapters, but it's also a big part of our strength.

HOW CAN SUPERINTENDENTS GET MORE INVOLVED?

I'm going to attend the Golf Industry Show in Orlando and help man our booth, so I made a list of things superintendents can do. We need them to serve on local boards, committees and in leadership positions. It morally fits so well with the way superintendents look at things. We don't have a specific element of the curriculum that deals with agronomy or the environment, but it's important, and it's extremely interesting to the kids when superintendents become involved.

Also, the facilities need resources. We're always looking for in-kind gifts – such as used mowing equipment, flagsticks, benches, ball washers and construction work – and money.

Lastly, superintendents can coach. There are many superintendents who are good players and teachers, and this can be fun for them. Just by understanding the program, they can influence people. Superintendents have more influence than they might believe. They can help spread the word.

WHAT DO YOU MISS ABOUT YOUR DAYS AT THE GCSAA AND THE TURF BUSINESS?

The members. I had so much respect for their belief in their occupation. They're so passionate and have so much pride. It was all about what

was right, not about how much you make.

I also miss the underdog mentality. We were always fighting for more of something, even if it was just a seat at the table for some meeting. It was never routine. I loved the challenge. I also liked the diversity of things I was involved with: education, the trade show, the magazine, the foundation. You name it, and it came across my desk sooner or later.

WHAT WERE A COUPLE OF YOUR FAVORITE MOMENTS DURING THAT TIME?

Receiving the President's Award for Environmental Leadership was probably – outside of my own family – the most significant thing that's ever happened to me. I loved the challenge of working on the environmental programs, but the award was a surprise.

I also liked facilitating the planning group and other committee meetings. The first chapter delegates meeting was pretty wild, too. I asked one question and, three hours later, I was still writing ideas and issues on easels.

We had many great people on staff, too. Turnover was tough, but there was a tremendous pool of talent at a great facility. People outside the association would come visit and be shocked at what they found.

WHAT CHALLENGES AWAIT STEVE MONA AT THE WOLD GOLF FOUNDATION?

First, he's the right person for the job. You need someone that can coalesce a bunch of different things and bring people together. He has such good ambassadorial skills. The challenge is that he'll be dealing with new systems and new undertakings. He has to bring old things together, start new things and internationalize things.

ANY FINAL THOUGHTS FOR YOUR OLD FRIENDS ON THE SUPERINTENDENT SIDE OF THE BUSINESS?

I still admire the job they do for golf and their care for the environment. I've gained even more respect for their focus at the GCSAA, and it's great to see them finally getting more of the recognition they deserve.

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HOUSE ARREST

The housing market downturn hampers new golf course construction

You've read about it in newspapers. You've heard about it on TV. And you even might be in the thick of it. It's the housing market. And yes, it's in a slump.

While some say it's a reflection of the overall economy, all agree it's part of a downward cycle that will improve eventually. When that turnaround begins or when this cycle bottoms out, nobody knows for sure. But one thing is certain:

The poor housing market has affected the overall golf course industry negatively.

The impact on the golf market is noticeable because builders and developers have seen the number of new projects steadily decline since January 2007, says Henry DeLozier, v.p. of golf for Pulte Homes. About 100 new golf course projects opened in 2007, and that number will be down decidedly in 2008, DeLozier says.



Westhaven is a developing neighborhood in Franklin, Tenn., where Southern Land Development is moving forward with golf course construction. Photo: Arthur Hills/Steve Forrest and Associates

BY JOHN WALSH

“Many builders are changing the timing of their projects to coincide with the resurgence of the housing market,” he says. “There are some projects being put on hold amid development. If one starts a projects then stops it, efficiency is lost and additional costs increase because the builder has to remobilize. The vibrancy of market and cost of capital are two good reasons to stop building.”

Almost everyone in the golf industry is affected by the housing market because everyone plans on new projects rolling out, DeLozier says.

“One in five of our projects have a golf course in it,” he says. “Most of the projects include golf as a lifestyle. The housing market drives all golf at Pulte. We don’t build free-standing golf courses.”

Like all of the big home builders, Pulte Homes projected a slow 2007, but most builders have found the downturn to be deeper and more prolonged than expected, DeLozier says. However, few projects get scrapped altogether because entitlements are set and deeds are tied to a master plan. Once builders start a development, they see it to fruition. An exception is if a project is undercapitalized.

Architects see the housing downturn affect golf course construction through their project lists. Six of Arthur Hills/Steve Forrest & Associates projects are under construction (three in the U.S. and three international), and 26 projects are on hold because of financing, owner decision-making, permitting and government regulations, says Steve Forrest, the firm’s principal and president of the ASGCA.

“The housing downturn has delayed projects,” says Forrest, adding that about half of the firm’s 26 projects are tied to residential home building.

“Things won’t improve until late 2008 or 2009. The bigger domestic golf course builders – Landscapes Unlimited, Wadsworth Construction, Heritage Links – are looking overseas.”

The majority of Weitz Golf International’s volume and revenue is through clubhouse construction, says Oscar Rodriguez, v.p., construction manager. On one project, Magnolia Landing in Fort Myers, Fla., Weitz finished its job, and the developer shut it down. The course is expected to close, Rodriguez says.

Also, Weitz was working on the foundation of a clubhouse on another project in Fort Myers called Portico, and that project was shut down, and Weitz pulled off the job. However, Rodriguez says he’s not sure if the golf course at Portico will be shut down. Homebuilding started at Magnolia and Portico but now has stopped because of poor sales, he says.

“Because the developer side of construction has completely stopped, we need to focus on the private side of clubhouse renovation,” Rodriguez says.

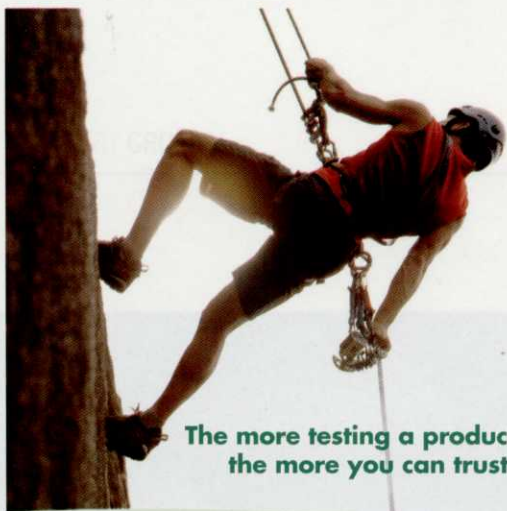
IT’S A CYCLE

Rodriguez experienced a similar downturn during the early 1990s while with Fairway Construction, which has since been incorporated into Weitz Golf International.

“I feel like early ’90s was just the golf course industry pre-Tiger Woods,” he says. “This time around, it feels like the downturn is because of the U.S. economy with the weak dollar. California and Florida were attracting many foreign investors who wanted to take advantage of the weak dollar. The downturn is more U.S. based than I thought in the early ’90s, which was more golf industry based. We don’t officially have a



El Conquistador Estates is a planned golf community in Puerto Rico. The project is under construction and is in a Caribbean market that’s strong right now. Photo: Arthur Hills/Steve Forrest and Associates



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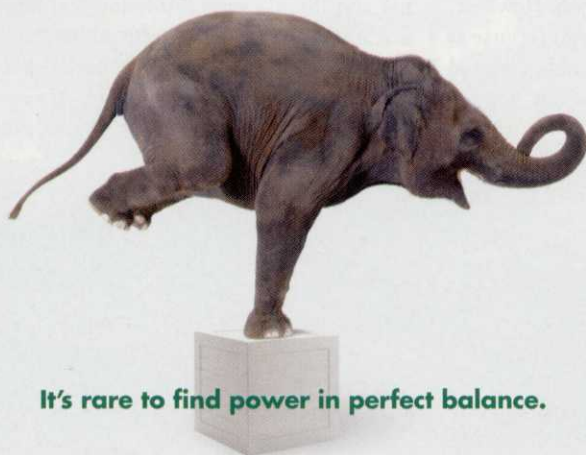
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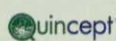
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INDUSTRY GROWTH

recession, but most people feel one is coming."

Because now there's more of a need to be bonded than before, Rodriguez doesn't see how smaller contractors can put all of their bond capabilities into one project. Contractors need to include more renovations in their scope of work because they operate more smoothly and new construction projects can be put on hold financially at any time, he says.

"This year will be a trying year," he says. "For example, smaller architects or subcontractors might not have enough work. It will be interesting to see who will withstand the downturn."

For Forrest, it seems like there's a downturn every 10 years, although Sept. 11 was a different market factor.

"We went through a period of strong renovation from 2003 through 2005, then back up to new projects in '05 through '07, then it fell off," he says. "And builders are lagging behind architects a couple years based on the development process. Right now, builders are getting the perfect storm."

DeLozier saw softness in the market like this in the early to mid-90s and in 1987 and 1988. The housing cycles, which follow other economic patterns, are hard to predict, but they're a certainty. As such, Pulte is prepared.

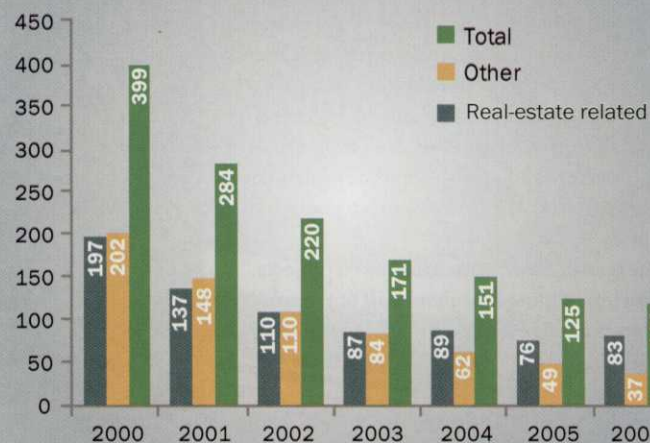
"Pulte has a great deal of experience," DeLozier says. "We have a seasoned senior management team that manages well through the housing sector. The company has downsized as it relates to market conditions."

The early 1990s was the last downturn in the golf industry, but there were various components involved, says Dave Richey, senior v.p. of the country club division of Toll Brothers.

"I don't know how long this downcycle will last, but the basic demand for home building is still fairly strong – there's 1.5 million to 1.7 million new homes built each year," he says. "Golf course development is totally driven by homes. Where golf courses are, they represent our largest communities. We wouldn't have a community with a 1,000 homes without a golf course."

Toll Brothers, which has 300 residential developments throughout the

Real estate-related golf course openings (18-hole equivalents)



Source: National Golf Foundation