

Once the backbone of a superintendent's professional life, can chapters cope and remain relevant in golf's new age?

GCI Columnist Monroe Miller provides his analysis.

ARE CHAPTERS DYING?

Time marches on, trends appear and all things change.

So it should come as a no surprise to anyone that the industry's 80-plus GCSAA-affiliated chapters would be not be insulated from the economic, cultural and political influences that have shaped our world in recent years. All across the country chapters face many questions. True, they might differ in degree and detail, but all deal with a common denominator – rapid change.

Brett Grams, during a conversation this past fall, brought many of these issues into focus. As executive director of the Wisconsin GCSA chapter, Grams is stewing over the costs of his association's annual golf turf symposium. Rooms, meals and speakers – it all adds up. He wonders when attendance will take a hit. Factor in dicey off-season weather and his fears escalate.

Grams also laments about the chapter's annual autumn golf and dinner-dance weekend, a long-standing tradition. It has gone from a robust event in years past to one attended by just seven couples this year. Brett and the chapter officers wonder if they should keep it going.

One veteran chapter director tells of planning the annual family picnic, and the only ones who attended were him and his wife.

Conversations with execs from a broad cross section of chapters – large and small, metro and rural – all reveal that national trends have influenced their successes and shortcomings.

For example, consider the cultural changes that have altered the dynamic of the American family. Today, it's not unusual for both parents to have careers, and daycare is a part of life. Men play a more active role in child rearing. As a result, many younger members don't attend chapter meetings. Instead, you're more likely find them at the local soccer fields, at band practices or shuttling someone to swimming lessons.

Something has to give, and at the chapter level it has been participation. For a superintendent it's extra time versus attending chapter meetings. Recent generations chose the latter, but at a cost. Today's superintendents are keenly aware of these burdens because they make accommodations for their workers.

TRICKLE DOWN. Recent trends have not been kind to the golf course industry. Because golf is a discretionary item for many consumers, the trickle-down effect seeps into the local chapters. Economic disasters the likes of which haven't been seen since the Great Depression have resulted in fewer rounds played, depleted rosters at private clubs, more golf deals and lower fees. The result: decreased facility income. Budgets get slashed, workers get laid off and fewer and fewer turf stewards remain in the golf industry and support their local association chapters.

For some reason, the first place sought out for spending reductions is the golf course budget. It also seems the largest reductions are in the golf course expense lines. And within the framework of the operational budgets, travel/dues/education accounts have been easy targets. The

logic is that you have to have fuel, you need fertilizer and you must have staff to operate. But does the golf course superintendent really need to play golf out of town every month, or absolutely have to attend the Golf Industry Show 2,000 miles away in San Diego or Orlando? These questions are answered by owners and boards, and the result is reduced or eliminated accounts.

It has been the perfect storm between golf and the economy.

Conduct a simple straw poll among superintendents in your market and most say these changes are here to stay. Some believe we have seen golf's zenith and many have worked in the best of times of the game. We aren't going to be going back to the time when golf leaders declared, "We need to open a new course every day if we want to keep up with demand."

Heck, we will be lucky if we don't have to close one course a week before the economy and our industry experience some serious recovery.

CHAPTERS SCOPE. So, how are local golf course superintendent chapters dealing with these profound changes?

Two obvious issues requiring immediate attention are declining memberships and lax participation at chapter events.

Chapter execs say they are facing these problems with optimism and determination. They remain confident that members still value their association with their local chapters.

One particularly positive chapter manager suggested that stretched golf course budgets might actually benefit local chapters. The logic is that reduced travel and education budgets encourage local events be-

cause they are less expensive and less travel is involved.

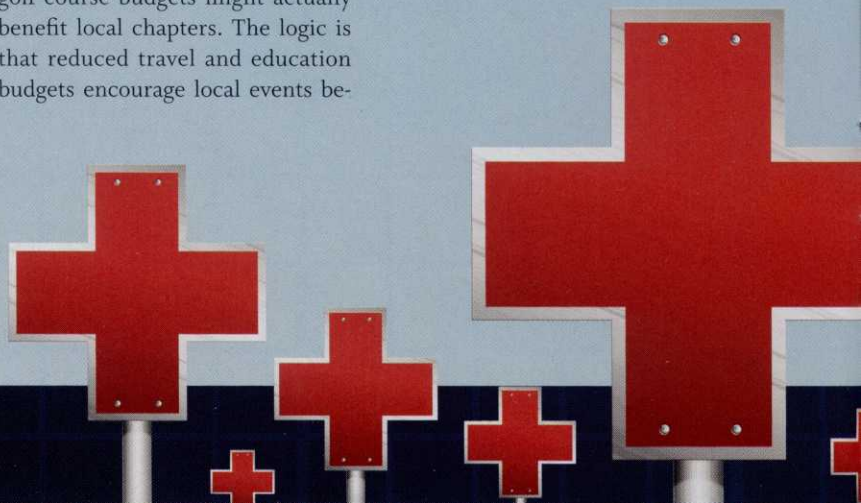
Many wonder if GCSAA membership is an issue and, if clubs or courses won't fund dues, does the dual membership come into play?

Some people mention the dual membership requirement as one of the factors in lower chapter membership. However, most chapter executives do not feel it is significant. Some propose a suspension of dual membership – an affiliate holiday, if you will – during these difficult economic times, but a GCSAA committee has ruled it doesn't hinder chapter membership.

A wealth of ideas are under consideration by chapters to boost their activities. Foremost might be the recognition that there may be too many events. Chapters need to refocus and eliminate poorly attended events. Initially, it may be an unpopular move with some members, but this needs to happen.

In addition, there need to be more efforts to create greater value for meetings, attempting to make as many of them as possible "can't miss" or "afraid to miss" educational events for members.

Some managers say they are considering a more regional approach, especially in states where travel times play a significant factor. Others are considering multi-day, high-quality events that could make long travel times worthwhile. More effort is being made to move chapter events around the states to make travel time equitable.



Every chapter is exploring ways to keep their costs down. Venue selection, local or regional speakers – such as university and extension personnel, as well as superintendents – and even Web-based meetings may all find a place in chapter planning.

However, competition remains from commercial members – primarily distributors – and the educational meetings they occasionally host – typically in the off-season – are issues mentioned with a fair amount frequency and is causing frustration at the local level. They have resources chapters do not have to choose exciting sites and invite well-known national speakers. In addition, they are able to offer superintendents GCSAA CEUs that apply toward PDI requirements, just as chapters do. These meetings are popular with chapter members and unpopular with many chapter executives who believe the uneven field is unfair. Many question whether GCSAA fully appreciates this conflict.

There are no easy answers, though.

A few years ago, for example, I attended, at no cost other than transportation, one of the finest educational meetings in my long career. LESCO had assembled faculty turf pathologists from Wisconsin, Michigan State, Chicago District Golf/University of Illinois and Purdue. The venue was a new Jack Nicklaus golf course in eastern Wisconsin and the meeting was held in the off-season. It was packed. The gratis lunch was superb. It was great to see colleagues and network. There wasn't a superintendent who didn't leave grateful, making it difficult to argue against these educational meetings. Some suggest we shouldn't even try.

Local distributors often put together great meetings, especially in the slow season. Our local Toro distributor organizes a huge show and conference every other year. In the alternate year, small educational meetings are held in all quarters of the state in the winter and they are well attended. The cost for the big

show is minimal and the small meetings are free. They are popular and offer real value to superintendents. Thus the dilemma to chapter execs concerned about chapter activities.

It should be noted, though, that there has been some pullback from commercial members in membership, and chapters realize they have to keep their needs in mind during this change process, as well.

MAKING PROGRESS. There is an acute awareness that networking is the most important feature and function of a gathering of golf course superintendents, and anything they can do to facilitate and encourage it works to everyone's advantage.

Organized phone call trees, e-blasts, newsletters, chapter publications, Websites and special invitations are all used to communicate with members. Execs, officers and directors are more carefully planning calendars to eliminate conflicts. They recognize the need to get calendars to members early to better accommodate individual travel and attendance schedules. No one wants last-minute surprises to negatively affect attendance.

Chapters are also increasing their overall value by broadening their importance to those on golf course staffs – assistants, spray techs and equipment managers, for example – and subsequent overall increased value to superintendents. Some chapter managers see that down the road services like travel assistance through an agency, credit card endorsements and insurance company promotions may have a place in adding to their bottom lines.

GCSAA obviously recognizes the value of affiliated chapters and has developed tools and programs to help them. Seminars for chapter execs and a pilot program for regional offices and field staff to assist chapters with programming are two prime examples. GCSAA has also responded to its own reduced membership and declining GIS attendance by reduc-

ing its staff and controlling costs.

The 15 percent decline in membership over the last few years has led to very open reductions in personnel, many of them familiar long-time employees, in addition to programing elimination. Even turfgrass research support has taken a well publicized hit.

Superintendents have never been busier, and that isn't going to change any time soon. Neither will the pressure felt by many: "What disaster can happen at the golf course when I am gone?" And despite cell phones and Blackberrys, their comfort zones have diminished, usually due to some economic reasons.

However, the fact remains that there has always been a core group of chapter members who show up for everything, serve committees and chairs and in offices. They are the ones who strongly believe in the cause of their chapters, regardless of good times or bad, and will lead the way through the changing circumstances facing golf.

One of the most inspiring stories of a person stepping in at a critical time is that of Leo Feser. Namesake of the annual GCSAA Leo Feser Award, Leo, a founder of the Minnesota Greenkeepers Association and its longtime secretary, is honored yet today for his efforts to keep GCM magazine's forerunner – Greenkeepers' Reporter – alive and relevant almost single-handedly during a tough three-year period in the 1930s.

Many of us could look into our crystal balls and see individuals taking a page out of Leo's book by doing the same thing for their home chapters and specific programs.

Regardless of the challenges facing this industry, many are convinced the local chapters will come through this transition time looking different than they do now, and ready to become even more relevant to their members. **GCI**

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CHAPTER MEMORIES

In my career as a superintendent, it was rare for me to miss a Wisconsin GCSA chapter meeting. I might not have played golf, but I didn't miss a chance to see close friends and learn something in the process. And as an added bonus, I was able to see a good many of our state's golf courses.

One of my most memorable chapter meetings took place on a tractor drawn hayrack. We convened at a course under construction in Madison, and there was extreme interest in the grassing of the putting greens – they were stolonized.

The stolons were trucked in from an out-of-state nursery, spread, compacted, topdressed and watered. Although it was a method in use then, I have never seen a turf established this way since that meeting back in the mid-1960s. We toured the new course with our legs dangling over the edge of the wagon. Needless to say, there was no golf that day.

There was no golf the day our chapter saw Wisconsin's first automatic golf course irrigation system, either. The meeting, also in the mid-1960s, was called to order at lunch and we spent the afternoon listening to installation details and a demonstration of what was a technological wonder as we walked the course. We all went home totally impressed.

Chapter meetings that didn't involve golf were fairly common during my college years, too. Rather than having a speaker or golf, the meeting might convene in a new shop, giving the WGCSA members a chance to see what a colleague had planned and executed. The concept lost favor sometime in the 1970s. It wasn't until the summer of 1996 that Michael Lee invited us to the construction site of the new Pete Dye designed Kohler golf course named Whistling Straits.

Years ago our chapter occasionally

had a dual meeting with another state chapter at a course near the state line, giving members the chance to make new friends and learn about their problems. Old photos of chapter meetings from the 1930s and 1940s are fun to study. White shirts and ties were the norm, a tradition we resurrected in the 1980s for a while.

In fact, when compared to today, that period was really something. Today, the meeting format usually is a lunch buffet, a short speaker program, golf, hors d'oeuvres, golf prizes and an early departure. In the 1980s we would have lunch, golf, a sit-down dinner with members dressed in coats and ties and an after-dinner speaker. If we attempted that today, nobody would attend.

Our state chapter has always put emphasis on turf students and scholar-

sin's only five star hotel. Our roster of speakers over nearly five decades rivals any other state program.

Not all has been smooth over the past 45 years. There was modest controversy when some of us wanted to name it the Wisconsin Golf Course Managers Association. In the end, a close call went to tradition.

The issue of forced dual membership in our chapter and GCSAA was not pleasant to deal with. The proposal really chapped my backside, pitting the haves against the have-nots. I always side with the little guy, but we lost. It occasionally comes up in the discussion of declining membership, albeit in an anecdotal way. The satisfying part is knowing that no superintendent is really denied access to his state chapter, even if it is with a wink and a nod. But I have to confess

The proposal really chapped my backside, pitting the haves against the have-nots.

ship, offering internship options and financial help. I won't forget riding with Professor Love to attend a chapter meeting at Wausau CC in late fall with another turf student to receive a GCSAA scholarship. We drove up late in the day, had dinner and stayed through the program that included us. What an experience. In the years since then scores of scholarships have been given to students in Wisconsin's turf program, most who, like me, went on to a career in golf course management.

When I was an undergrad, the WGCSA and Milorganite teamed up to present America's only true golf turf symposium to honor the late O. J. Noer. Initially held in Milwaukee's historic old German hotel – the Phister – it is still going strong today, only in Kohler at the American Club, Wisconsin

aggravation every time I receive snail mail from my chapter – big, black, bold GCSAA on the return address and "Wisconsin Chapter" in tiny letters.

Not everyone in a state chapter is able to attend GCSAA conferences, seminars and the GIS show, but the WGCSA has filled the social, educational and professional needs in an exceptional way.

Chapter meetings have been essential to our prosperity over the years, a comfortable venue where advice is easily sought and freely given. And there is no better place for networking. For all of us, the overwhelming emotions that result from our chapter participation are pride, gratitude and loyalty, along with some great memories.

Plus, I must say it has been a whole lot of fun. **GCI**

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Proper drainage is one of the fundamentals for good greens.



Don't lose out to POOR DRAINAGE

Green drainage is a critical part of any long-range plan.

By David McPherson

Putting greens with poor drainage are prone to problems when heavy rain and hot weather combine. Poorly drained greens tend to have poor soil oxygen, which is crucial for root health. As Al Schwemler, property manager, Toronto Golf Club, likes to say: “Drainage is one of the fundamentals for good greens.”

Toronto Golf Club, designed by Harry S. Colt, is North America's third oldest club (1876). It recently underwent a complete renovation. As part of the long-range plan, the club added new subsurface green drainage to all 18 holes, plus the practice green. Like many of the tracks built in the late 1800s and early 20th century, it features old pushup greens, which were built with little consideration for drainage.

“We had good surface drainage on these old Colt greens, but there was no subsurface drainage,” Schwemler says. “When doing our long-range plan, green drainage wasn't initially part



The greens drainage installation project underway at North Shore Country Club.

NORTH SHORE CC

of the project, but I threw this in from an agronomic standpoint. It was going to be a \$200,000-plus job though, so the club put it on hold. Then, when the whole project came in under budget, they put it back in.”

In 2009, Toronto Golf Club literally rebuilt its course – from new tee decks and bunkers to new grass in the rough, green expansions and a brand new irrigation system to name a few of the many changes the historic property made. It was the perfect time to install new green drainage as the course was closed from July 2009 to May 2010. The club hired TDI Golf and its XGD (Existing Greens Drainage) division, to install a subsurface drainage system to remove surface water more

Each green is unique. Therefore, design a drainage pattern using the green's natural contour to catch as much surface and ground water as possible.



rapidly and lower the water table, thereby improving turf growth. The procedure has gained a lot of recognition and popularity in the turf industry as an excellent method of improving the subsurface drainage of existing greens without rebuilding them.

"Conventional golf drainage theories rely on surface water as the primary focus, but this is absolutely false," explains Mark Luckhardt, vice-president, XGD, who helped develop and perfect TDI's XGD process more than 18 years ago. "We need to look at groundwater table issues first and foremost. XGD drainage is based on similar farm drainage practices which relies 99 per cent of the time on groundwater table lowering, and very few open surface inlets or catch basins. Every single mile of this simple, yet effective, drainage installation relies on controlling the subsurface groundwater table down to a manageable level out of the crop root zone."

This was the first time XGD had done an entire course. Schwemler says what was most interesting for them, because Toronto Golf Club has a sandy soil profile on the property, is that XGD backfilled the club's green drainage with their native soil. "If you put a blend of sand/peat back in the trenches, when you get hot, dry conditions, you can start to see those trenches," Schwemler says.

After only one season, Schwemler says he doesn't have any scientific proof as to the effectiveness of the new drainage, but he does have a superintendent's feel. "They are working great," he says. "Our soils drain significantly quicker and our greens are firming up faster after a series of rain events. It's also bringing more oxygen down to the soils, which should help reduce diseases and make the turf healthier in the long run."

The greens drainage project cost about \$230,000 for all 19 greens. The work was spread out among the entire renovation project with each green taking approximately five days to complete.

"The XGD system is a permanent solution to poorly drained and compacted greens, leading to increased aeration and the removal of excess moisture," Schwemler says. "The result is a revived green without the need for expensive and disruptive reconstruction. No other system minimizes the disruption to the green as XGD does, which ensures the surface is back in play as soon as possible. It was a great investment for our club."

intendents, Garrett Luck's budget is tight these days. The greenkeeper at North Shore Country Club in Mequon, Wis., recently developed a master plan to renovate the entire course. Part of his long-range plan included a complete rebuild of North Shore's greens.

But during the course of interviewing architects, the club decided they weren't willing

to spend the money needed to rebuild the greens. "Our members were happy with the conditions and subtleties of these old push-up greens," he explains. "But, we had about four inches of top dressing on top of a mucky soil, so our greens drained poorly ... we still needed to address this issue."

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specs was out of the question due to the cost, Luck looked for alternatives. That's when he discovered Golf Preservations, who the club hired to install green drainage on all 27 of its holes.

"At the onset, I thought it would be an improvement, but not nearly to the level that a complete rebuild would be," Luck says. "It has been a dramatic improvement, surpassing

our expectations in the ability of the greens to drain. For example, after a hard rain, we used to have standing water on 30 per cent of the greens. Since Golf Preservations installed the new drainage, now, within 20 minutes, the green surfaces are completely clear."

Luck used the opportunity of the greens being out of play to reseed them with a high-quality bentgrass; their consulting architect

also added some subtle contours to give the greens a little more interest on a select number of holes. "The members are very pleased," says Luck. "The balls don't plug now and they roll more smoothly. And, we can now mow and roll more quickly following rain events."

Samson Bailey, Golf Preservations' president, says the key to any green drainage project is choosing the right sand mix. "I recommend guys keep a sand mix that matches as closely as possible to their top three to four inches of aerifying mix. Most of the time, I tell clients to stay between two to four inches an hour on their sand mix. A lot of guys in the earlier days went sandy and now they have problems with their drainage lines showing up."

The first thing Bailey's crews perform is a survey to understand each green's topography. "Each green is unique," he explains. "We design a drainage pattern by using the natural contour of the green; then, we try to catch as much surface and ground water as we can. After we've used lasers to get the topography, we design a specific drainage layout for each green."

After the topography is determined, Bailey says the next step is to install six-foot centers to provide consistent drainage throughout the green.

This is followed by hand removing the sod in seven inch by 15 inch strips and placing plywood before trenching, Bailey says. The grade is then checked before installing two-inch perforated pipe with micro-slits to a depth of between 15 and 16 inches. The pipe is covered with a 6-2-2 greens mix to help direct the water into the system, he adds.

"After the mix is hand tamped in place, the sod is returned to its exact location to prevent shrinkage," says Bailey. "The sod is tamped level, the green is cleaned with blowers, and the green is immediately ready to roll, mow and play."

So, don't let Mother Nature wreak more havoc on your course than is necessary following a heavy storm. Take preventative measures now to tackle any subsurface greens issues your facility may have and make sure surface water drains away, rather than remains on the green.

Your members will thank you. **GCI**

David McPherson is a freelance writer based in Toronto.

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