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We need those steenkin' badgers

Even a moody beast like the badger has a welcome home – thanks to their preferred meals.

They're cantankerous den dwellers that would rather stand their ground than run from any fight, and they're calling the Princeton Golf Course in British Columbia their home. Badgers have taken up residence at the Princeton course, and superintendent Ian Elko is eager to make them feel welcome.

"About 15 years ago, we had a few badgers living on the golf course," he says. "They really took control of the ground squirrel population. They were definitely beneficial for us. We tried a lot of things to take care of ground squirrels and rodents. Nothing worked better than the badgers out here."

Each one of the nocturnal carnivores can put away about two ground squirrels each day. But as tough as they are, badgers are listed as endangered in B.C. Their unwillingness to run from a threat combined with poor eyesight makes them a common victim on roads and highways, which is their highest cause for fatalities. "They wouldn't be too intimidated by a truck," says Elko.

So when three badgers were spotted on the course last June by some club members, Elko jumped into action. He phoned the Badger Sighting Hotline to reach the South Okanagan – Similkameen (SOS) Stewardship Program with the news.

The club joined into a five-year Stewardship Agreement to help preserve the badgers and encourage them to stick around the course.

"We're going to do our part to protect them," he says. "We've put up signs around their dens for golfers to stay away, we keep vehicle traffic away. We don't mow around their dens."

The Stewardship Program is helping with costs for the projects, and assisting them in dealing with other native plants like toad flax and mustard weed that will help the badgers thrive at the course.

The effort is paying off as rodents keep disappearing from the course, and the partnership has alerted Elko and his staff to keep an eye out for other endangered animals that might make Princeton home. "We're on the lookout for other species too, like the red-headed woodpecker," he says. "The golfers like this too. We want to be stewards of our environment."



SUPERS ON ICE

Most superintendents spend all winter trying to avoid mixing ice and green, but in Vancouver, members of the Vancouver Island Golf Superintendents Association were out on the rink to raise money to fight Multiple Sclerosis.

Members swapped their clubs for sticks and raised \$100,000 for the MS Society of Canada at the 4th annual Charity Hockey Game and Banquet Jan. 29.

About four years ago, members of the association wanted to try to give back to the community, says Greg Kowalski, president of VIGSA and superintendent at Royal Oak Golf Club.

"Every Friday during the winter months, a group of us get together and play pick up hockey at one of the local rinks," he says. "We thought the hockey game would be a perfect venue to raise funds. In our 'family' of people, we knew several that were afflicted with Multiple Sclerosis, so it was the perfect fit."

Money came in from donations gathered by players and the public, as well as bids at raffles and auctions during the banquet at the Westin Bear Mountain Resort after the game. The association has raised more than \$275,000 in total for the cause.

"The event was a great success, with our goal of \$100,000 raised," says Kowalski, repeating last year's accomplishment of the same goal.

Maybe next year, we'll see if golfers can pull a hat trick?



“QUOTABLES

"It's a cutthroat industry. The private clubs used to just check what each other was doing. Now, the private clubs are even checking on what the public courses are doing."

— Chris Andrejicka, superintendent, Essex Golf & Country Club, LaSalle, Ontario, and president of the Ontario Golf Superintendents Association, to The Windsor Star

ROLL CALL

J. Rhett Evans has been named the new chief executive officer of The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA).

Mark Esoda, superintendent, Atlanta Country Club, was inducted into the Georgia Golf Hall of Fame.

Daniel "Danny Boy" Gonzalez was awarded the 2010 Superintendent of the Year award by the Texas Gulf Coast Superintendent Association.

The Mississauga Golf and Country Club, Mississauga, Ontario, hired **Adam Zubek** as its new superintendent.

Jason S. Adams, Blue Hill Country Club, was elected president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of New England for the 2011 season.

The Iowa Golf Association announced the election of longtime superintendent and Iowa Turf Industry activist **Doug Snook** into its Iowa Golf Hall of Fame.

The Golf Course Superintendents Association of Northern California (GCSANC) recognized **Thomas Bastis**, CGCS, California Golf Club, as Superintendent of the Year; **Richard Lavine**, CGCS, received the **George Santana** Distinguished Service Award; **Ryan Zuehlsdorf**, The Golf Club at Roddy Ranch, and **Jeff Markow**, CGCS, of Cypress Point Club received Turfgrass Excellence Awards; and **Terry Stratton**, Little River Inn Golf & Tennis Resort received the Presidents Award.

Todd Barker, part owner and superintendent of Fore Lakes Golf Course, was inducted into the Utah Golf Hall of Fame.

Chris Condon, superintendent, Tetherow Resort and Golf Course in Bend, Ore., won a 2010 GCSAA/Golf Digest Environmental Leaders in Golf Award in the resort facilities category.

The Ford Plantation, Richmond Hill, Ga., announced the hiring of **Alan Bussey**, equipment manager; Brooks Riddle, assistant superintendent and **Matt Sumpter**, assistant in training.

SUPER SHOT

It's very common for Sean Kjemhus to see elk moving and feeding on the Stewart Creek Golf & Country Club high-mountain course throughout the winter in Canmore, Alberta, Canada.

However, Sean shares with GCI this particularly picturesque pic he shot recently with his Blackberry.

"Here we have several elk that have worked through the snow to the turf to feed," says the director of agronomy. "There was actually a herd of 80 elk spread out along No. 2 fairway – which is in the picture – No. 3 and No. 4 fairways, in trees and out in the open. They also will bed down in the open areas... that is they will clear snow away to lay down on the turf as it is much warmer than the outside temperatures. These spots that the elk feed or lay down on reveal themselves in spring time as discolorations due to the exposure to cold temperatures. In addition the elk urine through the snow creates dead patches of turf that need to be repaired in the spring"

Yet another reason Sean says they use protective fencing around all the greens in the off-season.

Check out Sean's maintenance blog at <http://stewartcreekgolf.blogspot.com>.

Do you have a Super Shot?

Forward it along with a brief description to GCI at gci@gie.net.





Stephen Tucker is the equipment manager at the Ritz-Carlton Members Golf Club in Bradenton, Fla., and past president of the International Golf Course Equipment Managers Association. He can be reached at 941-309-2913 or stephen.tucker@ritzcarlton.com.

ASK PROBING QUESTIONS

Not long ago we discussed some basic questions to use when interviewing equipment manager candidates. Here are five more great queries to weave into your line of questioning.

1 "What were the most significant accomplishments you made at your last job?"

This question reveals whether the individual sets goals at a new position and what they were able to achieve. Your candidate should be able to name some things they've accomplished. You can tell a lot about someone's personality by how they answer this simple question. What you don't want to hear: "They never gave me the things I needed to get anything accomplished."

2 "If hired, describe what your first week would look like."

When I'm interviewing for a position I make some quick assessments: How does the equipment look? How well is the facility organized? How tight are reels set? Is a preventive maintenance system in place? What are the expectations and are they realistic? These are issues I evaluate without ever needing to ask them. This sets my goals for future accomplishments. This question gauges a candidate's interest in the position and gives you an idea of what you would be seeing the first week of their employment. Will they review what has been done already and how it has been done? Will they observe the current processes that are in place? You never want someone to come onboard and just start changing everything.

3 "What was your favorite part about your last job?"

Now you're trying to find something positive from the person's last or current employment. This question gives you insight into what the applicant likes. You also want to know whether an individual is a positive thinker or dwells on the negative. You want to employ positive people, people who can take the good with the bad and brush things off when they don't go just right. Golf course management is not something that goes well 365 days a year. Things will happen, mistakes will be made and you need to have people who can adapt and help when things are rough. This is tough to find, so when you do, no matter what position you are hiring for, hold on to them.

4 Scenario question: "A staff member comes to you with a fly mower that fell off the back of his cart and now the fuel tank is leaking. How do you handle that situation?"

This is the ultimate personality question. You're looking to identify what type of manager or leader you are interviewing. This question can go in three different directions. One: "I would just take the fly mower and give him another one." This tells me that the individual is either telling me what he thinks I want to hear or is someone that goes with the flow. This individual is OK with everything as it is and really won't go above and beyond, but does what is needed to get the job done. Two: "I would take the fly mower and report him to the superintendent." This individual does not want to step on anyone's toes but he wants someone to be aware that

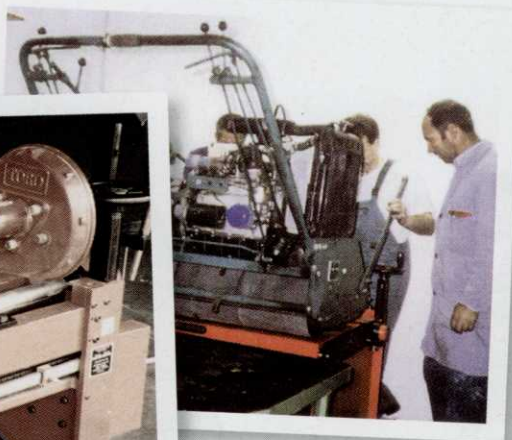
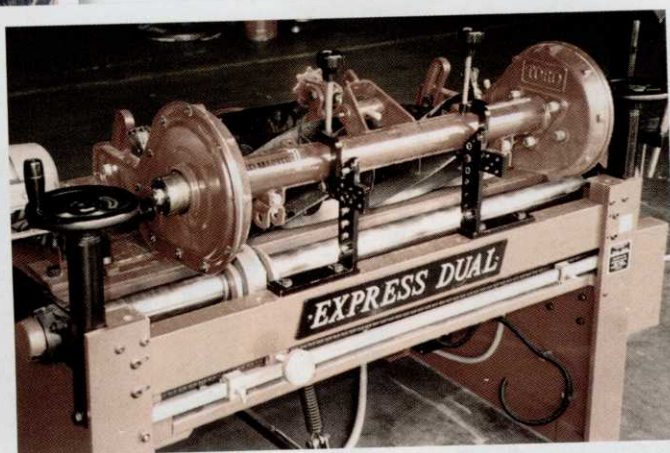
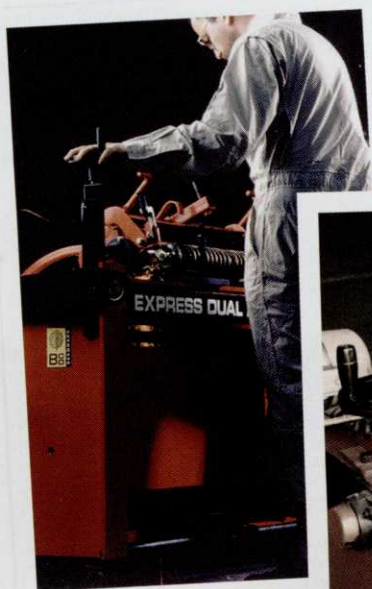
You want to employ **positive people**, people who can take the good with the bad and brush things off when they don't go just right.

there is an issue with an employee and he would like to see it resolved. Three: "I would ask him how it happened, explain to him the proper way of securing the fly mower to his vehicle, remind him of how much it costs to fix the issue and then explain the issue to the superintendent." This applicant went above and beyond to make sure the employee understood what the effects of mistakes cost, trained him in the proper way of securing the equipment and got him back on the course. Overall, this individual would gain the respect of the staff and will be more willing to report accidents when they happen.

5 "Do you or have you played golf?"

It's a simple, but effective, question. A tech is not required to play golf, however those who do have a sense of pride in the product they are helping to create because they understand the importance. You can't expect a technician who hasn't played golf to understand how important it is that everything is cut perfect and that topdressing is necessary. Playing the game is just as important as working in it, no matter what position you are in. **GCI**

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DON JONES

CONVERGING ON CHANGE

By Pat Jones

JIM KEEGAN and his associates are trying to get facilities to change their old, unprofitable paradigms.

Everyone has a handful of sayings and axioms that they use regularly. Talk with J.J. “Jim” Keegan for 30 minutes and you’re very likely to hear him say, “Status quo is a formidable foe.”

In short, Keegan believes in change. His group, Golf Convergence, is trying to help facilities change their business paradigm before the status quo takes them into bankruptcy or obsolescence. Keegan is the driving force behind the group, using his background as a CPA and MBA as well as his wide experience with facilities to analyze the weaknesses and strengths of golf facilities and pull together a team to create a strategy and execute a solution.

That may sound like a lot of business-speak bull, but the way it works is usually pretty simple. A case in point is the University of Minnesota Golf Course. The facility was being transitioned from the athletic department over into university services and was losing \$450,000 per year. Keegan came in, analyzed the situation and realized that tee times weren’t being utilized and that the course had a reputation for being under-maintained. The school adjusted the schedule to change student and faculty access times and raised conditioning standards. The course generated \$250,000 in profit the next

year without any major capital investment or huge changes in the operation. They simply fixed the status quo. “Condition and price are always the top factors in perceived value,” says Keegan. “We always challenge the status quo in those areas first.”

Keegan grew up in the Philly area and played golf as a kid, but he also picked up on the family’s entrepreneurial genes early. “I was one of those kids who got into Cub Scouts and did door-to-door sales for everything...peanut brittle and Christmas wreathes and all that...and I always had a paper route.” Predictably, he started caddying at the William Flynn-designed Philmont CC in Huntingdon Valley, Pa., and the golf bug really got him.

The experience shaped the rest of his life. The Caddie Master liked him and gave him the first bags of the day, telling him: “I expect to see you again in 3 ½ hours. You set the pace of play for the entire day.” Heady stuff for a 12 year old. “I still walk very quickly to this day,” says Keegan.

He learned a bit about club operations and the maintenance side during his years at the 36-hole facility but never seriously considered golf as a career when he headed off to TCU to get his accounting degree. He went on to get his MBA at Michigan and put his ROTC experience to work

for five years in the Air Force. He joined the accounting/consulting giant KPMG after the military but realized that the 8 – 5 corporate world wasn’t for him.

In 1989, he was helping to raise capital for small firms when he saw a business plan for an early automated tee time system. He recognized the opportunity in the then-burgeoning golf market, broke off from KPMG and formed Fairway Systems. He put the financing together, got the system built and launched what was at the time the largest tee-time provider for municipalities.

The ‘90s were a crazy time in the golf market between unprecedented construction and growth, big money coming in and a barrage of technologies like tee-time programs and dot-com “portals”...and Keegan was always smack in the middle of it. “Everyone was launching some kind of tee-time or point-of-sale software,” recalls Keegan. “Money was being thrown around like crazy, management companies were trying to sell their own software and new firms were coming to the market daily.” The pinnacle of the insanity probably came when bookforgolf.com sponsored a lavish \$1 million+ party at the PGA merchandise show in 2000 and hired Hootie & the Blowfish to play a gig.

In 2005, Keegan got off the

merry-go-round and formed Golf Convergence because he recognized that “someone had to start helping facilities act like businesses.” For the past five years, he’s worked with facilities and owners – many times municipal operations – to fix what’s ailing them and return them to profitability and health. For each project, he’ll assemble a team (which sometimes includes our Tim Moraghan, Armen Suny or other agronomic experts), assess the situation, create a strategy to change things and then help execute as needed.

This isn’t new, but the economy and the technology are conspiring against the average operator right now.

In short, he is Mr. Fix-It. Keegan helps repair broken golf courses, so business should be good, because there are plenty of those in this country today.

What things do you see facilities doing today that make your skin crawl?

The clubhouse is such an unfriendly environment. There’s this guy behind this huge desk in the pro shop who may or may not feel like welcoming you, but that’s just one way the customer experience is usually screwed up. We know that there are an average of 13 customer touch points from first phone call to the parking lot. Very few of those are warm and engaging.

The other thing we’ve learned is that the image of the course is formed by the lowest-paid employee. What incentive do those valets and cart boys and waitresses have to excel? A perfect example is that the great Steve Lesniek says that every single person working behind the counter needs to do one simple thing: get the name and e-mail address of every single customer. That’s a good and seeming simple goal but the people doing it weren’t

capable of it. We have to train our people to the same standards as other retail businesses routinely do.

Talk about customer acquisition versus customer retention in a daily fee setting.

First, never forget this: 12 percent of customers generate 60 percent of all revenue. You have to figure out who those people are, grab them and hold on for dear life. The average U.S. public course does 32,000 rounds a year and has 5,000 to 8,000 distinct customers. Half of all

customers that play that average course once and don’t come back. That means half of all customers annually are new.

Communication is critical. Billy Casper Golf sent a “we miss you” coupon out to customers who hadn’t been back to one of their facilities. They sent the coupon to people who hadn’t played in 10 days, 20 days, 90 days, etc. It definitely generated play, because it was a good customer touch, but the interesting thing was that there was no statistical difference between the results for zero days and 90 days. The touch was all that mattered.

So just blast away with coupons and e-mails?

Obviously not, I have a database of 12,000 names of people in the golf management business that I use to market my books and services. I can’t bomb them with e-mails every day, but I have sent pretty much the exact same e-mail to the exact people quite a lot – just changing the tagline a little – and my book sales are pretty much identical every time. The repetitive message is what matters.

What else offends your MBA sensibilities?

The speed at which decisions occur is often at a byzantine pace and, partially as a result, the accuracy of decisions they eventually make is often flawed. That’s true to some extent on the daily fee side, but you really see it in munis. They are hamstrung by the levels of management. They operate in this public vacuum that is very sensitive to criticism from politicians and taxpayers.

Clubs that are run by boards and committees are perhaps the most inefficient. You have to

have a GM who is a benign dictator. Look at Augusta...they have a very narrow organizational structure and it works great. Jack Vickers at Castle Pines is another example. Yes, it’s a club, but everything is done based on a common vision.

So give us some examples of how Golf Convergence works.

We’re just finishing a plan for city/county of Denver. They have been investing in clubhouses and capital assets that have little return because they don’t touch the course. They need to focus on golf! They have a Ross course right next to Cherry Hills. It will take about \$800,000 to restore it but the return on that will be enormous. Another one of their courses has an underutilized range. We’re upgrading it and rerouting it to make it more accessible. The revenues from that will help fund everything they want to do. The end result is that golfers are excited, it doesn’t cost taxpayers a lot, managers are pleased and the politicians are happy. It’s a rare solution that makes them feel good.

Sometimes you run into straightforward pricing issues.

Contrary to what you’d think, the City of Naperville (Ill.) lost \$100,000 on their facility in 2009 because their pricing and discounting strategy drove the perceived value of the course down. Something like 12 percent of residents have annual incomes of \$250,000 or more. They were discounting golf for the wealthy! They actually raised or “right-sized” their fees, had fewer rounds but their revenues went up dramatically last year.

That didn’t seem hard.

I’m actually sometimes embarrassed at the simplicity of the solutions. The course operated by the City of Ann Arbor, Mich., did not have a liquor license, had big issues with cart traffic and irrigation problems on a couple of holes. All of those were easy fixes and rounds went up 18 percent the next year.

You work with a lot of government courses. The daily fee owners rightfully complain about government subsidized competition. How do you deal with that?

We’ve studied it and the competitive advantage for a muni over a comparable daily fee is about \$176,000 per year. But, even with that “head start,” if you gave me the choice between a operating a muni with fixed fees, political restraints, etc., I’d take the freedom of being a private operator in a heartbeat. Golf course owners excel at blaming others for their problems and failing to focus on their own business and bring professional practices and disciplines to it.

The online tee-time market that you helped to pioneer seems to be both booming and controversial right now. What’s up?

First, never forget that all golf is local. Will a national reservations system ever be created that books reservations for more than half



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Q&A

of the country? I doubt it. But, in the Dallas/Ft. Worth market, 40 percent of bookings go through a 3rd-party system so the concept is obviously valid.

Here's the thing: when Orbitz and Hotels.com came to market with discounted fares for excess airline and hotel inventory, airlines and hotels responded with guarantees of low prices on their own sites and for walk-ups. Courses have had to do the same and that continues to depress the average gross fee for a round of golf. Also, third party systems don't give up a lot of info about the customer so the facility doesn't "own" the customer like they want to. So there's an argument about whose customer it is. They say they can't because of privacy, credit cards, etc., but it's really about owning the customer. But, as long as supply exceeds demand, they (third-party tee time companies) will be a force in the market.

How do we fix this?

This isn't new, but the economy and the technology are conspiring against the average operator right now. We did a study in San Francisco Bay on courses that were using various different systems to track golfers, rounds and revenue. We found the discounts may drive play but they generated very little non-golf revenue. Discounts don't really create loyalty. They primarily create bargain shoppers.

So is discounting a death spiral?

Discounting: There is a certain fixed cost required to create a meaningful golf experience. The business plans are prepared based on project yields and associated revenue. The expenditure a course creates is a function of its cash flow and any debt it wants to take on for additional labor or whatever. At the end of the day, that often means reduced capital expenditures. That starts the death spiral. Golf is at 52% of capacity.

What's the most common complaint you hear from owners?

The negative impact of Golf Channel's golfnow.com on gross course revenues is clearly the war cry of numerous owners, leadership at the National Golf Course Owner's Association and even many PGA Sections including Kansas and Colorado. These groups feel that Golf Channel is lowering the price per round across the industry and training the customer to hop from course to course based on getting the lowest price possible.

The result is that golf operators eschew marketing and spend way too little because