

**O**ver the past year, I've asked leaders from around the industry the same question: Have we turned the corner? In other words, has the golf industry reached the point where "The Environment" is now more of an asset than a liability?

The answer, almost universally, has been "yes."

Wow. That's a stunning consensus considering that, just a decade ago, concerns about groundwater contamination, pesticide exposure, loss of habitat and water usage were threatening to destroy both the growth and reputation of the game.

What changed? What milestones did we pass? What was the critical turning point? At the risk of downplaying the challenges and problems we still face, here's my take on the key moments in the history of the issue that almost killed golf.

## Don't lick your balls

Remember the 1980s? The media was indicting us for murder in the infamous "golf ball licking" case of Lt. George Pryor. People seemed to be coming out of the woodwork claiming that playing golf or living near a course had resulted in chemical sensitivity or other illnesses. Meryl Streep showed up in Washington tearfully ranting about Alar, and chemophobia reached an all-time high.

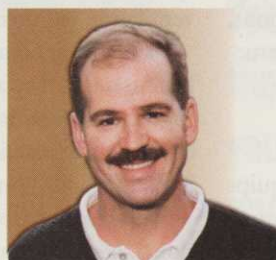
Golf course use of Diazinon went bye-bye very publicly because of waterfowl kills and EPA muscle-flexing. An AARP study suggested golf course greens were Superfund sites waiting to happen. The Corps of Engineers basically said that golf courses and wetlands were mutually exclusive. During droughts, misguided "worst-first" watering bans killed golf courses while car washes and other abusers happily dumped millions of gallons a day into sewers.

To outsiders, golf was a resource-wasting, toxic-polluting, wildlife-destroying, racist (thanks to the Shoal Creek incident) and generally pointless activity for a wealthy and uncaring elite. Comedian George Carlin suggested that the game should be outlawed and courses turned into tent cities for the homeless. Pretty much a low point, PR-wise.

It was a horribly frustrating time for superintendents who had always viewed themselves as conservationists. Now, they were being por-

# Golf's Improbable Green Conversion

BY PAT JONES



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trayed as villains who sprayed poisons indiscriminately to maintain a totally unnatural environment for wealthy bigots.

Amid the chaos, the golf community wrung its hands and bemoaned the injustice of it all. But, despite the serious threat, no one was doing much about it.

## Cape Cod and blue blazers

Then, in the late '80s, things started to change. First, GCSAA made a grant to a little-known researcher named Stuart Cohen to publish the "Cape Cod Study" findings. It wasn't perfect science, but it was the first evidence that golf courses, even in the worst-case sandy soils of coastal Massachusetts, posed little threat to groundwater.

Dr. Tom Watschke's Penn State run-off findings and other positive research followed shortly. Industry spin doctors (including me) finally had some science to fight back against the emotional rhetoric of the activists.

Next, the USGA, which had previously been leery of getting involved in environmental research, did a 180-degree turn under the executive leadership of Californian Grant Spaeth and the behind-the-scenes tenacity of the Green Section's Jim Snow. The Blue Blazers were now in the game with research money, credibility and political influence.

Then, a remarkable guy named Ron Dodson wandered into the picture with an astonishing idea: Maybe an environmental group could work cooperatively with golf courses. The resulting Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program not only changed attitudes and practices inside the industry; it created a way for courses to toot their environmental horns.

GCSAA and EPA began to communicate regularly thanks to committed leaders like Don Hearn, Dennis Lyon, Jerry

*Continued on page 56*



## He Loves L.A.

*Continued from page 55*

your father or any other family member is a challenge, Williams admits, but he says the two worked well together.

Williams says his father taught him to apply attention to detail and calls his dad "the ultimate manager of people, property and projects."

Williams was promoted to superintendent at Bob O'Link when Bob retired in 1979. He became only the fourth superintendent in the club's history.

Bob, aware that his son is a perfectionist, says Bruce is a chip off the old block. "It's a birthright," Bob says, adding that Bruce's grandfather is the same way.

### Movin' on

Bob O'Link was one of *Golf Digest's* top 100 courses in the nation under Williams, who was a fixture at the 18-hole club. But Williams admits that he and the governing board at Bob O'Link were taking one another for granted after 21 years together, and Williams felt stale.

And then LACC general manager Jim

Brewer called Williams with a job offer and a challenge. Brewer said the club was undertaking a massive greens renovation, and he wanted Williams to be a part of it. Williams was intrigued because he had never been involved in a construction project.

Williams realized that LACC was a rising star. If he took the job, Williams knew he would have to learn about new turf varieties, water quality issues, soil conditions and pests. But he viewed that as a positive.

Williams also liked the fact that the LACC has five times more membership and 18 more holes than Bob O'Link. Of course, the Southern California climate was appealing.

Williams wanted the job, but he wanted a contract. Although the LACC didn't offer contracts, it made an exception for Williams. "I told them that I didn't want to move my family 2,000 miles, buy a \$750,000 house and find out six months later they didn't like me," he says.

Williams made the stressful move to Los Angeles at the end of his demanding GCSAA presidency. But it was perfect timing, Williams

says, because he was operating at a high energy level and there was no time for a psychological letdown.

"All I could think about was getting the job done," Williams says, noting the greens construction, in addition to work on more than 60 bunkers and several tees. "I can't tell you why, but I like work at a high stress level."

Williams admits that he may "drive people nuts," but he says he gets along well with co-workers because he strives to be fair.

Williams says he's enjoying his job. He's receiving the backing and funding from management to get the job done his way.

And even the tenacious Williams enjoys the laid-back lifestyle of Southern California. But he's not ruling out another change, which is always possible in the turbulent industry golf course industry. "If change is imminent, I'll be ready for it." ■

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## Keeping It Green

*Continued from page 46*

Faubel, Steve Cadenelli, and, most notably, the Capitol Hill-savvy Bill Roberts. Thanks to their thoughtful and open approach, the agency began to understand that superintendents were among the best-educated and most responsible pesticide users.

By the early '90s, things were beginning to stabilize. We weren't losing ground anymore and a few brave souls in the media and at EPA were starting to talk about golf and the environment in positive terms.

It was then — just as we thought we might have dodged the environmental bullet — that we pulled out the big gun and shot ourselves squarely in the foot.

### Mortally wounded

The now infamous 1994 GCSAA/University of Iowa Mortality Study was, in hindsight, a naive attempt to prove that if superintendents didn't suffer ill effects from regular pesticide exposure, golfers and the public should have nothing to worry about. (For the full saga of the study, visit [golfdom.com](http://golfdom.com).) It was a perfect example of "canary in the coal mine" logic.

That logic, of course, backfired when the results seemed to indicate that the canaries had died at higher rates of "pesticide-linked" cancers than the general public. Despite the disclaimers about what conclusions could be drawn from this type of epidemiological study, the press had a field day and the worst round of golf-bashing yet descended on the industry. Paul Harvey, *The Wall Street Journal*, CBS — even Ranger Rick — they all piled on.

But from disaster came action. GCSAA, under the new and dynamic leadership style of Steve Mona, ended the longstanding "arm's length" relationship with the chemical manufacturers and actually joined RISE. GCSAA also began to take an active leadership role on the issue among the Allied Associations in Golf. An informal committee of golf industry leaders began to communicate regularly about the issues. The industry came together to develop the "Environmental Principles."

In short, because of the Iowa Study, the industry galvanized to protect its image and its financial health. A shot in the foot turned out to be the shot in the arm that unified the golf community.

### The green revolution

As the golfing public became more environmentally aware, developers sensed a new market. Today, it's hard to find a new facility that doesn't bill itself as "eco-friendly."

Superintendents, as we note in our cover story, discovered that environmentally responsible management was not only personally fulfilling, it was a great career move. All those eco-friendly courses need eco-superintendents, right?

Manufacturers discovered that superintendents were often willing to pay more for environmentally friendly products. Whole new markets for bio-controls and low-impact plant protectants emerged.

Don't get me wrong. It's not a perfect world and we still have a long way to go. But, looking back, when the green revolution hit golf, we rolled with the punch — and today, we are better off for it.

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