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Taking the Industry's Temperature

When we decided last year to devote an issue of *Golfdom* to examining the state of the industry, we knew we should do some research to back it up.

But rather than asking a

bunch of questions about what kind of mowers you buy or how often you fertilize, we decided to take the oral temperature of the industry through a telephone survey.

So we hired an outside re-

search company to call more than 100 superintendents around the country to ask them about issues ranging from job security to electronic commerce. We also did an independent survey of the Pro-

PDI

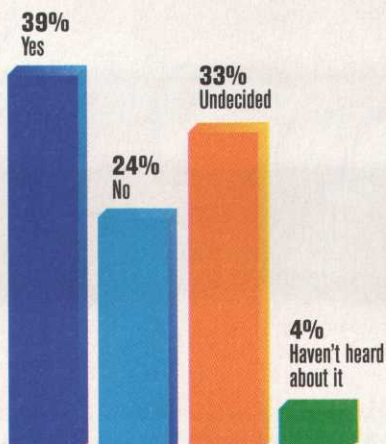
Is Half a Mandate Better Than None?

Calling the proposed Professional Development Initiative "a little controversial" is like calling Tiger Woods "kinda good." It has been the most hotly discussed political issue in the recent history of GCSAA and the profession.

In a nutshell, PDI would increase the standards required for Class A membership in the association through a combination of experience and educational requirements. The association's leadership believes that owners will respond to the higher standards and be more likely to seek out, hire and better compensate "branded" Class A members. An underlying theme is a general concern that without tougher barriers in place, job security and salaries may erode.

Opponents have decried the proposal as elitist and not in sync with the realities of a job where real-life experience and the ability to deliver results matter more than a degree. This type of criticism led the Membership Standards Resource Group, the body leading the development of the proposal, to relax the initial proposal to allow those without degrees to achieve Class A. Current Class A members would retain their standing under a grandfathering clause.

Do you support the final version of the proposed GCSAA Professional Development Initiative - or PDI?



The topic has dominated the "Talking it Over" online forum on the association's site, and postings from both sides have occasionally been nasty and personal. In an industry that prides itself on its sense of fraternity, the divisiveness has been painful to see.

Some supporters of the proposal have maintained that the opposition was a small but vocal group of boo birds who weren't reflective of the mainstream membership. In response, opponents have asked the association to survey the membership on the issue. To our knowledge, no survey results have been released by the association. Therefore, *Golfdom* included two questions about the proposal in its Superintendent State of the Industry Survey.

When asked if they support the final version of the proposal, 39 percent said "yes" while about a quarter said "no." A third said they were still undecided when the survey was done in October.

Several non-members and one Class A member (4 percent) had heard nothing about PDI. When non-members and non-voting members (Class B and C) are removed from the sample, the percentage of support goes up slightly (42 percent) while opposition decreases slightly (22 percent).

It's important to note here that mem-

Professional Development Initiative, something many superintendents asked us to do.

In this special report, you'll see more information about the 107 18-hole superintendents interviewed by the researchers. Should we have

included 9-hole superintendents or others in the study? Maybe. But for purposes of this first *Golfdom Report*, we wanted to focus on the core of the profession — and most perceive that to be 18-hole courses. Is this relatively

small survey statistically significant? We're told that's it's accurate to within +/- 10 percent. It's not perfect, but it's a good indicator of how people feel.

What is perhaps most interesting about the survey is

the lack of "shocking" results. Like most Americans, superintendents are generally comfortable with the way things are going. There were, however, a few surprises, as you'll discover when reading the report.

bers do not vote on PDI. First, the question on the ballot relates only to the changes in membership classification — not PDI itself. Any change in membership classification requires a two-thirds majority to amend the bylaws. Second, chapter delegates will cast the vast majority of votes on behalf of local members based on straw polls taken at meetings held this winter.

In short, *Golfdom's* survey can only give a sense of how members feel about the proposal, not how they would necessarily vote if they could vote.

The question raised by these results is whether support from less than half of those surveyed gives the association the "membership mandate" it has striven for since the leadership changes of the mid-1990s.

One of PDI's strongest proponents, Steve Cadenelli, CGCS at Cape Cod National GC in Brewster, Mass., agreed that it wasn't a landslide, but suggests that a change of this magnitude rarely has unanimous support. "Certainly we'd like to have a mandate, but I think 40 percent to 50 percent is a pretty good start," he says.

Cadenelli also wasn't surprised by the level of opposition. "We're asking people to meet a standard they've never had to reach before," he says.

Jim Black, a Class A member at Twin Shields GC in Dunkirk, Md., probably reflects the sentiments of many who oppose the initiative.

"I'm not so much specifically concerned with PDI, but I'm just generally dissatisfied with GCSAA," he says. "They focus too much attention on the big-budget certified guys at private clubs and not enough on the average guys at public courses like mine."

Black adds that he's concerned about the association's "obsession" with the image of the superintendent.

"I don't need someone in Kansas worrying about my

image," he says. "I work hard, and I'm proud of what I do. As far as I'm concerned, my image is the person I am 24 hours a day, not just when I'm on the job."

One respondent who originally said he opposed PDI has changed his mind since the survey — sort of. Craig Conner of Summit Chase CC in Snellville, Ga., decided to vote with his Georgia GCSA chapter in support of the proposal.

"I've learned some more about it and found out how much easier they've made it to get educational points," he says. "It's always been so difficult to get into the classes you needed (at the national conference). Now, I'd get five hours for the chapter meeting I just attended."

Conner may be among many who, once they finally learn full details of the final proposal, decide to give it their support. He doubts, however, that it will have the desired effect of bringing owners over to "our side."

"I don't think owners will ever really recognize us for what we are," he says.

"We're still pretty much viewed as hired help and the expectations keep growing. That's something I'd like to see GCSAA do something about."

Is it likely that the large number (one-third) of undecided will suddenly make up their minds to oppose the proposal? No one we talked to seems to believe so.

Nor had (at press time) any chapters confirmed that they planned to vote against the bylaw changes, while several individuals told us that their chapters had voted in favor.

So is this the "done deal" that some have suggested?

"The only thing that's a done deal is that our education programs are being reformatted to better meet member needs," Cadenelli says. "Everything else is up to the delegates in February." ■

— Pat Jones

If PDI passes, will it be good or bad for the profession?



Wanted: More Workers

What is the biggest challenge you face in your job?



*Irrigation/Ownership issues
Ownership Issues
Resources
Unrealistic Owner Expectations

Ron Ross, CGCS of Quarry Oaks GC in scenic Ashland, Neb., recently lamented about the difficulty of finding employees to work on his crew. When the unemployment rate is low and your course is located about 30 miles from a metropolitan area, it's difficult to attract potential workers, Ross says.

A whopping 58 percent of superintendents participating in our Superintendent State of the Industry Survey agreed with Ross that labor is the biggest challenge they face in their jobs. The second-biggest challenge is the weather, according to 23 percent of superintendents in the survey. Ten percent note that unrealistic golfer expectations is their biggest challenge.

Since other businesses, such as fast-food restaurants, offer employees better wages and benefits, the golf course maintenance industry has problems attracting laborers.

"We've had a lot of turnover the past few years," says John Cummings, superintendent for Berry Hills CC in Charleston, W.Va. "Our entry-level pay rate is less than some fast-food restaurants."

Keith Ihms, superintendent of Bent Tree CC in Dallas, says his golf course upped pay rates from \$5.50 to \$6.50 an hour this year to better compete for employees with fast-food eateries and car-wash operations, which are paying up to \$8 an hour.

"We had to make major adjustments with our budget to be competitive," Ihms says. "We also put a 401k plan in place. We're looking at

how we can entice employees to work here."

Cummings says another problem is that there aren't a lot of skilled employees available. "I hate having a \$5.75-an-hour employee running a \$40,000 fairway mower," he adds.

But superintendents realize they must hire unskilled workers and train them because of the shortage of employees. That includes Cummings, who says he's hoping to introduce a better pay package in 2001 to attract more help.

Ihms notes that a government crackdown on illegal Hispanic laborers reduced the labor pool in the Dallas area. Many Hispanic laborers have been shown the door because they don't have the proper documentation to work in the States. "The timing is difficult because the labor force is already small," says Ihms, noting that he's helping some of his Hispanic employees obtain proper documentation.

Bruce Rickert, CGCS at Medford Village CC in Medford Lakes, N.J., says weather and unrealistic golfer expectations combine to present him with his biggest challenge. Rickert explains that golfers underestimate the weather's impact on his course and therefore expect first-rate conditions every day. For instance, a golfer doesn't understand that a half-inch of rain will slow the greens, and a superintendent can't do anything about it, Rickert points out.

"I get discouraged with golfers," he adds. "The overall conditions of golf have improved dramatically over the years. There's more money going into maintenance, but [golfers] don't understand that." ■

— Larry Aylward

Out of Harm's Way?

Joe Oliveira, superintendent of Green Valley CC in Portsmouth, R.I., says he enjoys the relaxed feeling that comes with his job security. But Oliveira believes that job security for most of the nation's superintendents is getting worse.

Job security is an ongoing issue among superintendents. According to our Superintendent State of the Industry Survey, more than 70 percent of superintendents feel secure in their current positions. However, only 24 per-

cent of superintendents feel that job security has improved in the industry. Twenty percent side with Oliveira and say that job security is deteriorating.

On Jan. 1, Oliveira will celebrate his first anniversary as superintendent at Green Valley. He has worked at the course for 14 years, 11 years as an assistant. Green Valley is a semi-private club and has no green committee. Oliveira says club politics don't exist. "I have good rapport with everyone," he adds.

Since there are no politics and because Oliveira feels secure and empowered in his job, he's more passionate about his livelihood. He has never risen in the morning and not wanted to go to work. "This is a nice place to be," he adds. "You always do a better job if you're enthusiastic about it."

Does Oliveira feel fortunate about his employment situation?

"Absolutely," he says. "I hear the horror stories about guys who have been at courses for 15 years, and then one day they get fired. It's a crime."

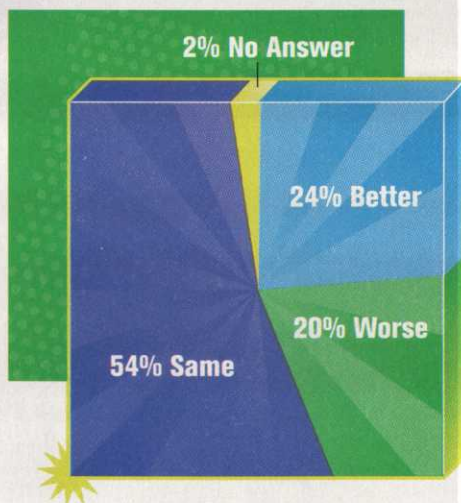
Oliveira says the industry and its leaders are placing too much emphasis on image, not on what superintendents are accomplishing on golf courses. It's one reason he believes job security is getting worse.

"There's more emphasis on image than the finished product," he says. "I have a tough time coming to grips with that."

James Starnes, superintendent of Crooked Creek GC in Fuquay Varina, N.C., says he feels insecure about his job because his accomplishments are sometimes at the mercy of Mother Nature. Starnes, too, has heard the tough-luck tales of superintendents who were fired

Continued on page 35

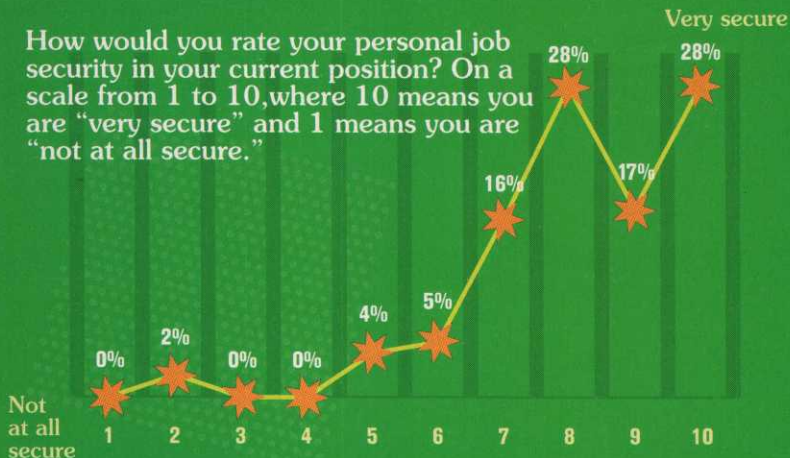
Industry-wide, do you feel that job security for superintendents is better, worse or about the same as it used to be?



cent of superintendents say that job security has improved in the industry. Twenty percent side with Oliveira and say that job security is deteriorating.

On Jan. 1, Oliveira will celebrate his first anniversary as superintendent at

How would you rate your personal job security in your current position? On a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 means you are "very secure" and 1 means you are "not at all secure."



How long have you been in your current position?



Continued from page 32

from their jobs because their courses suffered from bad weather.

While Starnes believes the owners at his semi-private club are pleased with his performance, he's still not secure because of the elements he can't control, like droughts and floods, which can wreak havoc in the South.

Most superintendents would probably feel more secure in their jobs if communication was improved with their superiors, Starnes notes.

"Problems can arise when owners, green committees and superintendents are inaccessible," he adds. "The better the communication, the better the understanding and knowledge."

Tim Hatfield, superintendent of Geneva Hills GC in Clinton, Ind., says he's unsure about his job security, but his uncertainty has nothing to do with his on-the-job performance. Last De-

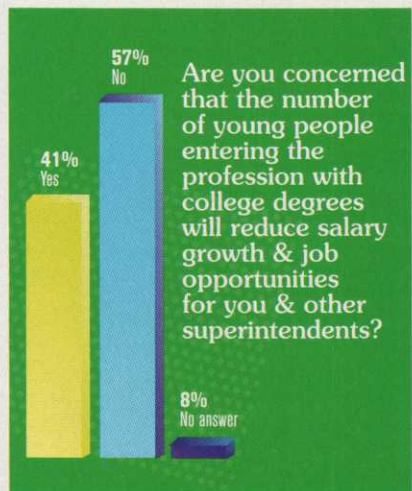
ember, the owner of Geneva Hills GC died, and the course could close.

"The entire staff doesn't know what's going to happen," Hatfield says. "It's one of those acts of God that's out of your control. But it affects my livelihood."

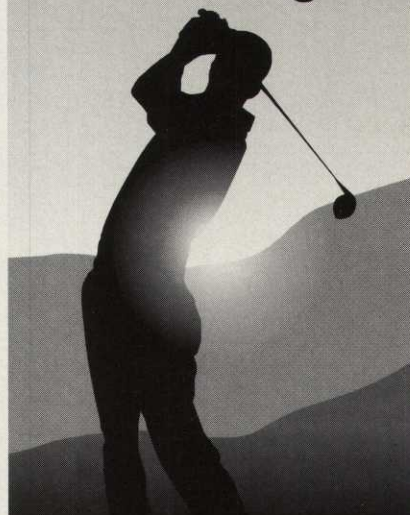
Job security has much to do with the influx of new college diploma-toting superintendents entering the industry. According to our survey, 41 percent of superintendents say they're concerned that the number of young people with college degrees entering the profession will reduce salary growth and opportunities for them. Fifty-seven percent, including Oliveira, aren't concerned.

"Young guys know the books, but when it comes down to doing [tasks on the course], they're green," Oliveira says. "There's no substitute for experience." ■

- Larry Aylward



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E-Commerce

Still Faces Uphill Battle

Despite sophisticated marketing designed to convince superintendents that electronic commerce is the wave of the future, the message is still struggling to be heard, judging by our Superintendent State of the Industry Survey. The results show that superintendents are split on using the Internet for business purposes. Twenty-eight percent use the Internet daily to conduct business, 25 percent use it weekly, 26 percent use it occasionally, and 21 percent say they never navigate the Web for business purposes.

As for purchasing supplies online, the numbers are more stark, at least in the short term. Forty-two percent of survey respondents said there was "no way" they would

buy any supplies online in the next 12 months, and only 3 percent are currently buying online. That means that e-commerce companies have more convincing to do if they hope to capture a substantial portion of superintendents' business.

One of the hindrances to e-commerce in the industry is a lack of Internet access from some superintendents' offices, says Carlos Vega, superintendent at Vista Hills CC in El Paso, Texas. He says he would buy online, but he's not linked to the Internet.

"That's one of the major barriers that is preventing superintendents from committing to e-commerce," Vega says. "We all have computers, but not all of us are online yet. As more superintendents get hooked up, more e-commerce will take place."

Vega says he plans to be online at his course within the next five months. He plans to purchase spare parts for his machines and chemicals through the Internet.

Bruce Rickert, certified superintendent at Medford CC in Medford, N.J., uses the Internet daily for business purposes and says it's "somewhat likely" that he will pur-

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chase supplies or products online in the next 12 months.

He says he foresees a day when the Internet will replace salespeople. But companies who want Rickert's business can't just send him broadcast e-mails about equipment deals. They must tailor their marketing plans to meet his specific needs, he says.

"Right now, most of the companies aren't customizing their pitches to me," Rickert says. "Companies are going to have to work harder to get information that specifically targets me, and they will have to provide that information

concisely. My time is precious, and the companies that make it easier for me to make online purchases will be more likely to get my business."

Rickert says e-commerce companies also suffer from the fact that they lack a history. He says he's more likely to buy from a Web site that bears the name of an established company rather than a newcomer he knows little about. "I'm leery of doing an online deal with people I don't feel like I know," Rickert says.

Kevin Goolsby, superintendent at Sportsman of Perdido GC in Pensacola, Fla., says he uses the Internet to gather information on products. He also uses e-mail to confer with fellow superintendents before deciding which products to buy. He listed himself as a "very likely" to purchase items through the Web in the next year.

"One drawback to buying items on the Web is that you risk losing contact with expert salespeople," Goolsby says. "That's scary for a lot of people, particularly when you depend on them to help you make a purchasing decision."

But as more golf courses focus attention on bottom-line performance, Goolsby says e-commerce will provide a faster, cheaper way to procure goods and services.

"We all have budgets that we have to stay within," he says. "If buying online will help us do that, then that's where the industry is going to move."

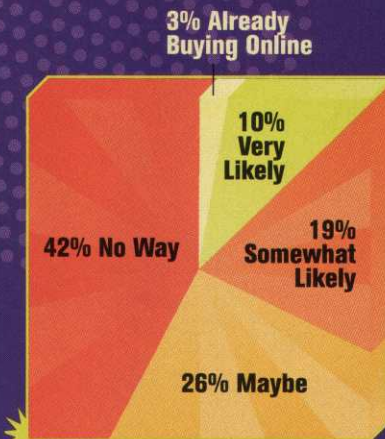
Vega also says he's not sure he'll ever buy equipment like greens mowers and utility vehicles on the Web. "I'll probably still contact my local distributor because I'll still want to see what I'm buying," he adds. ■

- Frank H. Andorka Jr.

How often do you use the Internet for business purposes?



How likely are you to buy supplies or products for your facility online in the next 12 months?



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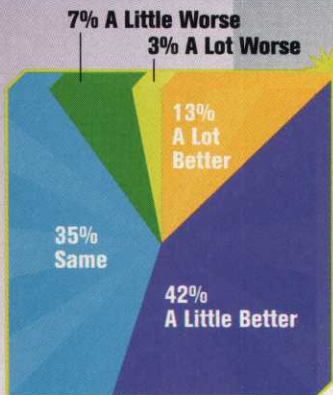
Scotts

Say, Aren't You the Superintendent?

Since the GCSAA has spent so much time, money and energy raising the profile of superintendents with golfers, the association should be pleased to know that superintendents believe their image with average golfers is getting better, according to our Superintendent State of the Industry Survey.

A majority — 55 percent — feel the image of superintendents is “a little better” or “a lot better” with golfers.

Do you feel that the average golfer's appreciation for the superintendent is getting better or worse?



of the course,” Leventhal says. “Golfers still don’t know exactly what we do, but at least they have a vague sense that we’re important to keeping their golf courses in good shape.”

On the other end of the spectrum is Terry McNamara, superintendent at Tarry Brae Muni GC in South Fallsburg, N.Y. He says respect for superintendents is slowly diminishing. He points to golfers’ lack of repairing ball marks and raking bunkers as indications that they don’t care about course maintenance.

McNamara comes from a family of superintendents, including his three brothers and his father. He says they have each expressed the same sentiment around the dinner

table during the holidays: Respect for superintendents among golfers continues to disappear, and GCSAA is powerless to do anything about it.

Thirty-five percent believe their image is the same, and a mere 10 percent say their image is “a little worse” or “a lot worse.”

Count Stuart Leventhal among the 55 percent. Leventhal, superintendent at Interlachen CC in Winter Park, Fla., says that respect for the role superintendents play in keeping the golf course in playing shape is higher than it was 10 years ago.

“Word is out that the pro doesn’t take care

of the course,” Leventhal says. “Golfers still don’t know exactly what we do, but at least they have a vague sense that we’re important to keeping their golf courses in good shape.”

“I understand there has been this huge influx of players, and there isn’t time to teach them all the basic rules of golf course etiquette,” McNamara says. “But the people who come to you and raise hell about poor conditions are the same ones who wouldn’t fix ball marks if their lives depended on it.” ■

— Frank H. Andorka Jr.

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The good news for golf course maintenance manufacturers and their dealers and distributors is that most superintendents are content with customer service. According to our Superintendent State of the Industry Survey, 43 percent of superintendents say that service and support from local dealers and distributors has gotten better in the past few years. Only 10 percent say that service is worse, and 47 percent report that service is the same, which probably means it's decent.

Over the past few years, has the service and support from local dealers and distributors gotten better or worse?



other, Ihms says.

"That's benefiting us," he adds. "The market is more competitive, and there's better service because of it."

Ihms says Bent Tree's name also has something to do with the improved service. "The name of our facility has clout," Ihms adds, noting that Bent Tree hosts a PGA Senior Tour event. "They want our business."

John Cummings, superintendent of Berry Hills CC, in Charleston, W Va., was one of only 10 percent of superintendents who said that service and support from local distributors is worse. That's because Berry Hills CC has no local distributors for some of its major equipment. For instance,

service is the same, which probably means it's decent.

Keith Ihms, superintendent of Bent Tree CC in Dallas, says service is better because the industry's three major equipment manufacturers changed distributors in his area about five years ago. Before that, service was suffering, and the manufacturers recognized the problem. "The three new distributors have done a better job for me on loaner equipment, parts availability and overall service," Ihms says.

Because they're new, the three distributors are more hungry for business and competing with each

a major mower distributor is about a four-hour drive away.

"It's all based on our location," Cummings says. "We're in no-man's land for distributors."

Hence, Cummings has little personal contact with sales representatives and technicians. It's also difficult to get repair people to Berry Hills CC in a timely manner. "It makes downtime a little longer," he says.

To combat the problem, Cummings has increased his inventory on certain parts, but that has also driven up his maintenance budget. Cummings is not angry, and he understands that locations of dealers and distributors are based on business decisions. "It's just the way things are in today's business world," he notes. ■

— Larry Aylward

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Issues

The More Things Change...

... will they stay the same? Examining 2001's pressing issues

Last year, the world waited for computers to destroy the world. Fortunately, the concerns heading into 2001 are less frightening, but there are a few issues that bear watching. Here are some of the issues superintendents will be talking about this time next year:

Rounds vs. course construction

In late October, the National Golf Foundation reported that 408 golf courses had opened in 2000. At the end of last year, 936 courses were under construction, with 760 designated to open this year. NGF usually projects that only 60 percent of those courses will open on time. But even then, the number of courses opened this year will easily eclipse last year's record of 496 openings.

NGF found that public facilities (daily fee and municipi-

pal) have dominated openings over the last several years, and it doesn't see that trend changing soon. In 1999, 84 percent of all course openings were public courses. NGF reports that 91 percent of planned courses and 87 percent under construction will also be public.

The number of rounds in 1999 reached 564 million last year, according to NGF. The average number of rounds per golfer increased to 21.3 rounds per year. NGF estimates there are 26.4 million golfers in the United States, with core golfers (those who played eight or more rounds in the year) making up 13.7 million.

Drought conditions pumped up the number of rounds last year, so what will the 2000 numbers show given the odd weather patterns that dominated the season? And can the numbers last given some unsteadiness in the economy? Stay tuned.

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ADA

As Casey Martin's golf car-use case rolls into the Supreme Court (a decision is expected this month), how golf courses deal with the access issues mandated in the Americans with Disabilities Act hangs over superintendents like the sword of Damocles.

There are 54 million people in the United States with disabilities as defined by the ADA, and around 600,000 of them golf. But Michael Quimbey, vice president of environmental affairs for Dallas-based Club Corp., says superintendents shouldn't be worried. Rules defining compliance requirements will be issued by the U.S. Department of Justice sometime in 2002, and Quimbey expects them to require only minor adjustments.

"It's a matter of changing our attitudes to golfers with disabilities," Quimbey says. "We, as an industry, have to remember that these people are golfers first and disabled second. When you realize that, it won't be that hard to accommodate them."

Quimbey and other members of the golf industry have worked on a subcommittee that produced six rules that courses will have to follow to be in compliance with the ADA once the Department of Justice issues the final rules in 2002. Then golf courses will probably have a year to comply, he says.

Management companies

There's rarely a middle ground for most superintendents when it comes to management companies: They either love 'em or they hate 'em. But understanding that management companies are here to stay, what impact are they having on the industry?

The consensus is that well-run management companies add tremendous stability to the business side of golf. For some facilities, aligning with a management company provides them with additional resources that they wouldn't otherwise be able to tap. Superintendents who work for good companies talk of job security and the possibilities for advancement as two significant advantages that management companies offer.

On the other hand, superintendents are upset with what they view as unethical recruitment tactics of management companies such as mass mailings and unannounced course visits. Some superintendents worry that owners are starting to listen to the pitch more closely.



Casey Martin's golf car-use case shouldn't have a severe impact on recreational golf.

Though management companies have mushroomed, the weaker ones are slowly being squeezed out of the market. That leaves more courses to be divvied up by three or four large firms, constricting the job market outside of management companies more than ever for superintendents.

FQPA

No single national government regulation raises the ire of superintendents more than the Food Quality Protection Act, enacted in 1996 to protect Americans — particularly children — from pesticide risks associated with food production.

Industry observers, however, believe that what started out as a good idea has been hijacked by the EPA and turned into an all-out war on pesticides, particularly in light of the actions taken against a variety of pesticides this year. It seems almost inevitable that more pesticides will come under fire next year, and it's important for superintendents to let their voices be heard, say industry insiders.

Rumors have Carol Browner retiring as chief administrator of the EPA. If that happens, the industry will have to watch closely to see who takes her place. ■

—Frank H. Andorka Jr.

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