

# A Look Back

REPORTER EXPLORES OLD DAYS,  
WHAT INDUSTRY HAS BECOME

By Peter Blais

I've covered the golf course industry for nearly 11 years, and it's good to see the game grow in popularity and the superintendent's profession rise in status.

Many of the stories I covered in the early days focused on the shortage of golf courses. Golf participation rates grew faster than the number of facilities. That meant too many golfers and too few places to play.

"A new course a day" was the battle cry a dozen years ago, and the industry responded. The number of new courses opening annually zoomed into the 300s, then the 400s and last year into the 500s as the industry danced through the 1990s.

Now that the growth in golf course supply has caught up and even surpassed demand, the industry is trying

to gently tap the golf course development brakes without putting the pedal through the floor board. "Sensible development in markets that make sense" is the new battle cry.

Pessimists argue that the growth in supply and a stagnant demand can only spell disaster for the golf industry — but all the courses I see seem to be full or close to it. While the number of U.S. golfers remains around 25 million, there are reportedly another 40 million who would like to take up the game if it weren't for cost, skill and intimidation barriers. The challenge is how to remove those barriers and bring that untapped resource into the game.

It still surprises me what a big business golf has become. Still, many of the companies I covered back in the early 1990s are gone. A few have gone out of business, but most have merged with other firms and taken on new names.

Wall Street is a financial thoroughfare many course operators are traveling to find additional money for their developments and acquisitions. The financial road doesn't only lead to the local banks anymore.

As for marketing, you rarely heard

the expression "customer service" spoken at golf courses a dozen years ago. Now it seems every management firm and individual course operator in the land has those two words etched into their mission statements and employee psyches. The back-of-the-house maintenance staffs of the 1980s are moving toward the front, led by superintendents who know that exceeding customer expectations is part of their jobs.

The growth in new courses meant several things, including the need to train more superintendents and assistant superintendents to staff the facilities. Turf students often had a dozen job offers before they left school. Some were hired out of college to fill head superintendent positions at salaries that 10- and 15-year turf veterans envied. Stories about experienced superintendents making six-figure salaries became more commonplace.

But all good things come to an end. More people entered the profession as universities added or expanded turf-management programs. Most recent grads now consider themselves fortunate to start as first assistants.

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## Quotable

**"We haven't had rain in 84 days.  
Not a drop."**

— Tom Kastler, superintendent of the Club at Runaway Bay, speaking on Sept. 21 about the severe drought in north Texas.

**"When I'm down there among  
the fish, none of them know  
who I am."**

— Tiger Woods, arguably the world's most recognized athlete, on the benefits of his new hobby — scuba diving. (The Cleveland Plain Dealer)

**"He has turned out many  
superintendents, but they will all  
probably tell you that he was the  
biggest son of a &#@!\*, b\*\$%\*!#,  
f?!+\*\$#@ ever to work for.  
You hated him — but you loved him.  
Because when you got your own  
golf course, all of the sudden you  
realized why he did what he did.  
Dick made you a better  
superintendent because he was  
so diligent and intense."**

— California CGCS Jim Ferrin on Dick Bator, renowned former superintendent and consultant.

## Off The Fringe

# Perc Test Needs Evaluation

### MILLER WORKING WITH USGA TO STANDARDIZE LAB TESTING

**A**mid charges of politics and loose methodology among soil testing labs, the USGA believes it's on the verge of a breakthrough to standardize testing methods and put an end to six years of tepid relations between labs and golf course contractors, builders and soil blenders.

"I'd love to put out a new method — and verify its strengths and correct its weaknesses for several months — and then release a final version by the first of the year," said Bob Miller, an affiliate professor at Colorado State University, who's working for the USGA to standardize testing methods among the country's labs.

The USGA has agreed to share costs with the labs if they need retooling. "While the labs' analysis for organic matter and soil chemicals are 'rock solid,' the bad news is the saturated hydraulic conductivity [percolation] test [is not]," Miller said.

The problem is the test method itself — the way it is written has signifi-

cant weaknesses, Miller noted. "No two labs are on the same page or in the same book," he said.

Indeed, the "perc test," as it is called, is the most important of all the analysis measures. The test determines how many inches per hour of water percolates through the root zone beneath a golf course green.

At the summer meeting of the Golf Course Builders Association of America (GCBA), the importance of the perc test was driven home.

Miller said: "One of the builders said to me, 'I produce X thousand tons of material on my construction projects each year. If a lab can tell me that a 90-10 (sand-to-peat) blend works better than 85-15, I can write off several million dollars in construction costs.'"

Therein lies part of the rub. Labs feel that if they tighten up their tolerances, they will lose customers, critics of the test say. So they widen the tolerances and lean up the mixture by using less peat.

"This was the dirty little secret of the industry," Miller said. "When a supplier sends a sample to the lab, he

sends a good sample. If he doesn't like the numbers he gets, he sends it to another lab."

Eight soil testing labs are now accredited through the American Association of Laboratory Accreditation, but Miller said "accreditation is empty unless you test for peoples' performance." Some labs have chosen not to seek accreditation, which costs \$25,000 to \$30,000 every three years.

The fact that soil testing labs use different equipment is not the primary problem, according to Miller, who holds a Ph.D. in soil science and for 10 years ran a lab at University of California-Davis.

"That is a misconception," he said. "If I ranked the top three problems, equipment would be third. Technique is the operative problem."

To correct the situation, Miller and the USGA are taking steps to make the process less sophisticated, but codify the steps more rigidly.

"The bottom line is that we use a robust method, which means anyone can do it and get the same numbers," Miller said, "If we get less than 5 percent to 7 percent difference [from lab to lab], that's fine with me."

— Mark Leslie

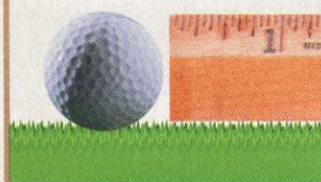
### Calling the Shots

Gimmie!  
Gimmie!

Is close enough good enough, or should you have to go the "hole" way?

Concede: **63.9%**

Make 'em putt: **36.1%**



HEY!  
Mulligan  
Mulligan

When you end up in the drink, should you get another shot?

Yes **36.2%**  
No **63.8%**

SOURCE: NATIONAL GOLF FOUNDATION  
ILLUSTRATION: DAN BEEDY

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The head superintendent jobs are available. It just takes a little longer to get there, which is probably a good thing considering the on-the-job training most young superintendents acquire before attaining top posts.

Superintendents have also upgraded their image. The battle to get others to call them superintendents, rather than greenkeepers, was still being fought 10 years ago. But with the new titles come new responsibilities, including budgeting, government regulations and personnel management issues. While enjoying their new responsibilities, many superintendents seem to miss the time spent outdoors, which is what attracted them to the profession in the first place.

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