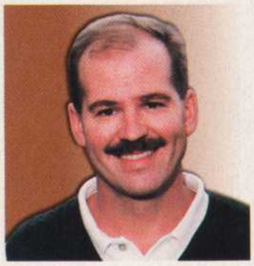
How's Our Industry One Year Later?

BY PAT JONES



I DON'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS, BUT MAYBE WE CAN FIGURE THIS OUT TOGETHER

In the weeks past and weeks to come, nearly every magazine columnist and TV pundit in the country will try to put the events of a year ago in perspective for their particular audiences. Frankly, I'm not sure I'm up to the task. It was such a horrendous gut punch from such a baffling, invisible foe that it continues to boggle my mind.

Nonetheless, here are a few observations about the past year and how our industry reacted, changed and survived.

First, it seems to me that America's almost primal need to heal and move on probably benefited us more than anything else. People were, and continue to be, desperate for a return to normalcy and comfort.

Golf provided that for many, and it was surprising how quickly many courses filled back up. Of course, destination resorts and high-end daily fees that relied heavily on travel and/or corporate outings were hit hard and continue to struggle, but the core of the golf market — the local clubs and moderately priced daily fees — showed amazing resiliency. For me, the lesson here is that the therapeutic value of golf can never be underestimated.

Personally, I'm almost ashamed of how quickly my intense sense of pain and anger faded and was replaced by a feeling of general anxiety about business, finances and making it through the daily grind. I have to sheepishly confess that my eyes now tend to glaze over when I see headlines about Al Qaeda, violence in Israel or airline security.

I intuitively know it's important, but instead I move on to the sports page, drink my coffee and go to work. Is it denial, human nature or just a natural defense against reliving painful memories?

The economic slide, which began nearly a year before 9/11, has clearly hurt new course openings. Projections call for 225 or so new facilities this year, down about 50 percent from the historic high of 2000. But there's a part of me that thinks this isn't all bad.

It's not that building 500 new courses a year is wrong. Instead, it's that we seemed to be building the wrong courses in the wrong places.

Too much of the construction boom consisted of daily fee courses that charged more than $100 per round or $15 million private clubs in golf markets that were already oversaturated.

At the risk of irritating my designer and builder friends, am I wrong in thinking that it's OK that developers and bankers backed away from some projects that were probably ill-conceived to begin with?

Most superintendents I talk with say they really haven't changed their budgeting or spending habits too much. The obvious exceptions are some of the management company courses and resorts where cutbacks have ranged from moderate to devastating.

When I've asked superintendents what kinds of things they do to reduce expenses, the typical response is that they've cut back on overtime labor or pushed capital improvement projects back a year. Few of you seem to be spending less on basics like chemicals, fertilizer, seed or equipment.

So, here we are — one year after our generation's Pearl Harbor. How has our industry changed? How have we as humans changed? I only know my perspective, but since I don't claim to have all the answers, I'm asking you, dear reader, to give me your thoughts on the matter by e-mail, fax or letter. Maybe — together — we can begin to figure this out. I look forward to receiving your ideas.

I also look forward to the peace, prosperity and happiness that we all deserve in this next "year after."

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