

Even though I'm not a huge baseball fan, I found myself strangely compelled to watch the Major League All-Star game last month. It certainly wasn't because I cared about any of the overpaid, steroid-munching monsters disguised as players. And it definitely had nothing to do with harboring any warm, fuzzy feelings about a sport that vacuums \$300 out of my wallet every time I take my family to a game.

So why did I watch? The answer is that I was sucked in by the hype. The money-grubbers who run MLB decided to boost TV ratings for the once-meaningless All-Star exhibition by linking it with home-field advantage in the World Series ... and good old Fox Sports had a heyday with it. The network hammered us with the "This Time it Matters" promos and commercials so relentlessly that even a baseball-hater like me had no choice but to tune in.

Now *that's* marketing.

The connection between this weird little experience and our business clicked in my head a few days later during a phone chat with Mike Klemme, our chief photo editor and arguably one of the greatest golf photographers in the world. Mike visits hundreds of the best facilities around the globe to capture their most beautiful holes in the best possible light. He also works closely with courses on brochures, scorecards, yardage books and other ways of using his images to "sell" their facilities.

We were talking about the general economic state of the industry and what he was seeing in his visits to courses. Basically, he said it's tough out there, but that well-run facilities are starting to get aggressive. "They finally understand that they have to *market or die*."

In any other business, this would seem pretty basic, but it's a bit of a revolution for golf. Historically, courses have relied on the "Field of Dreams" marketing plan: If we build it, they will come. Advertising, promotions, public relations and other such sales tools were somehow distasteful for many. It was as if the gentlemanly game of golf shouldn't have to stoop to such low tactics.

There's no room for that attitude anymore. This is the most competitive golf market in history as the industry pays the price for over-

It's a Whole New Ball Game in Golf

BY PAT JONES



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building, bad financing decisions and the glut in ego-driven \$20 million showcase courses that simply can't attract play at \$180 a round. "Market or Die" should become a buzz word for all but the most exclusive top-end clubs — and even a few of them could use help as waiting lists dwindle and memberships die off.

Here in Cleveland, I'm seeing specific examples of this every day. More and more midscale daily-fee courses and even a few high-end semiprivates are taking to the newspapers and airwaves with ads touting recent renovations, faster play, combo packages that include fees, food and fun extras and, increasingly, great course conditions.

So, the crux of the problem for courses — generating more rounds and revenue through marketing — is also the beginning of an opportunity for superintendents. The time has never been better for you to think about your role in "selling" the course and the benefits that may hold for you. For example, have you brainstormed with management about the key differentiators in your maintenance or design that could become highlight points for a marketing campaign? Have you considered changes in your programs that could help enhance your facility's reputation and revenues? Good examples could include widening fairways, adding yardage markers or lowering the cut of rough to speed play.

In short, there has never been a better time for superintendents to put on their marketing hats. Not only can it help with the short- and long-term economic success at your place, it can also be a rewarding way to grow your skills and remake your image within your facility. This is your chance to be an All-Star.

And this time, it definitely matters.

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