

Hangin' Out WITH Mike Hughes

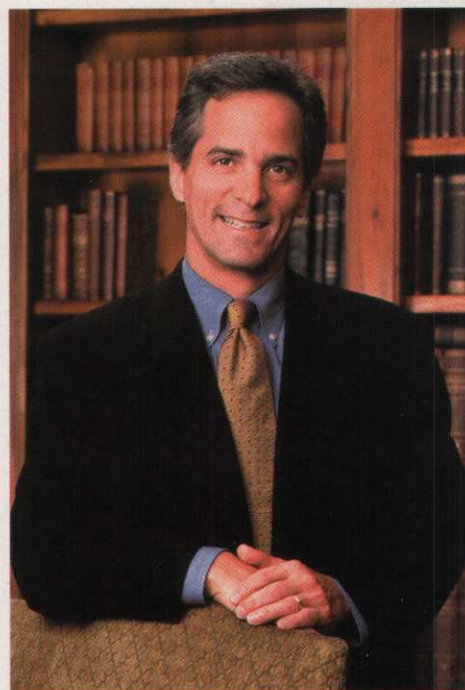
The National Golf Course Owners Association leader sat down with *Golfdom* to discuss why the number of golfers remains flat, what the uneven economy means for golf, and how the NGCOA and the GCSAA came together to merge their shows

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR., MANAGING EDITOR

It's never easy to pin down Mike Hughes, executive director of the National Golf Course Owners Association (NGCOA) because he's a popular leader with whom everyone wants to talk. But during the NGCOA conference and show in February, I was lucky to get a little face time with him.

As he made his way to a lunch table for an interview, coffee cup clasped tightly in his right hand, Hughes was stopped no fewer than four times from people who wanted to thank him for the job he's done at the association, bend his ear about a pet project or two, or just provide feedback on the show's educational programs. It was clear his time was in short supply with all the duties he has during the show.

When he finally reached the round lunch table, it was already populated with people taking a break from a tour of the trade show. They (naturally) spent a few minutes hobnobbing



Mike Hughes, executive director of the NGCOA, believes the merger between his organization and the GCSAA will benefit show attendees of both groups.

with Hughes. He apologized for the delay. "There's just a lot going on," Hughes said sheepishly.

And is there ever. Between the merger in 2005 between the NGCOA and GCSAA trade shows to continuing reports that the number of golfers remains distressingly flat to a struggling economy, Hughes has a lot on his plate. He took time out of his schedule to answer a few questions about these issues.

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On the merger

One of the big announcements from the GCSAA show was the impending merger in 2005 of its trade show with NGCOA's. What was the motivating factor for getting together, and what does the merger bring to NGCOA?

Hughes: The primary motivation was that we thought it would serve the members. That was one of the first line of inquiries: Were the members going to get more out of the combined show than two separate shows? We know that it's true.

In what ways will they get more out of it?

Hughes: It'll just be more for them to see and more education if they want to take care of that angle. The trade show itself will be a much broader offering and larger. The agronomic side of the business is important to the owners, and a combined show will give them the opportunity to see [its components] up close and personal. Most owners will attend with their superintendents to make a team effort.

So you think most owners will attend with their superintendents? One of the concerns superintendents have is that with a combined show only one person per course will be able to attend. Many superintendents assume that will be the owner. You don't feel that way?

Hughes: It's not going to be like that. They're two different roles. The superintendent's role is a far more technical role, so both will have to come down because they'll each get something different out of it.

How are the educational sessions going to work? Will superintendents be able to attend the owners' sessions, and will owners be able to attend the superintendents' sessions?

Hughes: Right now, we're planning to handle the educational tracks the way we're doing them right now [i.e., separately]. As we move closer, we'll be developing joint opportunities that will run both ways so owners can understand what the superintendents know and vice versa.

We think that [the joint sessions] will benefit both parties. I'm convinced the superintendent always benefits when the owner knows more about his side of the business because it helps the owner understand what the

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MIKE HUGHES
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
NGCOA

superintendent is responsible for and what the superintendent has little control over.

Given the fact the NGCOA moved its show into February to be more amenable to the GCSAA's traditional schedule and that the show sites will be more in line with traditional GCSAA sites, there is some talk that the GCSAA drove this. Is that how it worked out?

Hughes: We perceived it to be the coming together of equals. It was just logical because of the size of the superintendents' trade show that we'd need to go where they'd need to go. The GCSAA also has contractual obligations much further out than we do [with host sites]. We had more flexibility.

On the player development initiatives

Every year we hear that the golf industry needs to bring in more players and retain those it currently has. You have been instrumental in pushing player development programs during your 13-year tenure at NGCOA, with programs like Get Linked, Play Golf. Yet every time the numbers of players get studied (by the National Golf Foundation, for example), they remain flat nationwide. Do you feel the current programs are working? If you feel they are working, what accounts for the flat numbers year after year?

Hughes: The programs are working. The problem is [that] they haven't been revved up to a large enough scale to have an impact on the overall numbers. Once that happens, then you'll see the numbers change. The stages we've been in are learning and piloting. Once we have a

more national footprint, we'll all be able to see the difference in numbers.

Has progress been made on that national footprint?

Hughes: Yeah, very much so. One of the natural outgrowths of [our national programs] is not only the activities we engage in directly, but also the spin-off effect and the way we influence individual operators, individual programs and individual behaviors.

Even if we don't bring an organized program into the area, [owners] can see what it is that we do and take it on themselves without having to wait for an official program to come to them. We're leading by example and letting others come along with their own ideas.

Are you planning any new programs to roll out or are you happy with the ones in place?

Hughes: We've got most of the bases covered. It's just a matter of scaling them up and getting more people aware of them and adopting them.

Do you have a timeline on when you might expect to see the effects of these programs on the national numbers?

Hughes: We don't have a date, but we believe they're having an effect even now. You don't know that the programs aren't working [if the numbers are flat]. Without the programs, the numbers might be down.

On the economy

As the United States continues to experience a sluggish economy, which courses have been hurt most by the economic downturn?

Hughes: The courses that have been the most deeply affected have been the ones who have depended on corporate-outing business. We've also seen lower revenues for destination resorts as well. But for the bread-and-butter courses, they seem to be holding their own.

There's a general feeling of uncertainty that is holding down numbers in some areas of the country, but people will come back once that uncertainty goes away.

What can the industry do to help itself come back?

Hughes: You're already seeing a positive trend in golf course building statistics. The number of courses that are being built is falling, and that will help bring supply back in line with demand. I expect that trend to continue.

What's your read on the overall economy?

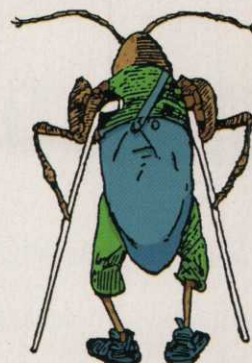
Hughes: It's going to take a little while for consumers to catch up to the fact that the underlying economic indicators are good and show a strengthening economy. When times are uncertain, people are conservative with how they spend their discretionary income. ■

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