

WHAT A GREAT **Concept!**

GCSAA could learn something from the functional and fun Idea Fair staged annually by the National Golf Course Owners Association

By Anthony Pioppi, Contributing Editor

When the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) invited the National Golf Course Owners Association (NGCOA) to become part of its annual conference and show, there was more than one person who wondered: What exactly will the owners bring to the table?

The superintendents already had educational classes, interesting speakers, a golf tournament and the trade show. But at the first Golf Industry Show (GIS) in February, one only needed to wander into the Rosen Plaza Hotel ballroom and the owners' annual Idea Fair for the answer: fun.

While the GCSAA conducts many of its events in a style where a funeral dirge would be the appropriate soundtrack, the owners at the Idea Fair turned in a 90-minute slapstick routine. But here's the best part: The ideas presented were anything but a laughing matter as each one had either made or saved an owner money.

When Jemsek family members, owners of Cog Hill Country Club in Lemont, Ill., told how they converted a few acres of their property into grazing land for sheep and saved \$40,000 a year in taxes, you knew people weren't joking.

This wasn't the staid format of the GCSAA's Innovative Superintendent breakfasts, this was yucks and laughs and even a few groans.

NGCOA member Vince Alfonso, who works for the First Tee in Memphis, Tenn., was the master of ceremonies with NGCOA board member Charles Birney acting as his sidekick. For Birney, a general partner of Atlantic Golf, an Annapolis, Md.-based owner, developer and manager of three golf courses, that meant donning an overly snug Superman

costume for much of the evening.

Alfonso's rapid-fire delivery of jokes, many of which only he found funny, were interspersed with questions for the 14 contestants and prodding to keep the proceedings on pace. An NGCOA past president, Alfonso has taken part in almost every Idea Fair since it made its debut in 1991. He reveled in his role as ringmaster.

The fun was not just limited to Alfonso and Birney. Speakers had no choice but to be part of the show as they were required to wear a large — very large — light-bulb-shaped hat while making their short presentations.

"It doesn't work if you don't put on the hat," Alfonso told one participant who tried to go without the required uniform.

When Lawren A. Just, president and owner of Persimmon Ridge Golf Club in Louisville, Ky., donned the chapeau, Alfonso

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Deborah Evans Crawford explains the concept behind Mirada Dollars.

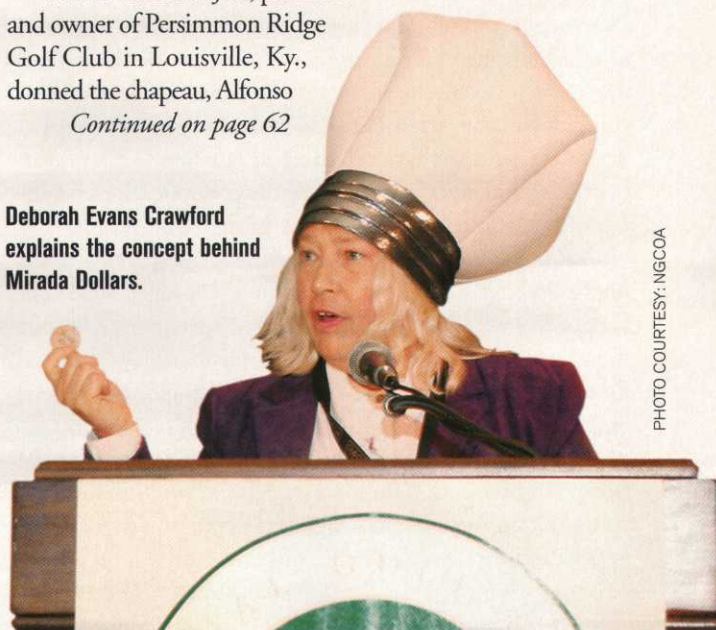


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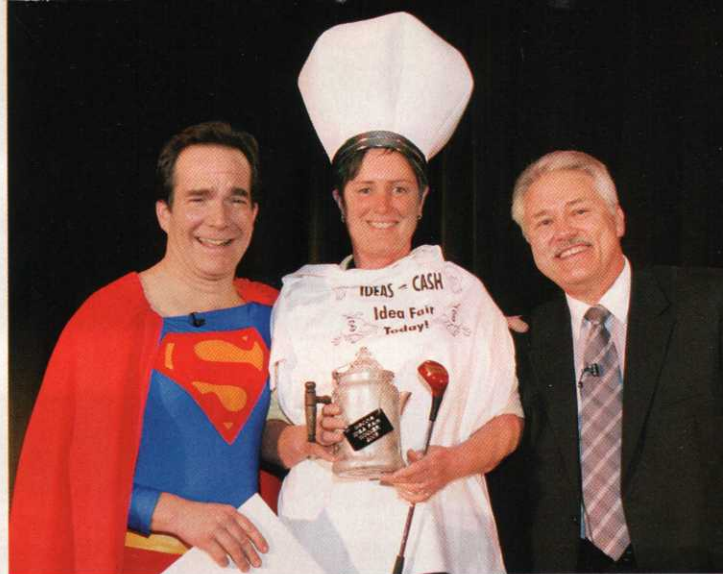
gushed, "Some people just shine when they put the hat on."

It was Just who went on to take the top prize as voted by the nearly 150 owners in attendance. Her award was a used coffee pot that Alfonso said archeologists discovered at a campsite used by Walt Disney while searching out property for his proposed amusement park. No one believed him.

Just's winning entry was her club's experiment of creating temporary memberships at the private Persimmon Ridge as a way to fill openings. Not only did she get the needed 154 members in 20 days, but her plan also brought in more than \$160,000 in cash for the course and increased monthly dues by \$30,000.

Second place went to Deborah Evans Crawford of Marada Golf Course in Clinton, Pa. At her course, employees hand out Marada Dollars to golfers they see performing a service that benefits others, whether it's fixing ballmarks, filling in divots or picking up trash. The wooden coins are worth \$1 when redeemed in the pro shop or restaurant.

Other ideas included one by Heather Leeke of Old Channel Trail Golf Course in Montague, Mich. Concerned about the possibility of Listeria contamination of on-course water jugs, Leeke switched to small bottles of water and the honor



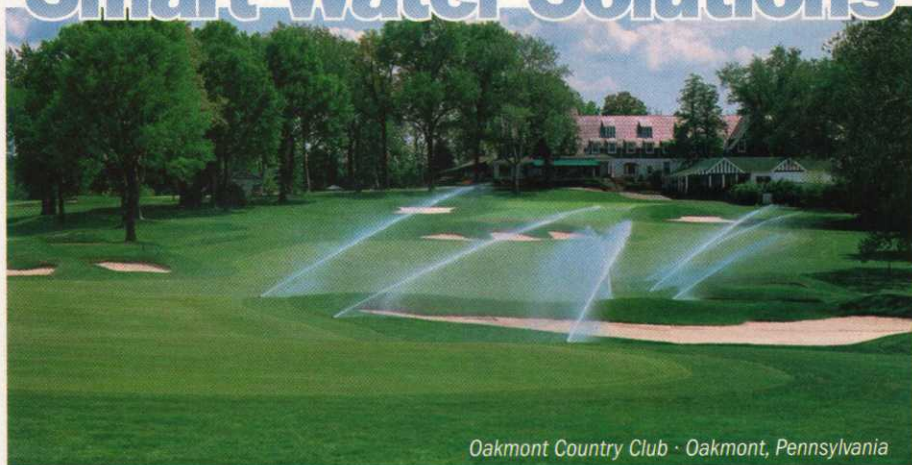
Lawren A. Just, flanked by Charles Birney (left) and Vince Alfonso, displays her unique trophy – a used coffee pot.

system. Coolers with ice and small bottles were used to replace the common water jugs. Golfers were asked to deposit \$1 in a container. The result: 85 percent compliance by golfers and an additional \$1,000 a month in revenue.

As a testament to the seriousness of the event and the value of the ideas, long after the proceedings had ended and Alfonso's final joke brought the last laugh, Just was still in the ballroom expounding on her winning idea to interested course owners — without wearing the hat. ■

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