

on the State of the Show

Mona: 'Most people felt like the trade show improved significantly last year'

SOME SKEPTICS BELIEVED the maiden voyage of the Golf Industry Show could have turned into the Poseidon Adventure. They thought the "new" event, which combined the annual trade shows of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) and the National Golf Course Owners Association (NGCOA), could founder for several reasons.

Nearly a year later, Steve Mona, CEO of the GCSAA and co-captain of the show, is here to report that the show was anything but a shipwreck. One could say the show hit a few patches of rough water during its five-day sail, but by in large it was a cruise to remember, Mona says.

But that was then and this is now and Mona, who recently began his 13th year with the GCSAA, has set his sights on this year's show, to be held Feb. 9-11 at the Georgia World Congress Center in Atlanta. (The GCSAA's Education Conference is set for Feb. 6-11.)

Even though he feels good about what happened last year, Mona has a few concerns about this year's event. One worry is traced to Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans, the original site of this year's show. While Atlanta is not a bad city for a convention, it ain't Bourbon Street. Mona knows that, and he's concerned about a dip in attendance.

"New Orleans is an attractive venue because of what it offers from nightlife and cultural standpoints," Mona says. "A lot of people were really looking forward to going there."

The GCSAA, with successful conventions in Orlando and San Diego the past two years, had been gaining a head of steam with two well-attended shows after experiencing not-so-well

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attended events in 2001, 2002 and 2003. The association was counting on another year of strong attendance by exhibitors and show goers — and the financial impact they would bring — by having the show in New Orleans.

"We were counting on the New Orleans numbers to be greater than the Orlando numbers [last year]," Mona says. "We were counting on taking another step up in terms of overall numbers and now we face the specter of that not occurring. It doesn't derail the momentum, but it does slow it down."

Rather than be glum that the show is not in New Orleans, Mona hopes the association's members are content that they're having a show at all this year and will rally around the cause despite the relocation.

"This is our one chance a year to come together as an industry and support each other," Mona says. "Sure we recognize the fact that this isn't where we expected to be, but forces outside of our control dictated we couldn't be there so let's make the best of where we are."

Mona says GCSAA members who attend the show will help their peers whose courses and lives were hindered by hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma. For every member who registers for the show's full package, GCSAA will donate \$10 to a special fund to benefit its members affected by the hurricanes.

Mona doesn't expect the loss of momentum to extend to next year when the GIS heads to Anaheim, Calif., and the Club Managers Association of America (CMAA) joins the party, which means more exhibitors and more attendees. "Whatever momentum was lost this year, we will regain it right away next year," he says.

Despite an anticipated decline in attendance this year, Mona feels good about the show's state. Despite initial concerns about the GIS — some superintendents were worried the show was getting too big and that they were being forced to

share their show with owners — Mona says he has received "tremendously positive" feedback about the GIS from superintendents, exhibitors and other attendees.

The people who voiced concerns about the event — "And there weren't that many," Mona insists — left the show with a more positive view of it than they had going in to it partly because they realized a lot had-

n't changed, Mona says. For instance, the GCSAA's Innovative Superintendents Sessions were status quo, as were other functions. "The reason their fears weren't realized was because we kept our community intact," Mona adds.

Mona won't pretend the event, most notably the trade show floor, hasn't

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changed. The show floor was distinctly different last year, especially with the seven solution centers, each featuring educational presentations and demonstrations, including the ambitious "Building of the Green." But the change was by design, and Mona says most attendees were impressed.

"I think most people felt like the trade show improved significantly," Mona says. "As I've traveled around the country this year, I've received a lot of good feedback on how the show came together."

Don't think that Mona thinks the show is second to none, however. "There are areas where we need to improve and will improve on."

For starters, Mona thinks the GCSAA and the NGCOA need to do a better job of identifying themselves on the trade show floor as the event's sponsors.

"What we decided to do last year was brand the show as the Golf Industry Show, and we'll continue to do that," Mona says. "But if you walked through that hall, you couldn't tell who the sponsoring organizations were. So this year you'll see the GCSAA and the NGCOA logos more prominently displayed."

Mona is aware that some superintendents believe their days of attending the GIS may be numbered. With the managers coming on board next year, some superintendents feel they'll be low on the totem poll if a club decides to only send one or two people. It sounds like a legitimate concern, but Mona says he believes the opposite will occur. He says the GCSAA is working with the NGCOA and will work with the CMAA next year to get owners and managers to encourage their courses' superintendents to attend the show.

Mona also says it makes sense for all three people to attend the show, especially if a course plans to make a major purchase. "If you're going to put in an irrigation system for a million dollars, I'll guarantee you that all three of those people will want to have some understanding of that [purchase]," he says.

Mona has also heard talk questioning the show's well being. People wonder if it could go the way of the PGA Merchandise Show.

A February 2003 headline in a story about the PGA Merchandise Show asked, "Has the PGA Merchandise Show Lost Its Luster?" The story went on to report that major manufacturers, including Titleist, Ping and Footjoy, had pulled out of the show. The story also reported that traffic levels were down at the show and it seemed more "quiet" than in years past.

People in the golf course maintenance industry wonder what would happen if large exhibitors pulled out of the GIS. Would it spell doom? If John Deere or The Toro Co. pulled out of the GIS tomorrow, Mona says the "end would be near." But Mona is confident that will not happen.

Mona says the GCSAA has worked with a trade show consultant for several years and the two entities leave nothing on the table when it comes to discussing show issues, even if they're dire scenarios. "[The consultant] has talked with us for years about how trade shows can meet a quick and sudden demise," Mona says.

A reason the GCSAA revamped its show to combine it with other associations' events is to prevent a possible demise, Mona says.

"It's in response to the fact that the model we had for many years may or may not have been relevant in the future," Mona says. "That's the main reason we brought the other groups in."

Mona also says the GIS can't be compared with the PGA Show because the GIS owns its show and the PGA doesn't. The PGA of America sold the show to Reed Exhibitions, a for-profit company, several years ago. So Mona says it was easier for Ping and Titleist to tell Reed they were bailing on the show than it would have been for them to tell the PGA of America, the association.

"We've been approached to sell our show by a couple different companies and we elected not to," Mona says. "And we have no plans to do that. But having said that, we certainly don't [assume] that all of our exhibitors will continue to come to our show because we're the association and we own the show."

Mona says it's vital to stay in touch with exhibitors. To do so, the GCSAA established an Industry Advisory Council made up of about 20 exhibitor representatives. "It's a good cross section of exhibitors who give us pretty

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STEVE MONA
GCSAA CEO

candid feedback on what they'd like to see at the show," Mona says.

More than ever, exhibiting companies attending the show are concerned about their return on investment. For some companies, going to the show is their biggest expense of the year. "We're sensitive to that," Mona says.

While some trade shows have grown as outdated as leisure suits over the years, Mona believes the GIS has a spot in the 21st century. "The reason I feel confident in our show's long-term health is because we feel like we've addressed a lot of the issues that have been brought forward to our attention from not only our top exhibitors but from others as well," he says.

But feeling good about it doesn't mean that Mona doesn't toss and turn at night.

"Believe me, I lose a lot of sleep thinking about the health of our show because it's our No. 1 asset and drives so much of what we do here," he says. ■

Welcome to Atlanta

The Golf Industry Show arrived in Atlanta in a roundabout way.

When Hurricane Katrina was bearing down on New Orleans, GCSAA CEO Steve Mona says the association's brass began talking about a contingency plan in case the storm destroyed the city. When the inevitable occurred, Mona says the association and its members still wanted to keep the show in New Orleans but had no choice to move it when city leaders canceled all conventions through March.


Mona and the GCSAA then turned their eyes toward Houston, which they figured was a good fit especially since the association's golf tournament was already scheduled for play there.

The Houston convention center made room for the GIS. At the time, however, Mona didn't realize that Shaq, LeBron, Koby and the rest of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) elite were due in town around the same time for the NBA All-Star Game. Although the game was scheduled a week after the GIS would end, the NBA needed the convention center and some of its trade show space to stage supporting entertainment leading up to the big event, namely the popular Fan Fest. Mona says he wasn't told this at the time of initial negotiations with the convention center. It wasn't until several days later he discovered that the GCSAA's big show and the NBA's big show were in each other's way.


"So for about a week we were trying to work out a three-way negotiation between the NBA, the city of Houston and us," Mona says. "But we couldn't get it worked out. We had certain requirements, and we couldn't give in to them."


Ironically, when Hurricane Rita was bearing down on Houston — when the GIS was still scheduled for the city — the GCSAA began making another contingency plan in case Houston was battered and the show had to be canceled there.

"We began to call around again," Mona says, "and that's when we found out Atlanta was available." — Larry Aylward




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