


THE BALL STOPS HERE!



The golf course maintenance industry must get more engaged in building its own business

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

It bewilders Steve Mona that there are numerous people who work in the golf course maintenance industry who don't play the game themselves. Those folks hail from various walks, from employees of equipment and chemical suppliers to superintendents and their crews and, yes, even to media types.

Mona, the CEO of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, says he seldom attends industry meetings that don't broach the topic of playing golf.

"Almost, without exception, what you hear is people say, 'I'm so busy and working so hard and traveling so much that I'm playing less golf than I ever have,'" he says.

Mona says that thinking needs to change.

"My view is that we're the ones who ought to be playing a lot of golf, and we ought to be supporting it and talking up all the good things about it," he adds.

More industry people need to lead by example and become more engaged in growing the business — their own business, Mona stresses.

Phil Tralies, president and CEO of Augusta, Ga.-based Club Car, couldn't agree more. That's why Tralies implemented a program three years ago to offer employees free golf lessons. Tralies feels it's his responsibility to do his part to grow the game, especially in a market where new-player growth has been essentially flat the past few years.

"Without this industry, we have no company," Tralies says. "Without a company, we don't have jobs for people out on the line."

The free lessons, taught by the staff at The First Tee of Augusta, have been a hit, as employees will attest (sidebar page 34). The pro-



Phil Tralies (right), president and CEO of Club Car, decided to offer his company's employees free golf lessons, which they have embraced.

gram has attracted about 200 participants.

"To be honest, I was less than convinced that we would get the employees to do this," Tralies admits. "I thought they would say, 'You've got to be kidding us.' But, boy, they have embraced it."

Concerned that employees wouldn't have a place to play after the lessons and that they might lose interest in the game, Tralies struck a deal with a Club Car customer, Jones Creek Golf Club in nearby Evans, Ga., so the company's fledgling players can take their games to a real course.

Tralies realizes the program is only one golf ball among thousands on a driving range. But if other companies and organizations institute similar programs, then noticeable progress could be made in the growing-the-game department. Tralies, who insists the program is about benefitting the industry and not Club Car, also invites other

Continued on page 34

[ABOUT THIS SERIES] "Growing the Game," a four-part series appearing in *Golfdom* throughout 2007, focuses on how the golf industry can attract more new players to create more rounds. In addition to the third installment on what golf course maintenance suppliers and companies can do to grow the game, we've also reported on the impact that baby boomers could have on increasing play (February) and what golf course architects can do in their designs to make the game more friendly for beginner and average golfers (May). In the final installment of the series running in November, we'll single out some of the more creative golf courses in the country and discuss the marketing programs they've implemented to attract new golfers.

Visit our archives at www.golfdom.com to view the 2006-2007 "Growing the Game" series.

Free Golf Lessons Help Grow the Game – And Then Some

By Larry Aylward

Even though she worked at one of the golf industry's major equipment suppliers, Madge Nelson never really thought about working on her golf game — until the leader of her company decided to offer free golf lessons to employees.

Nelson is employed by Club Car, the Augusta, Ga.-based manufacturer of golf cars, utility vehicles and other equipment. Thanks to the golf lessons, she's working on her game and loving it.

"I've played golf off and on for quite a few years," says Nelson, who has worked at Club Car for about 24 years. "I love to play. I could spend three days a week on the golf course."

That's just what Phil Tralies, Club Car's president and CEO, wants to hear. About three years ago, Tralies, disenchanted with golf's stagnant growth, decided to offer free golf lessons to the company's 850 Augusta employees to get them more involved in the sport and grow the game. As a representative of the industry, Tralies felt he owed it to the industry to do so.

The free lessons, offered by Club Car through the teaching staff at The First Tee of Augusta, have been a hit. The program has attracted about 200 participants. Nelson says most of those employees probably would have never picked up a golf club if not for the lessons, especially women.

"I always thought golf was a man's game," Nelson says. But now Nelson,

who recently purchased a new driver, plays the game often with her husband, Chuck.

Jennifer Murphy, Club Car's credit and collections manager, says she also didn't give golf much thought before Tralies introduced the program.

"But when I heard about it, I thought it was neat," she says. "I thought it was a great way to get employees more in tune with the industry. I was excited about it."

Eugene Smallwood, who works in Club Car's service parts shipping department, says he couldn't hit a ball across a golf course's green before taking the golf lessons.

"Now I can hit it about 200 yards," he states. "I've been having fun."

Smallwood, who is African American, says he previously believed that golf was a rich, white man's game. But since learning the game and playing it more, he dismisses that notion.

"I always wanted to take golf lessons," he says.

Tralies says the lessons, which span seven weeks, only cost about \$105 per employee. He's also not stopping with lessons. Concerned that employees wouldn't have a place to play after the lessons and might lose interest in the game, Tralies struck a deal with one of Club Car's customers, Jones Creek Golf Club, for Club Car's new players to take their games to a real course. The company subsidizes employee play at the course and recently started a league at the club.

"But you have to hit the ball straight at Jones Creek," Smallwood says, noting that there are houses on the sides of the fairways. "[Tralies] won't pay for broken windows."

While Tralies introduced the program to create new golfers within his own company, there have been ancillary benefits, which have improved the company's corporate culture. Employees are meeting each other for the first time at the golf lessons and on the course. Now they talk golf around the water cooler at work.

"[The lessons] have brought a big social benefit to the company," Nelson says.

The lessons have also improved company morale.

"We all have very busy jobs," Murphy says. "A lot of us work a lot of hours to make sure we meet the needs of our customers. I'm thankful that we have support from upper management that encourages us to do other things, to have fun and be more involved in the business that we take part in every day. If you ask anybody who has participated in the program, I think they would say the same." ■



(From left) Eugene Smallwood, Madge Nelson and Jennifer Murphy are grateful for the lessons.

Continued from page 31

companies, even competitors, to replicate Club Car's program. He says he would be happy to provide them a blueprint of the details.

"If everyone is pushing in the same direction, all of the sudden the needle starts moving," Tralies reasons.

Mona says the GCSAA is also aware that the people who work at its Lawrence, Kan., headquarters need to do their part to grow the game and their profession. About 10 years ago the association struck a deal with a local golf professional to provide a discounted rate for group lessons to interested employees. The GCSAA pays half the cost for each person's lesson.

"It's not completely free, but our view is you need to have a little skin in the game yourself," Mona says.

The lessons have spurred a lot of interest in the game, Mona says. When Mona joined the GCSAA nearly 14 years ago, he says only handful of people played. Now at least one-third of the association's 120 employees are teeing it up, including at a weekly summer golf league.

Other industry companies are cognizant of their growing-the-game duties.

The Toro Co. has formed employee golf leagues at manufacturing plants and other facilities throughout the country. In Bloomington, Minn., where the company is based, the Toro Employee Club sponsors two golf leagues from May through September. The Par 30 League, for new golfers and those working on their games, plays on an executive golf course. The Regulation League, on an 18-hole course, is for more-advanced players.

Toro believes "everyone should have the opportunity to enjoy the game of golf," according Sandra Donnelly, the company's commercial division spokesperson. That's why the company supports the game's growth through the Special Olympics, National Amputee Golf Association and the Sister Kenny Rehabilitation Institute.

"We have a very balanced approach to helping build interest in the game with youth and underserved populations," says Michael

What Are You Doing to Grow the Game?

Golfdom was not able to contact all of the suppliers that represent the golf course maintenance industry for this story. However, we invite you to send your growing-the-game ideas to Larry Aylward at laylward@questex.com. We want to hear what your company is doing to grow the game so we can share your information with our readers.

Happe, Toro's managing director of commercial business.

Toro and other industry companies, including Bayer Environmental Science, also support The First Tee — a national, non-profit organization dedicated to growing the game among children by creating affordable and accessible golf facilities — to help grow the game. Mike Daly, the golf market lead at Bayer, says the company has donated money and products to The First Tee's cause.

Daly likes The First Tee's approach to growing the game. "The whole idea is to develop a new dedicated golfer by focusing on young kids who may not have an opportunity to play," he says.

David Pursell, who owns FarmLinks Golf Club in Sylacauga, Ala., is also a big believer in The First Tee, so much that he formed his own First Tee program in 2004 to help grow the game among kids. The First Tee at Pursell Farms functions as an after-school program four days a week for area children ages 7 to 17. More than 200 kids have participated in the program.

Pursell also aims to grow the game through his 18-hole course, which serves as a research and demonstration facility for various industry products, among other things. Every time he goes to another facility, be it Pebble Beach or a golf course down the road, Pursell studies what that facility is doing to improve the overall golf experience to grow the game. He takes mental notes from the time he drives into a club's parking to the time he departs it.

"I want to see what people are doing well," Pursell says. "Then I want to see if we can improve on those things or replicate them."

The game simply needs to be more fun for it to grow, Pursell stresses. "And you have to make it more fun than all the other options that people have to do, which is an uphill climb because of the time, expense and trouble of playing golf," he adds. "So the challenge then becomes making people's golf experience so good that they're willing to take the time, expense and trouble to play."

Those involved with growing-the-game programs say there are secondary benefits that come with creating more golfers.

At the GCSAA, Mona says the more employees who play the game, the more employees who understand the game and can use that knowledge to serve the association's members better.

Golf outside the association's walls has also helped build employee camaraderie within them, Mona says. "It has been terrific because people from different departments who don't really interact with each other on a daily basis are all of the sudden on the same team in a golf tournament," Mona says.

Not that employee morale at Club Car was in the dumps, but offering free golf lessons has only made it better.

Turf maintenance also has a lot to do with growing the game, company representatives agree. Karla Cuculi, Jacobsen's marketing director, notes that GCSAA research says the No. 1 reason golfers return to a course to play is because of its quality and condition. With that in mind, she says Jacobsen aims to manufacture high-performance equipment to create quality turf. No doubt other industry companies share the same philosophy.

Continued education of superinten-

Continued on page 36

IR®

HONOR THE GAME.

Club Car
www.clubcar.com

QUIETLY GOING ABOUT ITS BUSINESS. Let's face it. You need a vehicle that's all business. One that keeps hauling and keeps you productive all day long. The Carryall Turf 2 with IQ Plus™ is all that — and more. Equipped with the new Club Car IQ Plus System, the most advanced DC drive train technology in its class. Plus, it's so quiet, you can keep working without disturbing golfers. How can we help your operation succeed? 1.800.CLUBCAR

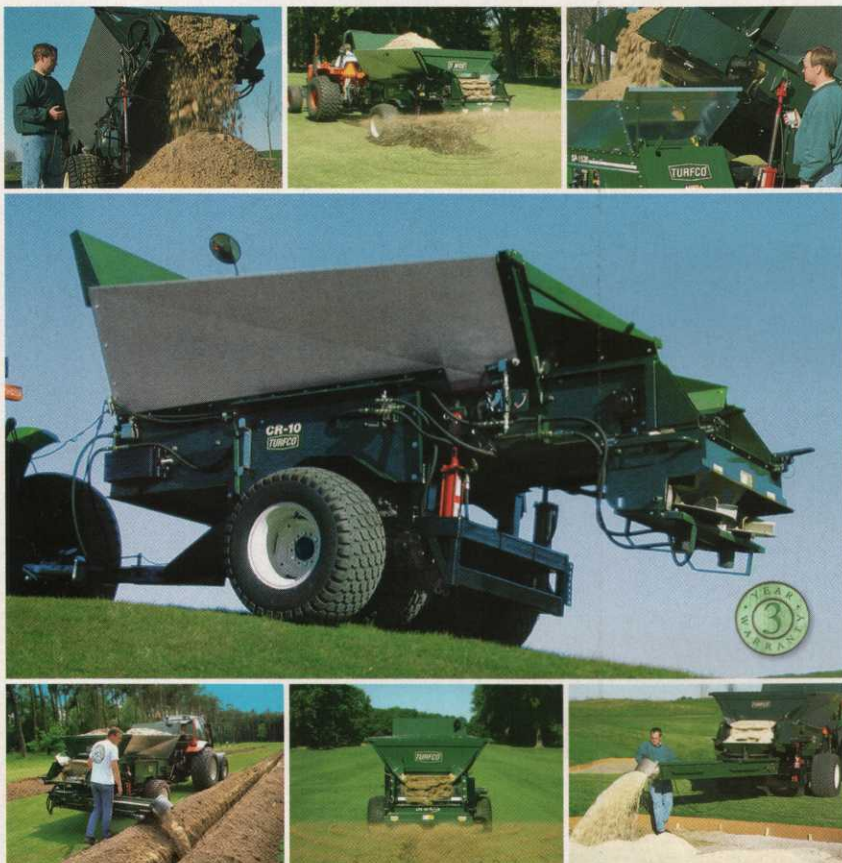


Continued from page 35

dents is also vital when it comes to well-maintained turf. It's a reason why Pursell created his research and demonstration course for superintendents. It's also a reason why Bayer and John Deere teamed up last year to form the Green Start Academy, a two-day educational event for assistant superintendents to further their careers by learning about best-management practices and innovative products, meeting industry experts and networking with peers.

"The next generation of superintendents is something we shouldn't leave to chance," Daly says. "Having a high-quality golf course ... that people enjoy going out to play is integral to [growing the game]."

Tralies says any company in the golf business that's making money has an obligation to do something to grow the game. Mona says companies can help by simply placing signage, such as the Play Golf America logo, on their products. "Most industry companies sell products that come in packages," he adds.



The Turfco CR-10 makes it happen!



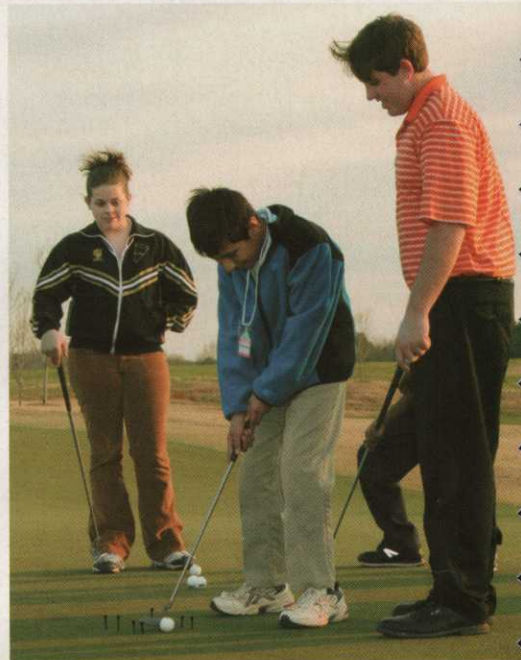
Whether you're top dressing your fairway, renovating bunkers or relocating material, the Turfco® CR-10, with a 4 cubic yard hopper, is the workhorse you've been looking for. Its patented three-position switch, cross-conveyor flow control and self-cleaning hopper make it the most effective material handler available. And now the CR-10 is available with WideSpin™ technology — allowing you to deliver light or heavy top dressing applications at unprecedented widths and depths. All this — plus a three-year warranty. The CR-10. Don't start a project without it.

Call 1-800-679-8201 for a free on-site demonstration or video.

1655 101st Avenue NE • Minneapolis, MN 55449-4420 U.S.A.
(763) 785-1000 • Fax (763) 785-0556 • www.turfco.com



THE LEADER. SINCE 1961.



More than 200 kids have participated in The First Tee at Pursell Farms. The program has done more than help grow the game; it has helped keep kids off the streets and out of trouble.

Tralies suggests the GCSAA put together a formal roll call highlighting industry companies that have implemented growing-the-game initiatives. If such a list is made public within the industry, Tralies points out, then more companies will feel the need to be on it.

Mona says Tralies' idea has merit.

"I do understand the notion of holding up for emulation the companies that are participating in a way that helps to drive interest and participation in the game," Mona says. "[Tralies' idea] deserves further exploration."

Tralies said the buck — or the golf ball in this case — stops with the industry's own people when it comes to golf's economic viability.

"They should all be motivated to see this game grow," he says. ■