Where Is Respect For Its Own?

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

June is the month when I typically question the United States Golf Association's timid stance on equipment and its impact on architecture, cost and pace of play. Or sometimes this space is where I lament the USGA's various course setup boondoggles. You know, those questionable hole locations and excessive green speeds designed to humiliate players, or more perversely, to assure us that the game needs no equipment regulation when the best players in the world are averaging 76.4.

These annual tirades prompted one Kool-Aid-drinking USGA Green Section staffer to e-mail and tell me that writing is a dubious way to make a living. I forgave him because I know the day might come when he will actually be impacted by USGA's stunning decline.

Yet, of all the egregious miscalculations previously made by the USGA, who could have imagined that its bodacious Executive Committee would ever do something that actually affects lives?

Until now. At his February address, USGA President Walter Driver told the assembled blue coats: "To build the best staff possible, we spent a large amount of time reviewing the current compensation and benefit programs, structure and hiring needs in an effort to build a solid foundation for the future. The USGA can now continue to recruit and retain top talent and staff."

Since Driver moonlights as a suit for Goldman Sachs, he has refined the art of saying one thing and meaning something sinister.

Building a solid foundation for the future? Translation: staff benefit cuts.

This is straight from the corporate playbook. The best way to get a quick 7-percent stock price boost? Announce layoffs or a "restructuring" of staff benefits to "continue to recruit and retain top talent and staff."

Right.

While these corporate types love to sit around and talk about creating "value," they are unable to quantify the "value" delivered by a quality staff whose members are happy at their jobs.

However, the USGA is a nonprofit entity, so Wall Street should not be part of the equation here. But the Executive Committee is now stocked with several venture capitalists and wannabes who must blame someone other than themselves for the organization's declining revenues and deteriorating reputation.

USGA STAFF PAYS FOR EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE'S BOONDOOGLES

The committee didn't have to spend excessive amounts to elevate corporate tents at the U.S. Open so that the privileged could look down on the merely average spectators. And instead of dropping its pricey corporate jet program, overpaying Executive Director David Fay $600,000 a year or admitting that membership revenues have plummeted since Golf Journal magazine was dropped, the USGA staff has to pay for the committee's boondoggles.

So this winter the Executive Committee announced it would trim the benefits program and eliminate the staff's college tuition assistance program. Since pay at the USGA has never been great, these generous benefits allowed the organization to attract great people who could put their kids through college while serving the game they love.

After a near revolt, which included Fay informing the staff in a townhall meeting that they should write letters to the committee, the tuition program was granted a three-year reprieve before it meets its ultimate demise.

Nonetheless, the committee marches on unfazed, treating the staff of America's golf governing body about as respectfully as Gordon Gekko treated Bluestar airlines.

This might explain why your Green Section rep has been a little cranky lately. Because not only is the USGA Executive Committee failing the game, it is failing the very people who work for its betterment.

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