

golf industry show
Preview

Outgoing GCSAA
CEO takes a
candid look
back at his
14-year-career

Mona's Memoir

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

The upcoming Golf Industry Show in Orlando will be Steve Mona's last as the CEO of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. Mona, who turned 50

recently, joined the GCSAA as CEO when he was 36. He celebrated his 14th anniversary with the association in November. Mona says he wasn't looking to leave the GCSAA, but he was approached with an offer — to become the CEO of the World Golf Foundation — he says he couldn't refuse. Mona will begin that position in St. Augustine, Fla., at the end of next month.

Golfdom Editor in Chief Larry Aylward recently spent time with Mona and talked to him in-depth about his tenure at the GCSAA.

■ **What kind of man is Steve Mona today compared to 14 years ago when you began this job?**

■ I would say that I'm a more patient person today than I was 14 years ago. I'm more willing to let a process play itself out today. In the past, I was always trying to drive as fast as I could to a conclusion so a decision could be made, and we could get on to whatever the next decision was that needed to be made. But now I'm more content to let information soak in and get some additional perspectives and, hopefully, make a better-informed decision than I might have years ago.

Also, the most important things in my life are my faith, my family and then my work — and I can assure you that wasn't the case 14 years ago. Working in this environment ... contributed to my evolution and growth as a person. I credit our organization and our

members for helping that process along. One of the reasons I love this job so much, and one of the reasons I think I did reasonably well at it is because I feel like I'm wired a lot like a golf course superintendent — early to bed and early to rise. I also think I'm pretty straightforward and forthright.

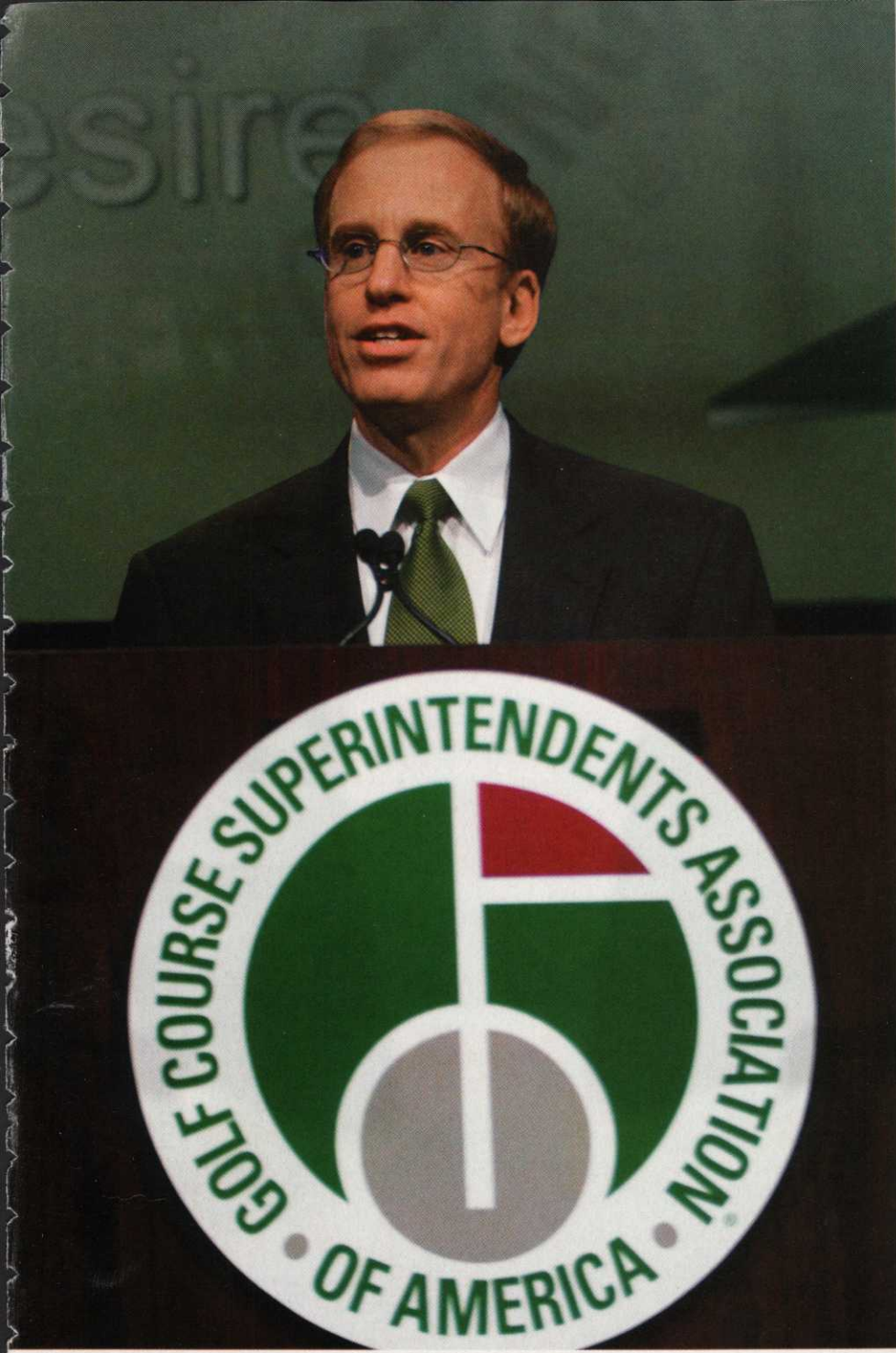
■ **What were your main goals when you took the job, and did you accomplish them?**

■ The board handed me three specific mandates when I came. One was to get the house in order. Two was to increase member involvement, and three was to enhance and strengthen relationships. There was a little bit of (turmoil) when I took over. But one of the really unusual things in a situation where there was a certain amount of unrest was that the financial condition of the association was then and still is today very strong. So that was really a blessing to come into an organization that had some issues but had a strong financial position. That made the job much easier.

Getting the house in order was just a matter of focusing inward. We had staff reorganization. There were a lot of processes, technology upgrades and infrastructure things that needed to get done.

Increasing member involvement was getting more members involved in the governance of the association through the committee structure. We substantially enhanced that.

The third was to enhance and strengthen relationships. This was principally among allied associations, among industry partners, the media and where relationships weren't exactly great. That was an area I enjoyed, and I think I did fairly well at.



■ **Do you feel you're leaving the association in better shape than when you took it over?**

■ I do feel good about what has been accomplished, but I don't take credit personally for the accomplishments. In every single case, with no exceptions, it took a lot of people to get some of these things done. It would be disingenuous for me to say, "Yes, I did that." I was part of a group of people that got these things done.

The one regret I have is that I didn't have a better CEO-succession plan in place. That

was going to be my next big project to work on. I wasn't looking to leave this job, but obviously this other job came along, so I didn't get a chance to put a plan in place.

■ **What were your biggest accomplishments during your tenure?**

■ Certainly, the Golf Industry Show would be one. To help bring together three organizations that had trade shows — the GCSAA, the National Golf Course

Continued on page 45

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Continued from page 43

Owners Association and the Club Managers Association of America — requires a lot of work and a lot of effort.

Another accomplishment would be The Environmental Institute for Golf, which evolved from the GCSAA Foundation. It was much more than a name change — it was a repurposing of the foundation.

Another accomplishment is the investing in the Beauty of Golf endowment campaign. We set out to raise \$3.5 million under the banner of the GCSAA Foundation, and we ended up raising more than \$5 million. That helped us from a fund-raising perspective but more importantly a friend-raising perspective.

A huge one is the Professional Development Initiative (PDI) and member standards. As I look back, there were a lot of moments of truth, and this certainly was one when our members voted upon themselves to have a higher and more rigorous standard to become a Class-A member and to retain one's Class-A designation. That was when this association and its members said this is a profession, not an occupation. I think there's an important distinction between the two.

Another thing that doesn't get talked about that much but really signaled a shift in thinking is when we began sponsorships of our various events and activities and programs. There was a long-held belief that that was not an appropriate thing to do. But the board agreed that it made sense, and it has burgeoned into a pretty substantial program since that time.

■ **How do you handle the criticism of PDI and that people say it was watered down in order not to lose any members?**

■ What's interesting about that argument is there are really two sides to it. It's a little bit like being a superintendent and having one person say, "Hey, the greens are too slow." And then you walk another 50 feet and another person says, "Hey, the greens are too fast."

Some people say PDI is wrong because it requires people to do things to become

a Class-A member, which is not the role of the association. They say we should just support our members through education, information and representation and not create an elitist organization with the haves and have-nots. And then I also hear the too-watered-down argument. So there are two opposite arguments, which makes me think we probably got it right.

I understand the arguments, but it was important to get this passed. Now we're spending more than \$1 million a year on trying to create a brand known as Class-A GCSAA member. I think that brand will become a recognized brand in the marketplace, and there will be value in being a Class-A member of GCSAA, and people who dropped out for various reasons will probably see it in their interests to get back involved. And people coming in to the profession will view that as something they must have to be successful.

We got something done that our members told us they wanted. That's the thing that gets lost in this. If you go back to the chapter delegates meetings in 1994, '95 and '96, the delegates said, "We're a profession, and we're professional people. So we should be recognized, compensated and given the same kinds of opportunities within our facility that our peers enjoy."

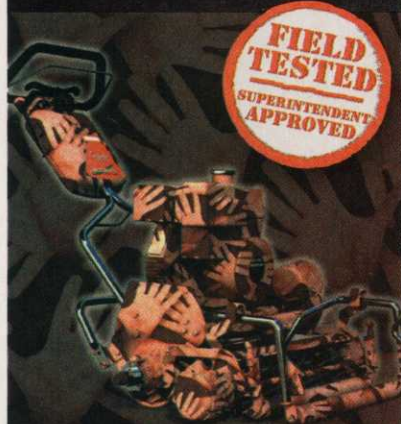
Is PDI perfect? No, but as it evolves through time, it's going to get better and better. And to those who say it's watered down, I say to wait a few years and see where it ends up. I think it will end up a little more stringent than it is today.

■ **Are there things that you did that you would like to do over?**

■ I think I made some good hiring decisions, and I think I made some not-so-good hiring decisions. That would be an area I wish I had some do-overs. It's an area where you try to make the best decisions you can at the time, and sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. We had some bumps along the way, and probably some of them were related to decisions I made in terms of who I was

Continued on page 46

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Continued from page 45

putting in certain positions and who I wasn't putting in certain positions.

■ **What were your best days on the job?**

■ One was the day that Greg Norman called me to say he would be the chairman for the Environmental Institute of Golf. Another day was when the members voted so con-

clusively to adopt PDI. I've had thousands of really good days where I'd go home at night tired but feeling good about what was accomplished. Never once in 14 years have I dreaded coming into this building or wherever I was going on behalf of GCSAA.

■ **What were your worst days on the job?**

■ There are frustrations at any job. All of us in our jobs tend to gravitate to what we do best and away from what we are not very good at or don't particularly like to do. I'm no different than anyone else in that regard.

■ **Was there any criticism during your tenure that really bothered you? And how do you handle criticism?**

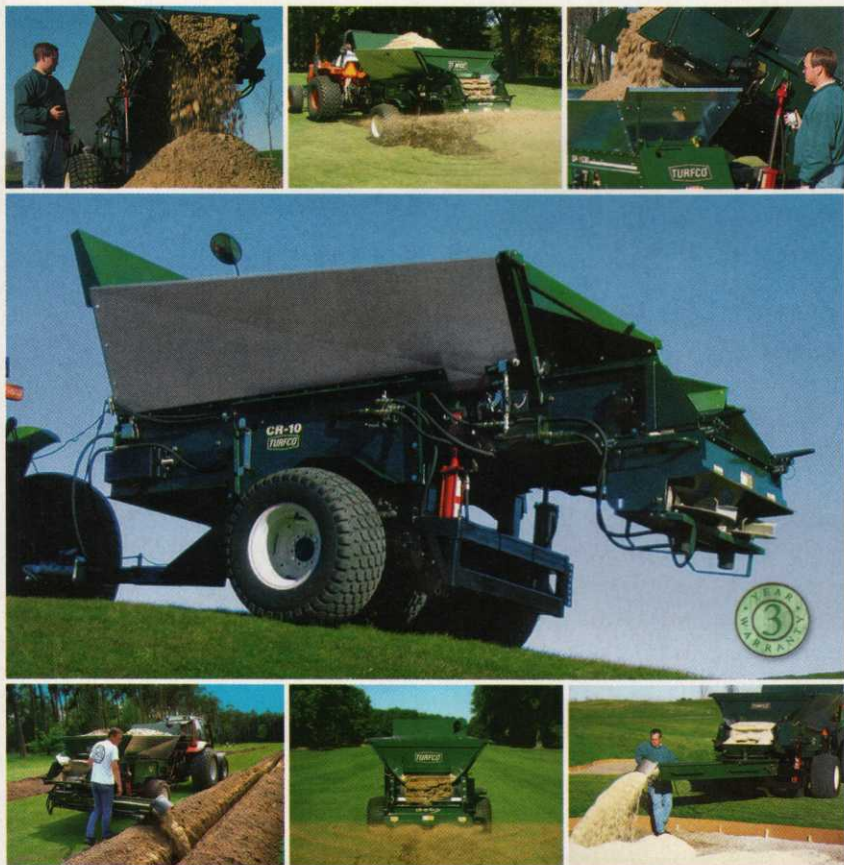
■ Before I started the job, there was an article about the new team coming into the GCSAA. When the article began talking about me, it said, "Well, he's only 36 years old and his resume looks a little light. Maybe he was hired more for who he knows than what he knows." I hadn't even started yet, and I was already getting criticized.

I've been criticized for a lot of different things. Sometimes it bothered me because I believed what I was doing was right, and the people who were criticizing me really didn't know what was going on. And in some cases I couldn't say what was going on because it was leading to something that we were going to announce later that in some cases would vindicate me.

I'm pretty comfortable in my own skin, so I really don't let criticism bother me too much. I don't think I'm a cocky person, but I have a lot of self-confidence. I also have the philosophy that the higher up you get in any kind of position, the highs are going to be higher and the lows are going to be lower. You get canonized sometimes and get too much credit, but you can't let that go to your head. And you probably get too much blame at times.

■ **After 14 years at the helm, do you think it's healthy for the GCSAA to get a new leader?**

■ Now that I've had time to reflect on it, this is probably about the right time for me to move on. I think it's time for someone else to come in who has new ideas and has a little bit different approach toward things.



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I don't feel like everything that could have been done got done, but that's the nature of a job like this.

I told the board, "Don't try to get another Steve Mona in here because I am who I am. I think you've liked what I've represented, but you'll also see that someone new will focus attention in an area that I didn't. And you'll say, 'Wow, that's pretty good because Steve never really paid much attention to this.'"

I feel good about the GCSAA and its future. I look forward to being on the outside and looking in to a certain degree to see what the GCSAA does in the future.

■ **What do you think the GCSAA should be looking for in your successor?**

■ It's my view that the person should be from the golf industry. Having said that, I could see a case where somebody could come into this role who isn't from the industry. But if that's the case, [that person] has to be somebody who is extremely passionate about the game of golf and has a higher-than-average awareness and intelligence about the game.

In this role, you're asked to be the face of the association in many venues. You need to be able to represent the association well and all that it entails. You need to know how to organize, lead and manage a staff and team of people, about 120 of

them. And you have to have a little bit of a flair for fund raising because that's part of this job.

It's a well-run association with an excellent staff, and good processes and systems in place. It's also well funded. This is a great opportunity for somebody to walk into because there's not any remedial work that needs to be done. You don't have to come in and fix anything.

■ **In your new role at the WGF, will you continue to work on behalf of superintendents in their plight to become more respected and have more of a face in the golf industry?**

■ I can assure superintendents that they will have a huge advocate and supporter at the WGF. That's my promise — to make sure the superintendent and the profession are appropriately and collectively recognized in these bodies within golf. I will be in a unique situation to help move that along.

I can't have an organization be that big a part of my life for so many years and then just walk away from it.

■ **What will you miss most about the job?**

■ Without putting anything in order, there are several things. First, there are the members, who are fantastic. It was wonderful to work for a group of people who are straightforward, diligent, hard-working and honest.

I will also miss our talented staff. They are a great group of people — hard-working and loyal. And I will miss the people related to the industry, including industry partners from big companies and small companies.

I'm not trying to feather my own nest, but I'm going to really miss the psychic rewards you get from this job. When I go to various places and interface with our members, so many of them say, "I really appreciate what you're doing" or "We're so glad you're with us." You don't get that in very many jobs, particularly in a position like this one.

Usually when the CEO comes around the people are waiting to pounce on him to tell him what's wrong. ■

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