

Shades Of Green

■ OPINION

If I didn't know better, I'd think golf writers were stumped about what to write with Tiger on the bench the rest of the year. It's not like there's not a template: Basketball lost Michael Jordan, and NASCAR lost Dale Earnhardt. Others filled the void in no time at all.

The sports section is a lot like the entertainment section, and golf writers seem to dwell on Tiger's knee rehab and John Daly's high jinx rather than pertinent issues like water restrictions, which affect all golfers from touring professionals to the municipal hackers. So what's more important — secret random drug testing for golf pros or turning golf courses into parched deserts?

Just look at the green industry in Georgia and the two-year quagmire that the Georgia Golf Course Superintendents Association went through to create Water Conservation Best Management Practices. Despite its efforts, golf courses around Atlanta could only water greens and tees. Quite a severe penalty when other businesses were asked to only cut back 10 percent. Once again, the perception of golf as a rich man's game prevailed instead of considering golf as a viable sports and leisure industry that supports tourism and local business. It's hard to grow the game when you can't grow the grass.

Golf always seems to bear the brunt of water restrictions because of the old misconception that golf courses are big water users. Rather than dispel that myth, water management authorities hide from public reaction by assigning disproportionate water restrictions on our industry. Since 1995, when I began tracking golf course water use in Florida — which has more courses than any other state — golf irrigation has remained around 3 percent of the total fresh water (ground and surface) used for irrigation. In Georgia, golf water use was only .85 percent. When you force the smallest users to cut back, you don't save that much water at the pump. But it sounds good in the media.

I can't speak for all states, but here are the major water user groups in Florida: agriculture (48 percent); public supply (30 percent — half of which is estimated to be used on outdoor watering); industry, business, commercial (8

Public Opinion Still Drives Water Woes

BY JOEL JACKSON



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percent), power generation (7 percent), and recreation (5 percent — golf use is estimated as two-thirds of recreation or 3 percent); private domestic wells (2 percent).

The lowest hanging fruit for water savings is in the outdoor watering use (15 percent) in the public supply sector, but restriction enforcement is complicated when dealing with multiple utilities and jurisdictions. We have all seen the water wasted by improper operation and maintenance of residential, commercial and municipal irrigation systems. Adding insult to injury are the wasteful and often environmentally damaging disposal practices for treated wastewater.

When it comes to water use, the golf industry applies, conserves, recycles, recharges, filters and reuses water more efficiently than most other water users. Compare the 5 million acres of lawns and landscapes with the 140,000 acres of irrigated golf turf in Florida. Then consider that golf contributes \$5 billion in economic impact to Florida's economy. Certainly that must be worth a larger slice of the irrigation pie.

Until governments and utilities invest in improvements in the infrastructure needed to recycle water for irrigation and mandate efficient landscape and irrigation designs, turning off the spigots to golf courses is not a productive solution. The water savings are small, but the effects on the local economy and related businesses can be huge.

I hope the recent National Golf Day event in Washington and organized state golf alliances will be able to generate more positive media stories about the positive economic and environmental aspects of this great game that you can play for a lifetime. Waterless golf doesn't pay off for anyone, including sports writers.

Certified superintendent Joel Jackson is executive director of the Florida GCSA.