

109TH U.S. OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP

LEADERS	HOLE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	RD	RD	RD	RD
	PAR	4	4	3	5	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	5	3	4	4	3	4	1	2	3	4	
PARR																							
WOODS																							
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2009: SHACK'S LOOK BACK

Golf Course Maintenance – Front and Center

It's hard to imagine a year when the world hasn't heard more about superintendents, the efficiency of modern irrigation and the potential for a green revolution

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

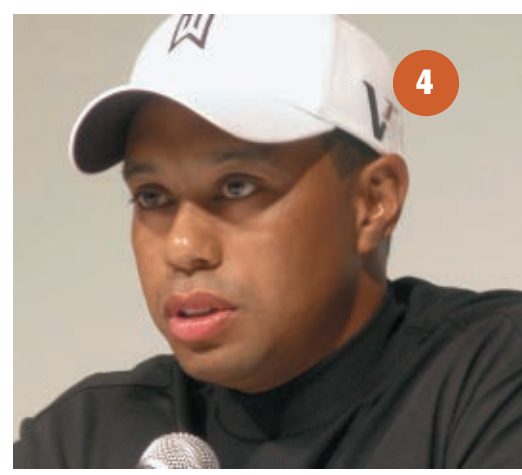
The state of golf is typically reflected by its major events. Even as 2008 ended with a little stock market collapse and the ensuing economic meltdown, golf held its head high after a combination of Tiger Woods' unforgettable win at Torrey Pines, two dynamic Padraig Harrington Major victories and then was gift-wrapped with an epic American Ryder Cup triumph.

What about 2009? Well, have you ever received a used gift card as a present?

The enigmatic Angel Cabrera won on a Masters Sunday when Tiger and Phil Mickelson were finally paired to-

gether. An even more enigmatic Lucas Glover finished off his rain-plagued U.S. Open win on a Monday at a Bethpage State Park miraculously held together by Craig Currier, his crew and army of volunteer saints. Then, just when it looked like order would be restored with a historic Tom Watson win at the Open Championship, the 59-year old legend bogeyed the final hole and stumbled in a playoff loss to Stewart Cink. For good measure, someone named Y.E. Yang dramatically took the PGA Championship from Tiger Woods, who went Majorless for the first time since 2003.

Oh, and not since the Great Depression has golf seen anything like what else



it witnessed in 2009: high-profile course closings with more on the way, a moribund new-course construction industry that has essentially shut down stateside, widespread layoffs in all sectors, the demise of the second-tier country club, massive hits to golf's image and no end in sight to concerns about the game's future.

One ray of hope remained — the golf course maintenance industry and its ability to adapt in the face of serious questions about the future of water, green and sustainability. It's hard to imagine a year when the world has heard more about the role of the superintendent, the efficiency of modern irrigation systems and the potential for a green revolution.

Front-page news

Most striking was a front-page *New York Times* article by Leslie Kaufman extolling golf's "contributions to helping better understand water management," specifically in Georgia, where "golf course managers have emerged as go-to gurus on water conservation for both industries and nonprofit groups."

The August story also noted that, "Water is just one area where golf courses

and environmentalists may find a rapprochement," reminding readers that "as metropolitan areas sprawl outward, golf courses may be the only large-scale green space for miles around, offering crucial potential habitat for migrating birds and other wildlife."

That was not breaking news to anyone in the golf industry, but when such statements appear in a front-page *New York Times* story and are syndicated in papers throughout the land and widely read online, the development can easily be viewed as a breakthrough moment when golf courses face more environmental scrutiny than ever.

In May, *New York Times* golf correspondent Larry Dorman looked at three companies "competing in the market for subterranean wireless sensors." The story was accompanied by superlative graphics showing how the monitoring of moisture, temperature and salinity in soil can be fed to a software network accessed remotely on a laptop, a handheld device or a desktop computer.

It was another victory for golf's place as a leader in technology and innovation when Dorman concluded: "Early adopters say they will cut an average of 10 percent of their typical water use, amounting to millions of gallons of water each year. At that rate, the system would pay for itself within the first year, depending on the volume of water a course uses."

More positive ink arrived in September, when NBC aired the story of Sherwood Golf Course manager Brian Lautenschlager and superintendent Mark English, who have brought 11 llamas to the Brevard, N.C., country club to work as caddies.

"They go at the speed of a golf car," Lautenschlager told the NBC reporter for a feature that appeared on the network nightly news.

Also in September, Merion Golf Club superintendent Matt Shaffer used attention brought on by the Walker Cup to not sugarcoat the state of main-

tenance and golfers' odd expectations.

"Merion is an old-fashioned golf course in a modern world," Shaffer told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "Television has changed everything. Appearances are all that matter. At Merion, we are less sensitive to matters of aesthetics and more interested in playability. Other courses use much more chemicals and fertilizer than we do, but if more golfers were less concerned about brown grass, golf would be a lot cheaper for everyone."

November witnessed *Golf Digest* focusing on golf and the environment by featuring a spread of top superintendents talking about their roles. Besides including photos of each (and no one looked like Carl Spackler), readers could go to *Golf Digest's* Web site and hear extended audio clips that revealed how articulate and provocative some of the nation's top superintendents can be if given the chance.

Hope?

Amid all of the gloom and doom in our economy, there seemed to include an almost weekly black eye for the game. For

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- 1** Rain swamped Bethpage Black, but Craig Currier and his staff prevailed.
- 2** Lucas Glover also prevailed at Bethpage with a win.
- 3** Matt Shaffer spoke his mind.
- 4** Tiger Woods went Majorless, but still won a ton.

PHOTOS BY: HOWARD P. NUEMBERGER (RIGHT, TOP); LARRY AYLWARD

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instance, Congress held hearings on banks that received government bailout funds and the hospitality industry took huge hits after Northern Trust Bank was exposed for hosting opulent celebrations during the PGA Tour event it sponsored.

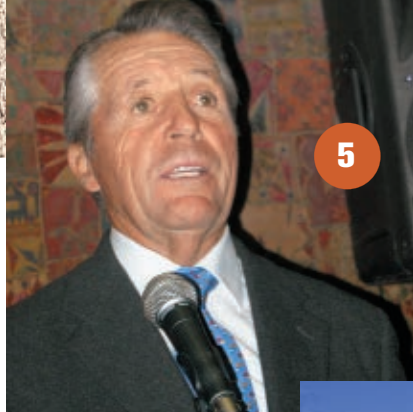
Yet for all of the embarrassing moments, President Barack Obama teed it up 24 times in his first year in office. Not since new Golf Hall of Fame inductee Dwight Eisenhower has an American president so devoted his leisure time to the game. Yet, that didn't stop a number of golfers from complaining that the hard-working president should stay off the links.

As for golf's executive ranks, there was little hesitation to pat themselves on the back after uniting to get golf back into the Olympics. With backing from every noted player (all conspicuously happen to have golf course design businesses), the movement has been billed as a savior for the game and course construction industry. The thinking goes like this: When tennis became an Olympic sport, governments in Russia and elsewhere suddenly invested in the development of tennis academies and the world became a happier place because we were introduced to the likes of Maria Sharapova.

The less-than-subtle inference is the sport will grow magically worldwide, thanks to new Olympic funding in countries that don't have golf. With almost no golf courses under construction in the United States, architects and builders view the opportunity to work overseas as a godsend.

The year a connection was made

In reaction to the Olympic news and realizations the golf industry will remain stagnant until a new model emerges based on fun, faster rounds and environmental sustainability. Several noted figures began to speak out about the role technology plays in boxing golf into a corner of 7,500-yard courses that take too long to play. All-time great and architect Gary Player said: "We have



to build golf courses for the people. We have to change. Change is the price of survival. We cannot go on in the golf business as we are now. We have to get more people playing, more people out, more children playing, and we've got to change our whole concept."

Tony Jacklin, a counterpart from Player's era and an always-shrewd observer of the sport, remarked to *Golf World UK* that the state of golf "is a bit like the financial mess the world is in."

"For too long, no one wanted to address the underlying problems in the world economy but then all of a sudden it was too late. No one wants to believe the game today is not as good as it was. Tiger disguises a lot of the problems."

Jacklin, like many, believes the problems started with the chase for distance that led to absurdly long new courses, and a devaluing of much-needed short courses. "It will take strong leadership but men like that are few and far between," he said.

Just as striking was a David Owen-authored story in the November *Golf Digest*. A noted *New Yorker* staff writer and author of Augusta National's club history, Owen used pages once devoid of any suggestion to say the distance chase was bad for the game.

"Many exciting technological advances related to conservation and golf-course maintenance are being developed," he wrote. "But technological innovation alone can't solve all of golf's environmental and economic chal-



5 Gary Player said "change is the price of survival." **6** Golf course closings were the result of a downturn in the economy.

lenges, and even the most promising-seeming discoveries have a history of carrying unintended consequences and hidden costs. Golf's governing bodies have dithered on the distance question since the early 1990s, but that attitude seems increasingly unsustainable. We can take the initiative in shrinking golf's landscape, or we can allow economic crises and environmental disasters to shrink it for us."

In 2010, we'll see the first effort to rein in distance with the introduction of new groove rules that some believe will force better golfers to use softer golf balls that don't fly as far, and therefore end the race to lengthen courses. While the rule is a nice a start, the golf industry realized in 2009 that the game's recent direction has put the sport in a bind and a contraction of some facilities and the model for golf is inevitable. More importantly, serious introspection and much-needed discussion has begun in earnest.

Here's to 2010 becoming the year golf figures out how to create a sustainable future. ■

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