

STORY AND
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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THE BET'S ON Rhett

After a six-month stint as interim CEO, GCSAA names Rhett Evans as the man to lead the association into the future.

It's been quite a journey these last 18 months for Rhett Evans.

It was July of 2009 that Evans was named the Chief Operating Officer of the GCSAA. Evans arrived in Lawrence, Kan., via the city of Mesa, Ariz., where he oversaw a budget of \$32.5 million as the director of parks and recreation.

A little less than a year later, in June 2010, Mark Woodward, CGCS, then CEO of the GCSAA, abruptly left the association, less than two years after being hired. Evans was named interim CEO, stepping in for his old friend from back in Mesa who helped him get his COO job with the association.

A search firm — Tryon & Heideman, based in Kansas City, Mo., and specializing in CEO/executive-level and association searches — was then brought in to conduct a search for the association's next CEO.

In the meantime, staff cuts ravaged the association, including one round that cost the association 79 years of institutional knowledge in just four positions.

But through all this turmoil, some closure has finally been achieved, and the association can now look to the future. That closure comes in the form of Rhett Evans, GCSAA's new CEO and the man chosen by the GCSAA Board of Directors to lead the association into the future.

"I didn't want this handed to me," Evans said while at the PGA Show in Orlando. "We had to go through all the appropriate processes. We couldn't rush through something this big. And, obviously, I'm thrilled it's turned out the way it did."

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THERE ARE NO MORE SILOS,
EVERYONE IS ROWING IN THE
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TO STRENGTHEN.**

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The best candidate

Robert Randquist, CGCS, director of grounds at Boca Rio Golf Club in Boca Raton, Fla., and the new president of GCSAA says the reason the GCSAA Board of Directors selected Evans CEO was simple: He was the best candidate.

“Obviously, the search firm was very thorough. When we saw the scope of the work (Evans) accomplished in Salt Lake City and Mesa, it fit the criteria we set. He had experience with conventions in Mesa. His experience in dealing with allied associations is great,” Randquist says. “He was the best candidate, and that’s why we chose him.”

Evans, age 42, comes to the association with years of experience in facilities and events management, a valuable asset to an association that has seen a decline in recent years in its annual conference and trade show. As a 24-year-old Evans was the director of operations of the Delta Center in Salt Lake City, Utah, home of the Utah Jazz. After five years there, he spent five years as the director of the McKay Events Center in Orem, Utah. In 2001 he moved to Mesa, Ariz., to be the director of the city’s convention center and amphitheater. After five years in that position he was promoted to the director of parks, recreation and commercial facilities for Mesa.

In his last years in Mesa before moving to Lawrence, Evans managed the Chicago Cubs’ spring training complex, 2,600 acres of park space and two golf courses.

“Working with those professional sports organizations — the Utah Jazz, a professional arena football team and a Triple A baseball team — we had an owner, Larry Miller, who owned all of those entities... to be able to work with him really taught me a lot,” Evans says. “That was a foundation of good business principals that I learned.

“You take all of that entrepreneurial experience and go to a municipality setting (in Mesa) — that’s pretty unique. Those organizations taught me a lot. In



Mesa we had two golf courses, and that helped me learn the day-to-day operations of a golf course, and what goes into it. As I’m doing this job, I know firsthand what our members are going through.”

A great fit

The hiring of Evans as GCSAA CEO earned an approving thumb’s-up from Steve Mona, CEO of the World Golf Foundation and the former GCSAA CEO before Woodward.

Mona first met Evans at the 2004 PGA Championship at Whistling Straits. At the time Mark Woodward was president of the GCSAA. Mona says, traditionally the GCSAA president brings his employer to an industry event so the employer can get a better understanding of the work involved in being president of GCSAA.

For the 2004 PGA Championship, Woodward brought along Evans, since the two were peers on the city of Mesa staff. Little did they know at that moment they were standing side-by-side with the next three CEOs of GCSAA.

“I think it’s great (that Evans was named CEO), it’s absolutely the right decision,” Mona says. “It’s a great fit for GCSAA. He’s demonstrated that over the past however-many months in how he’s handled the interim job. That’s one piece; second, there’s been a lot of turnover at GCSAA — it’s good for them to have some stability.”

Mike Hughes, CEO of the National Golf Course Owners Association, agrees



with Mona’s view.

“I think the first thing (the GCSAA) needs is stability. They’ve been through a couple of reorganizations and consolidations... they need to steady the ship,” Hughes says. “I think this was good news — good news for the GCSAA, good news for the NGCOA, and good news for the industry. I think he’ll be great. I think Rhett is a good communicator. He’s good with people; he’s a hard worker and intelligent. He’s a bridge-builder, too.”

Randquist says though the GCSAA staff might be happy to have a familiar face as CEO, that was not a consideration when hiring Evans.

“What we looked at were his qualifications, and that’s what stood out,” Randquist says. “I do think (his familiarity with staff) will help, but that was not

◀ Cam Oury, GCSAA CFO, crunches numbers with Evans.

▼ Evans says he expects a heavy workload, but he'll get help from Eileen Bangalan, executive operations administrator.



a criteria. We researched his references thoroughly, and his references were outstanding.”

Wait and see

Others weren't as quick to get excited about Evans as Mona and Hughes.

“With every CEO who's been hired, I take a wait-and-see perspective,” Mark Esoda, CGCS at Atlanta Country Club, says. “I don't know Rhett. I don't know who they interviewed or where he stood. I am excited that GCSAA has a leader at the rudder.”

Esoda says he was involved in a small way in the search process. He was asked his opinion on what the search firm should look for in the future CEO, but said he was “barely a fly on the wall.”

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"Had I been more involved my first reaction would have been, 'OK, let's get some backup on this decision,'" Esoda says. "He wasn't my first choice, just because he got his mentoring from Mark (Woodward). If (the Board) didn't like what Mark was doing, then why bring on a guy who has to deal with Mark's history to overcome? I don't see much of a change."

Gregg Breningmeyer, group director of sales and marketing for John Deere Golf, says he wonders why it took GCSAA so long to remove the "interim" tag from Evans' title.

"Rhett was the logical choice. I'm concerned it took them this long to name him CEO... that leads to speculation, and in this industry speculation is not favorable to the GCSAA," Breningmeyer says. "But at the end of the day, Rhett seems like a capable choice. I think I can speak for the supplier side when I say we all need a strong and vibrant GCSAA."

Par Aide president Steve Garske says that he barely followed the hiring of the new CEO.

"I'm more concerned with the guy we worked with, Mark Bisbing (former GCSAA director of sales and marketing, who left GCSAA to work for the First Tee) leaving," Garske says. "He's gone now, and it's tough because there's going to be another new guy we've got to break in. (Bisbing) was the guy who communicated with us."

Esoda says he wasn't totally surprised Evans got the job, but he didn't think Evans was going to make it past the final cut.

"I'm not sure what the competition was, but let's just say if I was a betting man, I would have lost that bet."

The qualities inside

Only the GCSAA Board of Directors knows what all the deciding factors were, but one thing is for sure: in Evans, they got a fiery competitor.

Evans is known at the GCSAA as a fierce competitor. Whether it's something as innocent as a company golf scramble or

"I think fundamentally the GCSAA needs to take a completely new look at its business model. They can't just depend on the GIS. I think the GCSAA needs to expand who it serves. Their first job is to serve all the superintendents. But all the suppliers who pay a good portion of the bill need to gain value as well."

Gregg Breningmeyer,
John Deere Golf

"It's two parts — he has to gain the confidence of the active GCSAA leadership and the delegates who are on the fringe. The second part is, he'll have the challenge of every CEO — to prove the value of the GCSAA to the membership. I see the value personally, but that's a huge challenge."

Mark Esoda, CGCS,
Atlanta Country Club

"There is always going to be a group not pleased with a decision or a policy. You just always have to be ready for that. Resign yourself to that so you're not in a constant state of angst where you're agitated with those facts. It kept me composed and gave me a perspective. It seems, in the interactions I've had with Rhett, that's he's pretty level-headed. He'll deal with that pretty easily."

Steve Mona, CEO,
World Golf Foundation

as serious as an Ironman triathlon, Evans takes all competition seriously.

"I was a wrestler growing up, and that was strictly mano a mano," Evans says of where his competitive streak comes from. "I have a drive to succeed and a drive to push myself."

It's a safe bet that anyone who has ever swam 2.4 miles, biked 112 miles and then



Advice for the new CEO

"(Evans) has to have his finger on the pulse of the board. The board is supposed to supply him with strategic direction. He needs to work with them and communicate with them. He doesn't need to be a rubber stamp — he needs to challenge them — but the directions he wants to take, he needs to sell them to the board first. And if the board comes to him with an idea, he needs to embrace it... he doesn't have to just do it, but he needs to either figure out how to do it, or how to justify not doing it."

And don't half-heart anything, either. All-in or all-out. GCSAA can't do everything, especially now. What are the most important things?"

Sean Hoolehan, CGCS,
Wildhorse Resort & Casino

"I think the biggest asset the GCSAA can offer members is their lobbying — if they can protect us from the idiots in Washington. Superintendents want to see some value in what they do for them? There's value right there."

I think Rhett will be successful if he can just keep them together. Keep their spending down, keep the trade show viable. That's a big deal. I think people still do like trade shows... I hope they do."

Steve Garske, Par Aide

ran 26 miles has a drive to push himself. That's what every Ironman triathlon consists of, and Evans has done four of them.

Evans says beyond his résumé, he believes the board of directors recognized his passion, his drive to succeed and his results-oriented attitude.

"At this level, everyone is experienced, everyone is educated, everyone's led orga-

nizations,” Evans says. “What you have to boil it down to is qualities inside that person. No. 1, my passion — golf is more to me than a game, it’s something I’m passionate about. No. 2, I have a sustained drive for success. I can keep it on. In this economy, you have to be able to keep it on. And No. 3, I’m results-oriented. It’s great to build relationships — that’s required of a CEO — but we need results.”

Back in Mesa, City Manager Chris Brady knew of these characteristics — he saw them firsthand in the three-and-a-half years the two worked together.

“Rhett was definitely a high-energy department head. He took on a lot of challenges,” Brady says. “You’re going to find him as very energetic. He’s a hard-worker, but approachable. He’s full of ideas and he’s a great leader.

“I was a little surprised (at the quickness with which he became GCSAA CEO), but even here, he had some high-level opportunities, and he just stood out,” Brady says. “He always does more than you expect him to get done.”

Do or die

Ask anyone what they see as Evans’ biggest hurdle to overcome for the GCSAA and the answer always comes back almost verbatim: diversify revenue.

“I think his biggest challenge is diversifying the association’s income,” says Sean Hoolehan, CGCS at Wildhorse Resort and Casino in Pendleton, Ore. and GCSAA’s president in 2006. “It relies on the GIS so much. They’ve got to find new revenue streams.”

Randquist agrees.

“The less reliant we are on the GIS, the better off the association will be,” he says. “There are no easy answers. It’s going to take some creative thinking.”

Once again, Evans likes to look his challenge in the eye, no backing down.

“The most exciting aspect to me is that we’re going into a new economy,” Evans says. “It’s a new philosophy of do-or-die. You have to make it work. Some see that as a negative, I see that as a positive.” ■



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