

# Behind *THE* Curtain

BY SETH JONES

Billy Casper Golf allows us exclusive access to its annual meeting — and shows us how it's trying to change the industry.

**F**or three days in February, golf industry professionals from across the country converge on Tampa, Fla. They come from as far as Hawaii and Pennsylvania and just about everywhere in-between. Their job titles include superintendent, golf professional and sales director.

They're there to learn about the business, network and take classes.

This isn't the Golf Industry Show. It's not a regional conference.

Welcome to management company Billy Casper Golf's Annual Meeting.

To some, the thought of having to attend a management company's annual meeting would be a horror. Because that would mean that their course was now being operated by a management company.

But to the attendees of the BCG meeting, this is one of the best weeks of the year. Because it's the biggest reminder that they are a part of a management company — or, as many call it, "a team."

And they wouldn't want it any other way.

## Schedule change

Virginia-based Billy Casper Golf owns or manages roughly 150 golf courses in 28 states. The company, now 23 years in operation, employs a fair share of turf professionals. But it's only been recently that those superintendents have truly felt like an integral part of the BCG team.

Six years ago, the superintendents in the company didn't attend the BCG Annual Meeting. They weren't invited.

It was at this time that Bryan Bielecki, vice president of agronomy for the company, affected change. He decided that superintendents must attend the national meeting in order to get the credit they deserve, and enhance the business, art and science skills they bring to their properties daily.

"We had that typical struggle with the perception of superintendents within the organization — like in the real world — about what superintendents do," Bielecki recalls. "The superintendents needed to be exposed to the rest of the organization, and the rest of the organization needed to be exposed to our superintendents, to see they are real professionals."

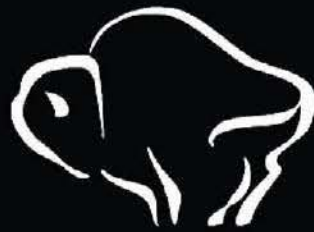
Or, as BCG Chairman and CEO Peter Hill

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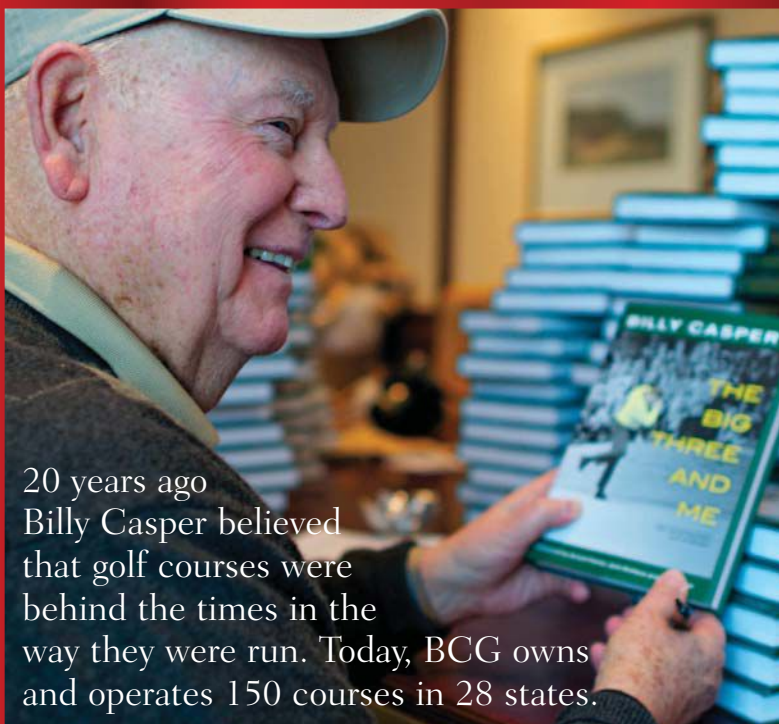


**Bryan Bielecki**

“The guys who haven’t been to the annual meeting, or haven’t been a part of our team for a long time, they’ll talk about Billy Casper Golf in the third person—it’s ‘you guys,’ even though they’re employees of Billy Casper Golf,” Bielecki says. “Once they’ve had a chance to indulge themselves in the culture, after they get a few regional meetings and a national meeting under their belt, all of a sudden it’s ‘us.’”



BILLY CASPER  
GOLF



20 years ago Billy Casper believed that golf courses were behind the times in the way they were run. Today, BCG owns and operates 150 courses in 28 states.

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says, "Superintendents are integral to Billy Casper Golf, furthering its mission to build the best operating platform in the history of golf."

At first blush, telling a superintendent to prepare for a three-day trip to Florida seems like the move of a person trying to make friends. But if BCG were to make an addition, that meant a subtraction must happen. GCSAA's annual Golf Industry Show, the biggest turf maintenance event in the industry, would no longer be a trip that BCG would pay for.

"We were in a real tough spot. If we cut out the GIS for all of our superintendents, they might lock us up and throw away the key," Bielecki recalls thinking. "But if we didn't get our superintendents exposed to the organization, and vice versa, we risked being stuck in neutral."

### Anatomy of an annual meeting

Much of the BCG annual meeting is about being around fellow members of the BCG family. Region-by-region dinners kick off

the first night. Then the meeting gets a proper start with an opening session the following morning. Company namesake and World Golf Hall of Famer Billy Casper and CEO Peter Hill both address the group. Following the opening session, attendees can choose to go on a golf outing, fishing trip or cruise around Tampa Bay.



**Peter Hill**

The next day, classes begin. Courses such as "Revenue Strategies to Grow Your Business" and "Golf Course Ownership Workshop" are offered to all attendees, as well as some turf-specific classes for the superintendents at the event.

"There's also a lot about running a business, finance classes and growing your career," says Bryan Stromme, Midwest director of agronomy. "The education is a huge part of the meeting. And it's not just turf, it covers business, HR classes, contracts and more."

"We'll do an agronomy meeting, then you go do a budget meeting, then a reporting meeting," says Bryan Nuss, superintendent at Jack Frost National GC



**Bryan Stromme**

in Blakeslee, Pa., who has attended five BCG Annual Meetings. "It's general, but you learn more about the overall aspect of the golf course, not just our department."

Following the education sessions is the awards ceremony, where top performers are recognized. The morning of the last day features a guest speaker for the group, covering topics such as leadership and creative thinking.

Louis Bischoff, superintendent at the BCG-managed North Course in City Park, New Orleans, savors the Annual Meeting, and is among its biggest advocates. He's won awards at the event twice — Rookie of the Year and Top Performer.

"There are a ton of great things about the BCG Annual Meeting," Bischoff says. "People I call friends, people if you're lucky to see them once, maybe twice a year, and you actually spend time with them at the 'Annual.' We all chew the same dirt, it's interesting to hear stories from others."

Bischoff hasn't been to the Golf Industry Show in "quite a few years," but doesn't seem to miss it.

"Some of the knowledge that roams around the BCG halls... it's horrifying, they're so smart," he says. "I always feel like I can get accomplished whatever I need to do at the Annual."

On the contrast, John Spiwak, superintendent at BCG-managed Eastpointe CC in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., doesn't like missing a show so important to him as the Golf Industry Show. So he attends every year on his own.

"The GIS allows guys to experience things more on their own, put your hands on all the equipment, and get that type of knowledge," Spiwak says. "Some of it does cross over, but you couldn't say it's the same."

Nuss agrees.

"It's nice to get away, heading to Florida in February is great. It's two days where you learn a lot in classes and at the golf outing," he says, adding that the GIS complements the BCG Annual Meeting.

Almost to a superintendent, there's great value placed on the worthwhileness of the education at the BCG meeting, but Bielecki, maybe surprisingly, says education isn't the main reason the company has brought superintendents to Florida the past six years.

"What do we hope to get out of it? It's probably more cultural than anything else," Bielecki explains. "It's camaraderie and exposure."

### Team first

A team-first attitude is everywhere at the BCG meeting. Some of these superintendents may miss attending the GIS, but they're also fiercely loyal to their Billy Casper Golf team.

"They use the word a lot; 'team,'" Spiwak says. "It gives you the feeling that you're a part of a group that others aren't. A very positive thing about (the BCG Annual Meeting) is you don't feel alone after you've been to one of those meetings."

"Being a superintendent, you have your local chapter, and you can rely on those guys... it's similar to that, just much bigger," Nuss says of how he feels about BCG. "Instead of local guys you've got very smart people all over the country. If you run into any problem, you can easily contact any of them and get a good answer and trust it."

Bielecki says taking the GIS off everyone's plate instantly drew some criticism. But he stands by the decision.

"I really believe, still, that it's the right decision," he says. "The exposure (BCG superintendents) got to the organization, the exposure that the organization got to them, has really paid dividends for how those superintendents are perceived."

Bielecki says the goal is to create the Southwest Airlines of the golf course maintenance industry. He wants to create an organizational culture that can attract and retain the best superintendents in the business.

"If you look at the history of Southwest, and the performance of the stock price,



John Spiwak

employee engagement, employee morale, they've far, far outperformed their competitors. We're trying to create that," Bielecki says. "We're not there yet. But the annual meeting is just one component of making sure Billy Casper Golf brings its best game to each property every day. If we can attract and retain the best superintendent professionals in the industry, it makes our jobs a whole lot easier. And it makes the results at our facilities a whole lot better."

Count Bischoff on board. After 20 years working at private country clubs, he regrets not joining the team sooner.

"I'll tell you exactly what I told (BCG CEO) Peter Hill my first year... this is the future of golf, the management company," Bischoff says. "It's called country club syndrome — that's my own term for it. Grandma and grandpa might have started the country club, mom and dad grew up in it, they participated, they played. Then they had their children. Their children want to participate and play, but they don't want to pay. They're slowly, one by one, dropping off the face of the planet."

"Management groups are the way to go — they're the way of the future." **G**

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