



"To me, all of these signs are an indication that the successful golf courses and operators will continue to improve and grow."

MARK WOODWARD, *Contributing Editor*

Positive signs for golf

After several years of tough times in golf, I choose to believe that 2014 is going to be a good year for our industry. Now, I don't have any magic formula of predicting the future, but I'm already seeing small signs that make me feel optimistic about this year. As we all know, beginning in late 2008 and continuing through 2013, our industry has struggled right along with the economic times.

We've all seen the statistics about rounds being down, revenues being down, people being laid off, more golf courses closing each year than opening and budgets being cut. I have personally felt the impact of these tough economic times and downturns in everything related to golf.

When I was with the GCSAA, we laid off close to 30 employees and the organization felt the direct impact of the entire industry tightening its collective belt. Our vendors/partners gave the association less marketing dollars, so we had to take special, but necessary measures to balance the budget.

When I returned to Arizona and worked for a golf course construction/renovation company, it was extremely difficult to get work because golf facilities were

hunkering down, not spending any money on their much needed renovation work.

When I started my own golf course renovation company, we saw a niche in the business, focusing on small to medium sized renovation projects. Even though we did well as a small start-up company, the work is seasonal, making it hard to keep staff busy year-round.

With all of these examples of how our industry has struggled, I still choose to believe that things are looking up for 2014.

One positive sign is at the golf course where I do consulting work. It is doing quite well considering what has happened there over the past several years. Rounds have gone from 29,000 to 49,000 in just 18 months. Revenue has also increased substantially,

commensurate with the increase in play. Additionally, rounds are up for the first part of January 2014 compared to the same period in 2013.

Our renovation company is already seeing an increase in golf courses wanting renovation work. We're right in the middle of our golf season here in the desert southwest, when no renovation work typically occurs, and we already have more work on the books and scheduled in 2014 than we've had the past two seasons. We believe that the golf courses that are going to make it through these tough times are now beginning to approve budgets and projects to take care of their number one asset, the golf course itself.

In my mind, another indication of a slow turn around, is that golf course owners in all sectors of the industry

(private, daily fee, resort and municipal) are looking for new ways to keep their golf courses open. They obviously recognize the importance of golf to their members, guests and communities and are taking measures to insure that their facilities remain viable business entities.

They are looking at alternative ways to manage their golf courses and engaging more actively in player development programs. They are changing their methods of managing the tee sheets, focusing on yield management, they are making efforts to grow the game and attract new golfers to their facilities and, as I mentioned earlier, taking better care of the physical plant itself, the golf course.

To me, all of these signs are an indication that the successful golf courses and operators will continue to improve and grow, giving our industry one of its better years in quite some time.

I understand that there are many variables that could affect how successful our 2014 will be, including weather and the economy. There won't be a huge spike in rounds, revenues and course openings, but I still choose to believe that if we all do our respective parts, we can collectively make a difference and this will be a great year in golf.

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