

number pales in comparison to the number of courses built in the mid-1990s, but it's still a lot of new courses for an industry that's been struggling, Hughes says.

"I doubt there are many places that you can say don't have adequate supply," Hughes says. "There might be a few metropolitan pockets, but not many. It doesn't help anybody to have a bunch of struggling golf courses."

Hetrick agrees the industry has reached the saturation point for high-end, daily-fee courses that charge \$150 and take five hours to play. But he believes there are pockets where more affordable golf courses could still be built.

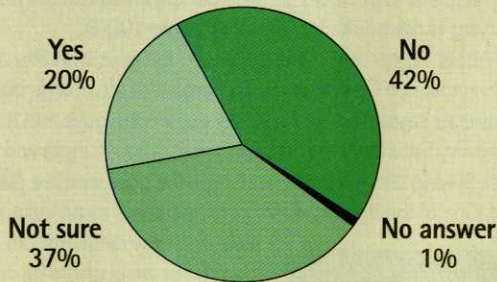
"If you've got the financing, there's never been a better time to build a golf course," Hetrick says. "There are a lot of builders looking for work."

Weed says architects face more competition than ever because of the decline in new courses. "But a lot of the slack is being picked up with renovations," he adds. "I don't see that slowing down. In fact, I see more of it coming."

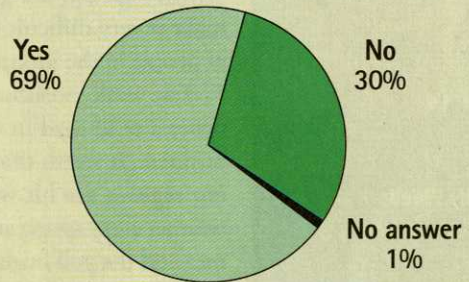
While Weed says real estate will continue to drive some golf course development, he's concerned that some

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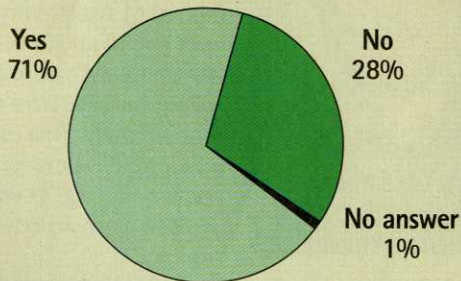
Many people believe the economic slump in the golf industry is over. Do you agree?



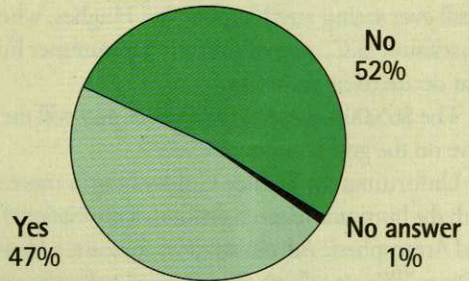
Do you feel confident the general economy will improve in 2005?



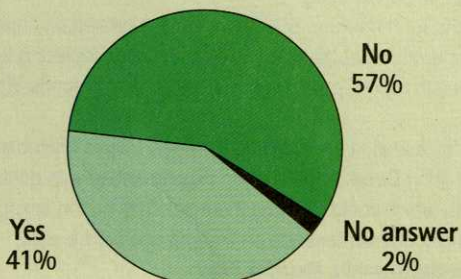
Has the economy affected your course's revenue?



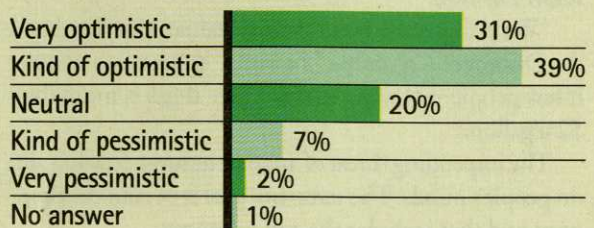
Was your course damaged or hindered by bad weather in 2004?



Did your course's rounds increase this year?



How optimistic are you about the economic health of your facility?



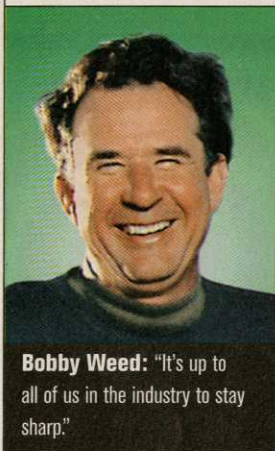
Editor's note: Findings are based on responses from 325 superintendents who participated in *Golfdom's* October online survey.

*Continued from page 31*

developers don't care if golf courses aren't profitable as long as they sell real estate around them.

"That thinking has given golf a black eye in some areas," Weed says. "But I think more developers are becoming more frugal and want golf courses to be more of a profit center."

Hughes says he hasn't heard of many golf course closings, although many have changed ownership. But Hughes is worried that rising interest rates could hurt some owners' operations, especially if they're already operating with deficits.



**Bobby Weed:** "It's up to all of us in the industry to stay sharp."

"One of the things that has allowed people to survive in a very difficult environment has been low interest rates," he says. "If they go up, it's going to make it very difficult for a lot of people in the industry."

The wacky weather always poses a wild card in the golf business. It seems that different regions are hit with bad weather every spring and summer and the golf business suffers in those areas. Florida was

a prime example in 2004, and the effect the hurricanes had on golf industry economics in Florida and other Southern states may not be known until early 2005.

"I've lived on the East Coast my whole life, and I don't recall ever seeing anything like it," Hughes, who lives in Charleston, S.C., says of the four late-summer hurricanes that occurred in six weeks.

The \$65,000 question is: What impact will the weather have on the golf economy in 2005?

Unfortunately, Stanley Goldenberg, a meteorologist with the hurricane research division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, forecasts a future of bad storms. "We are talking about overall twice the amount of activity and two and a half times the number of major hurricanes," Goldenberg recently told *Engineering News-Record*.

Other questions loom as well. Fultz is worried the escalating price of gas will affect Shenvalee and the entire resort business.

"We pull people from Pennsylvania, Maryland and the District of Columbia," he says. "You have to wonder if less people will want to drive here if gas is more than \$2 a gallon."

The impending threat of another terrorist attack is also on people's minds. The terrorists' goal is to ruin the economy, and that includes the golf economy.

As Weed says, the golf industry is a completely differ-

ent industry than it was four years ago. And if its segments — from architects to owners and superintendents to pros — don't work in unison, the industry could suffer, Weed contends.

"It's up to all of us in the industry to stay sharp," he says. "We're all joined at the hip when it comes to growing the game of golf. The economy of the business continues to change and evolve, and we have to adapt to that." ■

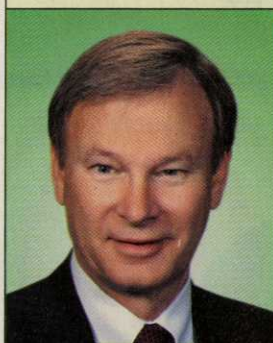
## Schwieger: Iron Majors Seek Strength in Numbers

Dennis Schwieger, executive vice president of marketing and business development for Charlotte, N.C.-based Jacobsen, wishes more guys like him — average golfers — would start playing the game. That would certainly benefit an equipment industry trying to relive the glory days of the late 1990s.

"About 20 percent of the golfers — the guys who play all the time — make up 70 percent to 75 percent of the rounds played," Schwieger says. "And the light-duty guys — the guys that don't play every Saturday — we're the biggest group in there and we're playing altogether no more than the guys who are playing a lot. One of the things we're concerned about as an industry is

attracting new members, but more importantly we ought to be concerned about retaining who we already have."

The iron industry fared somewhat better in 2004 than it had the previous year, Schwieger says. "For cutting and grooming equipment, I would say that business was slightly improved, but it's nothing like it was in the past decade," he says. "The compound annual growth rate is not what it was five years ago. It's dramatically down from what it was five years ago."



**Dennis Schwieger** says the golf industry must focus more on retaining the players it already has.

Competition is good ... and hopefully getting better and more amicable, Schwieger says. He advocates the decision to incorporate several trade associations into the 2005 Golf Industry Show. "That's a really positive thing," he says. "Somewhere along the line we have to have cooperation through associations and that sort of thing."

As for the future, Schwieger sees improved technology — from environmentally friendly electric drives replacing hydraulic drives to robotic equipment that can groom courses after night-fall.

"I think all of us — at least the three majors (Jacobsen, Toro, and John Deere) — have been experimenting with guidance systems, which could give you more flexibility on the timing of when you can do maintenance on the golf course," he says.

— Thomas Skernivitz, Managing Editor



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# Time for an Annual Review

It started off great, what with Phil winning the Masters. But things started to get ugly around U.S. Open time

By Geoff Shackelford, Contributing Editor

It started off so promising. There was an exciting West Coast swing and an increase in spring rounds played.

There was Phil Mickelson's brilliant Masters win on a retro Sunday in Augusta, followed by a stellar leaderboard heading into U.S. Open weekend.

Then the USGA lost its mind and lost control of Shinnecock Hills, and in the second half of the year golf seemed to serve as a constant reminder of the many issues facing the game on both the professional and recreational levels.

Actually, the stitches began to come undone the week prior to the Open. The pain had to do with slow golf. At the Buick-sponsored tour event formerly known as the Westchester Classic, twosomes took five hours to play Saturday's third round. The tour's finest waited for upwards of 20 minutes on tees as most of the field attempted to drive two short par-4s. The course's two par 5s were also reachable in two for most of the field and added to congestion problems. It all prompted a grumpy Fred Couples to say, "I wouldn't have come out and watched today. You might as well have stayed home."

The worst-kept secret in golf is that slow play is undermining the sport's popularity like never before. Golf courses that host the top players and even everyday layouts designed with certain driving distances in mind have become out-

*Continued on page 36*



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*Continued from page 34*

dated. The result? Lots of waiting. Why the waiting? Because people are hitting it longer. Even everyday golfers are starting to see genuine benefits from equipment, thanks in part to the use of launch-monitor club-fitting technology.

The real eye-opener at the Buick event came from PGA Tour official Slugger White, who probably was reprimanded for concluding after the round that the slow play was caused by extreme driving distances. "We've got a situation now where I really feel like the ball is going too far," he said. "We've got guys driving the ball farther than they ever have."

The year saw many in golf coming to grips with the notion that golf manufacturers have little interest in the everyday game. More prominent golfers and officials joined the chorus of traditionalists calling upon the governing bodies to regulate distance to preserve vital traditions and ensure a healthy future for the sport.

Among those in 2004 suggesting a rollback in distance or a "tournament ball" to end the madness of lengthening and narrowing courses were Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, Nick Price, Tom Weiskopf, Deane Beman and Tiger Woods.

Yes, that's right, Tiger tried to bring up the issue, first in a press conference and a week later on the ABC prime-time telecast of "Battle of the Bridges." Yet golf magazines mysteriously did not report on his rather startling and simple solution.

"I think you should put a limit on the speed of a golf ball, the spin rate of a golf ball," Woods said in comments obviously choreographed with his biggest sponsor, Nike. "You can increase the spin of the golf ball and make it so that we don't hit the ball as far. You can decrease the speed of the core. There are different ways you can get around it so that we're all playing under certain speed limits. Hopefully that will be the answer to a lot of the problems that we're having with golf course design around the world."

At public courses and country clubs across the land, superintendents reported increasing pressure to deal with the distance issue. The Golf Course Superintendent Association of America's (GCSAA) annual survey found that 28 percent of superintendents polled said "maintenance of their course changed to compensate for the increasing distance of golf balls." That's up 10 percent from 2003.

Many superintendents reported anecdotal evidence of



GEOFF SHACKELFORD

**The green of the par-3 seventh hole at Shinnecock was as slick as an ice-skating rink during the U.S. Open.**

increased driving distance by more golfers. They said that some places accustomed to parking golf cars while waiting for other groups to tee off were no longer safe. They also said that tees once out of reach from parallel fairways are now design issues in need of analysis (and protective fencing).

The list of unfortunate symptoms related to the distance chase is long, but the saddest continues to be the lack of attention paid to the significant upgrade in course maintenance across the United States compared to a decade ago. Sure, a few courses are still not in great shape and many are cutting back on basics such as bunker raking, but, by and large, maintenance has never been better.

### **Where are the watchdogs?**

The good news for the struggling golf business is that several prominent voices have taken notice of the connection between distance, cost and the overall commercial atmosphere driven by manufacturers. They have made the connection and understand how the situation is scaring off long-time and beginning players.

"You can be anti-technology when it comes to golf, without being one of those uncompromising purists who thinks we should go back to hickory shafts," wrote *Washington Post* columnist Sally Jenkins. "Which of us doesn't long for the days when a par 4 was supposed to be played ... in four strokes?"

"The real problem with golf is not science itself, but that it's been applied to the game so rampantly by equipment

*Continued on page 38*

# GOOD THINGS HAPPEN...



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companies interested only in selling the 'newest' clubs and balls for even higher prices. They don't care if Augusta is stretched to the point of ruin, or if a 480-yard hole has to be turned into a par 4. They just want to move product. In no other sport are the equipment manufacturers so influential when it comes to how the game is played. Spalding and Nike don't control basketball. But the equipment companies in golf have enormous sway via advertising and sponsorship dollars, and they are the chief obstacle to reform."

On the reform front, the governing bodies continued to run scared this year. The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews made clear it has no intention of doing anything. The USGA rolled out a new Phase II ball test, and PGA Tour driving distances did not decrease. (You must go down to 89th place in the driving distance stats to find someone *averaging* under 290 yards off the tee!)

The PGA Tour is too worried about its upcoming television contract negotiations to step into the battle. While the other assorted bodies wheel out fog-filtered ads about all that they're doing to grow the game, it has become apparent there isn't much point to introducing a poor inner-city child to the game if it's going to cost nearly \$1,000 for a starter set of clubs.

Yes, that's right, Nike unveiled a starter set that cost \$897 — and bragged about it in a press release. Taylor Made unveiled a \$799 driver. Meanwhile, Callaway began a nose-dive that saw Wall Street dumping its stock, while ball giant Titleist continued to rake in the profits and rail against any form of regulation that might restore some sanity to the sport.

"The concomitant pressure to innovate faster and faster, repeatedly recapturing the consumer imagination while not angering buyers with computer industry-style speedy obsolescence, makes golf one of the most difficult subsegments in the leisure products market," wrote Golf Channel equipment editor Adam Barr. "And faster (read: more expensive) innovation leads to more late-model closeouts and — you guessed it — more downward price pressure."

Translation: The golf equipment industry is moving from the already insidious Wall Street-driven concept of "planned obsolescence" (they don't make 'em like they used to) to a cycle that calls on rapid innovation and flashy marketing designed to make golfers feel as if they're using obsolete equipment if they haven't picked up this month's newest drivers.



MIKE KLEMM

**Whistling Straits, site of the 2004 PGA Championship, ranked high on *Golf Digest's* Top 100 Courses You Can Play list.**

Here's the kicker (and reason to not own Callaway stock): The cycles are moving so fast that the companies are no longer able to exploit the suggested retail price long enough to produce expected earnings. The dwindling number of golfers combined with less enthusiasm from avid players to constantly buy the latest clubs produces plenty of surplus and weak profit margins for the manufacturers.

**Winners are ...**

On the architecture front, *Golf Digest's* Best New Course competition continued to generate plenty of buzz. Jim Engh's The Club at Black Rock in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, upset two courses almost surely destined for Top 100 lists: Tom Fazio's Dallas National and Bill Coore-Ben Crenshaw's Friars Head on Long Island. Tom Weiskopf's Forest Dunes earned the Best New Resort Course Award while Baxter Spann's Black Mesa in New Mexico took the Best New Affordable Award.

Speaking of affordable golf, *Golf Magazine* unveiled its list of the Top 100 Courses You Can Play. Average in-season green fee: \$191. Perhaps feeling guilty, the magazine thankfully offered up a new list, the Nifty 50 courses under \$50 that are worth playing.

The year ended up with Vijay Singh establishing himself as the best golfer in the world, the American Ryder Cup putting on a dreadful performance at immaculate Oakland Hills, but an overall sense that Americans are finally taking notice of key issues that face what is still a great sport and a fine business in which to be part. ■

*Shackelford can be reached at [geoffshackelford@aol.com](mailto:geoffshackelford@aol.com).*



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# Up and Down

A look back at the year in statistics and sayings, including results of our recent superintendent survey and the best quotables of the year from some of the industry's most interesting characters

## About the Survey

In October, *Golfdom* conducted a major online survey of about 325 superintendents. A good portion of our findings are reported here. About 54 percent of the superintendents who responded to the survey are from public courses, and about 46 percent are from private courses. Nearly 40 percent of respondents have worked in the industry for more than 10 years. About 58 percent of respondents are over the age of 40.

