ions

rebound in San Diego. And while you can certainly chalk up some of the low numbers in New Orleans to the diminishing interest of the host city, a hefty amount can also be attributed to the crummy economy we're in. Almost every one of us with a budget has had to cut virtually everything that's not an absolute necessity to maintain a golf course, including the line item of "travel and education."

It's possible that skipping the GIS last year was an isolated phenomenon for many superintendents. But it's more likely the people who missed last year are also going to miss again this year. Hey, it's not like the economy suddenly turned around and the golf industry is on the rise again. Clubs and courses are still hurting, and many superintendents from those clubs won't attend the show. Obviously, we won't be tossing back any drafts with those guys and gals, who would rather stay employed for the other 51 weeks of the year.

Don't think for a moment superintendents are the only ones affected by this continued economic downturn. Our industry's suppliers, the vendors at this show, have been hit hard, too. It's also not cheap for them to go to the show, considering the costs of booth-space rental, not to mention the cost it takes to house and feed the employees the companies take to staff their booths.

While these expenses have continued to grow, the number of qualified buyers visiting their booths have dropped — down 3,000 last year when compared to the year before. So some vendors are decreasing booth space, bringing less staff and reduce the number of client dinners where the bar tab typically dwarfs the food bill. The question is: Are some vendors skipping the show because of this trend?

On the up side, the shorter trade-show format should be more productive for vendors and attendees, especially with no other scheduled events to compete for attendees' time. Rather than stretch out the trade show with a longer distributor preview on the front end and a seriously empty floor on Saturday morning on the back end, this two-day format has been eagerly anticipated for years. The trade show should become the only focus for the two days in the middle of the show resulting in better attendance from qualified buyers and more attentive vendors hoping to capitalize on them. Plus,

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The shorter trade-show format, set for two days on Feb. 10 and 11, should be more productive for vendors and attendees.

A good showing will likely provide some real hope that the worst is behind us.

PHOTO BY: ISTOCK INTERNATIONAL INC.

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on Thursday, Feb. 11, there's a show floor happy hour from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. I'm in!

Finally, San Diego represents the last year of the unified GIS, with the CMAA departing from the rest of the flock. With only a few years of active partnership between the three sponsors, including the National Golf Course Owners Association, the CMAA's departure marks a potential that will go forever unrealized.

When conceived and introduced, the newly combined conference and show was suppose to ring in an unprecedented collaboration from everyone within the golf industry to help unite all facets of the golfing community. But sometimes you simply can't fit a square peg into a round hole.

From the reactions of many, the CMAA will likely not be missed in future shows. However, it certainly seems a little disappointing that people who share a common passion for the game of golf couldn't find a way to make this relationship work for the betterment of all parties involved. In a time when almost every facet of the industry is struggling, presenting a sentiment of solidarity between all the associations would've not only been a monumental success, but also an inspiring act that our industry sorely needs right now.

My crystal ball may be a little hazy, but I believe San Diego could very well hold a bright future for the GIS in its sandy, beach-filled hands. Everyone, from the vendors to the GCSAA executives, is watching and hoping for a good turn out in numbers. A poor showing could indicate a continued downward spiral of our industry, economically speaking. A good showing will likely provide some real hope that the worst is behind us as we prepare to recapture what we've lost in the upcoming season. ■

Gray, a contributing editor to Golfdom, is general manager and superintendent of the Marvel Golf Club in Benton, Ky.

Holding Their Turf

Golf course distributors, suppliers have no choice but to be steadfast in dealing with economic woes

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

It's a splendid late-October evening for an outdoor cocktail reception, and members of the Independent Turf and Ornamental Distributors Association (ITODA) are holding their gathering in the perfect place — on the balcony of a Key West hotel about 50 yards from the ocean.

There's a cool ocean breeze under a cloudless sky and the sound of gentle waves lapping the sandy shore. The only thing missing at this party is a flip-flop- wearing, six-string-strumming Jimmy Buffett.

While it feels like Margaritaville, the sensation is fleeting. Most of the folks at the party, all whom are golf course maintenance distributors and manufacturers who are members of ITODA, have endured a challenging year in the golf course maintenance industry. In a few days, they'll return home from Key West, where they held their annual meeting, and they'll be back in their offices — and back to the reality of doing business in a difficult golf economy.

Ned Herod sits on a chair and sips a cold drink. He sighs when asked if he's glad that 2009 — which will go down as the year of the Great Recession — is coming to a close. Herod, the second-generation owner of Herod Seeds, a distributor in Richmond, Va., says he's glad 2009 is almost over because he's never experienced a year like it. And, unfortu-

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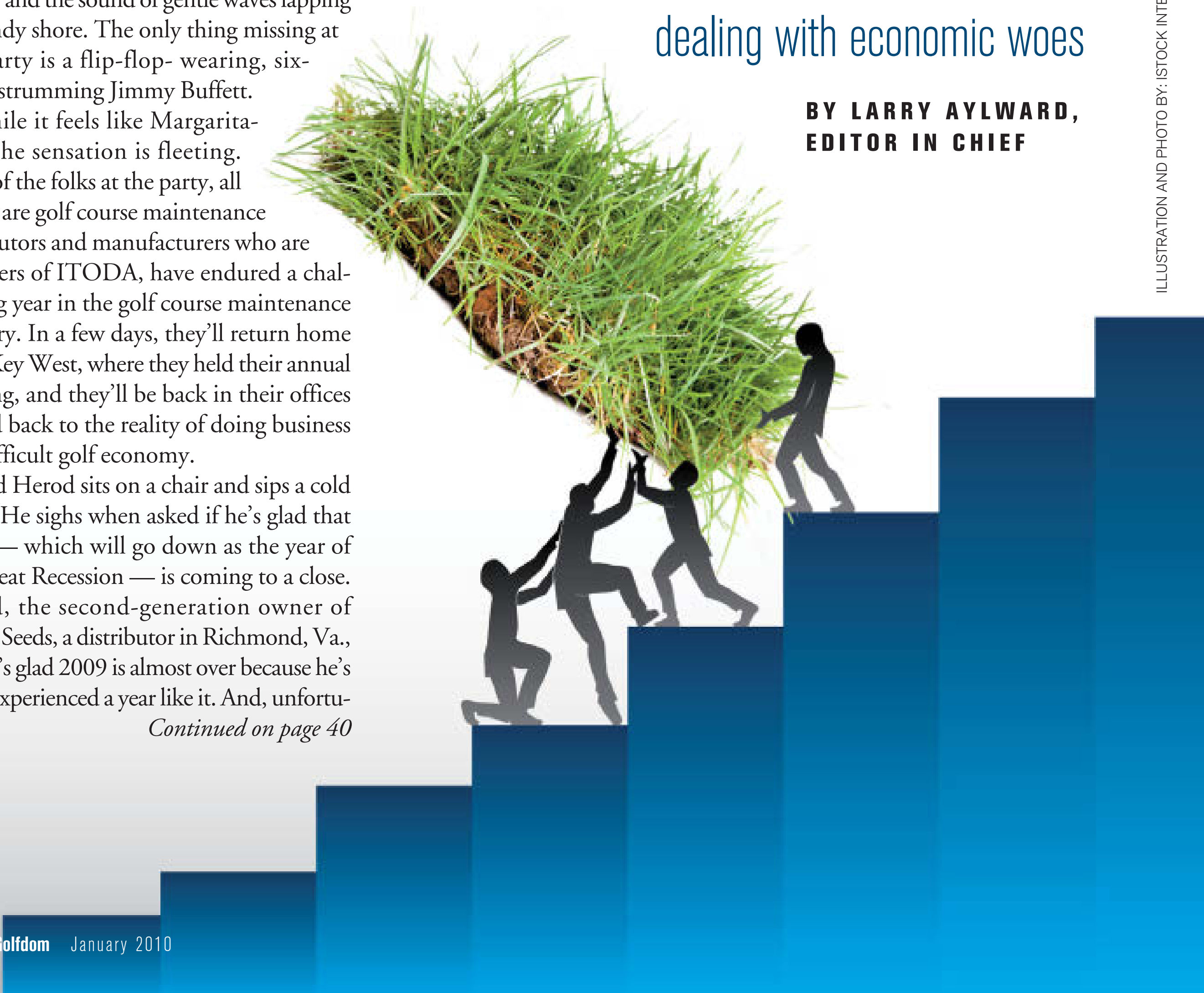

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A cocktail party under palm trees and sunny skies gave ITODA members the chance to chill.

"Some were hurt by price drops in the mid-season, and they don't want to be hurt again."

– DON NAUMANN

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nately, he expects 2010 to be similar.

Last year started off on a good note for Herod Seeds, which conducts about 65 percent of its business in the golf market, but …

"I wasn't feeling the pain a year ago," Herod says. "We did a good job with early-order programs and really didn't start feeling the pain until April or May."

Herod estimates that golf courses in Virginia and Maryland, which his company primarily serves, are down 25 percent to 30 percent in expenditures on seed, fertilizer and chemicals. This after Herod Seeds grew steadily every year since it opened in 1979.

Don Naumann, president of Sierra Pacific Turf Supply in Campbell, Calif., says his business was down only 3 percent going into August, but that dropped to 15 percent in October. He says some northern California superintendents are using "super-long" residual slow-release fertilizers or cutting fertilizer applications to save money. Others cut a pre-emergent herbicide application in the spring.

Naumann predicts 2010 will be worse than 2009 because superintendents base their budgets on the year's previous revenues. Naumann also expected fewer golf course superintendents to participate in early-order programs.

"They're afraid the money won't be there when they need to pay it in June or July," Naumann says. "Also, some superintendents were hurt by price drops mid-season, and they don't want to be hurt again."

Chad Will, president of Tenbarge Seed Co. in Haubstadt, Ind., says other factors besides the economy hurt business in 2009.

"It was a perfect storm this year for our business because golf is down, the housing market has slowed, and the weather couldn't have been much worse," he says. "The weather has affected our business more so than the economy. But we've learned a great deal about our business through these tougher times, and we'll be stronger because of it."

Will, however, believes his business will be better in 2010.

"If for no other reason than the weather has to get better," he says. "In addition, prices are down and that should create more end-user buying. Consequently, we'll still face challenges, and I don't foresee any record-breaking numbers."

Brian Smith, president of Arizona Sports Turf in Scottsdale, Ariz., is also bracing for a challenging year. Winter is golf's peak season in Arizona, but Smith says he heard hotel reservations in Phoenix were down as much as 50 percent at some establishments.

Smith conducts 75 percent of his business in the golf industry. He says he's taken steps to combat the economic downturn by taking "a great awareness" to be cost-effective.

"The advantage for an independent smaller company like us is that we can react," Smith says. "We saw this coming. We started doing the things we needed to do to better manage the finances of the business."

Smith says he's constantly looking at new products, new product applications and new technology for improved performance and

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PHOTO (TOP) COURTESY: ITODA