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# 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."

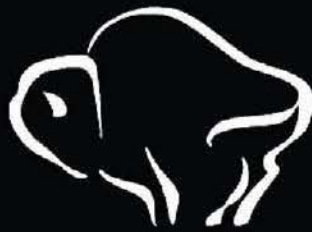
Or, as BCG Chairman and CEO Peter Hill

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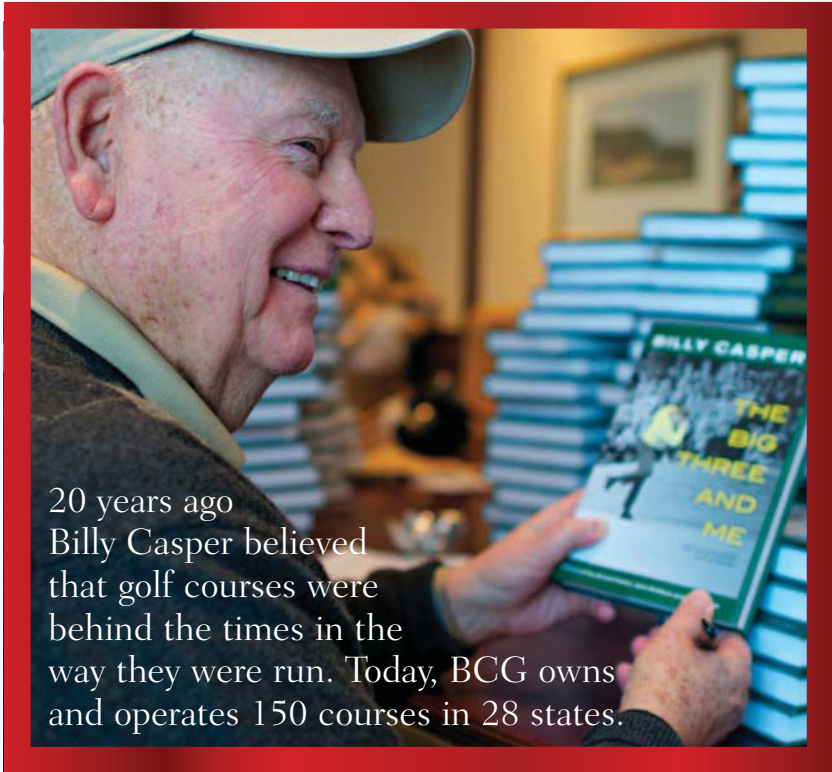


**Bryan Bielecki**

“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  
G O L F



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.

*Continued from page 22*

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 worthwileness 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."



John Spiwak

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,

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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# wee one foundation



a tribute to wayne otto, cgc's

## When in need

For 10 years, the Wee One Foundation has been helping those in trying times.

BY JOHN WALSH

**R**yan Kopke, golf course superintendent at New Albany (Ohio) Country Club, has been living a nightmare for the past two years.

It started when Kopke's wife felt pain in her abdomen and subsequently made several trips to the emergency room; but doctors couldn't determine the cause. After several CT scans and ultrasounds, doctors determined her appendix needed to be removed; but that didn't stop the pain. So after more tests and scans, they decided to remove her gall bladder.

Still the pain didn't subside. Only after exploratory surgery did doctors discover that Kopke's 35-year-old wife, Cara, had a golf-ball-sized tumor in her intestine. The doctors removed the tumor along with 18 inches of her intestine only to deter-

mine the cancer had reached stage 4 and metastasized into her lungs.

It's been crazy for the Kopke family since then. They have to deal not only with chemo treatments but also with the pressures of being new home owners, skyrocketing medical bills and having to take time off of work. On top of that, Cara lost her job at a floral shop because it went bankrupt.

"It was impossible to focus on my job with what was going on with Cara," Ryan Kopke says. "It was nerve-racking. I took a month's worth of vacation last year, but thankfully, the amazing people I work with donated 24 vacation days to me and gave me a monetary gift."

Kopke was stressed out about everything: medical bills (Cara's drugs alone cost \$8,000 every other week), his new home and how his wife's health would affect their 6-year-old son. It was a lot to deal with.

Joe Enciso, a sales representative for Floratine, knew it, too. That's why he recommended Kopke



The 10th Annual Wee One Foundation Golf Outing will be played Sept. 16th at Pine Hills CC in Sheboygan, Wis. Rod Johnson, CGCS, is the host superintendent. As of press time, spots were still available.

look into the Wee One Foundation. The foundation was developed as a tribute to Wayne Otto — who was superintendent at Ozaukee Country Club in Mequon, Wis., from 1969 to 2002 and died of pancreatic cancer in 2004. The Wee One Foundation aims to help golf course management professionals (or their dependents) who incur overwhelming medical expenses.

“One day in March 2012, I Googled it, and reached out,” Kopke says. “Cara and I wrote a letter and shared our story. Two weeks later a representative from the foundation called to let me know we’d be receiving a one-time monetary gift. I was blown out of the water. I’ve never had anyone be so nice to me.”

### Looking out for each other

Since the Wee One Foundation’s inception in 2004, when friends of Otto banded together to assist him financially in his battle against cancer, the foundation’s membership has grown to more than 270 in 17 states. More importantly, the foundation has gifted almost \$600,000 to families in Ohio, Arizona, Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina, Idaho, Minnesota, California and Texas. It raises money through its membership, golf outings (including one at Pine Hills Country Club in Sheboygan, Wis., annually) and sponsorships.

“People in the golf industry have always rallied around sick people for fundraising, but there was nothing permanent or beyond the needs of an individual,” says Luke Cella, executive director of the Wee One

Foundation (the name stems from a trip to Scotland, where the caddies were making wagers as golfers stood on the tee and one caddie declared, ‘My money’s on the

*Continued on page 28*

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***“I’ve been a superintendent for more than 20 years and we always seem to have dollar spot issues. I didn’t have those issues this year while using Daconil Action, and I know others did. I’m definitely going to use Daconil Action again.”***

**Kelly Kressler**  
Southmoore Golf Course, Bath, PA

*Continued from page 27*

wee one!). “The group evolved as they saw fit and crafted a mission statement. The foundation’s gifts aren’t insurance plans or for families recovering from the loss of a loved one. They didn’t want to fall into that.”

In addition to the WGCSA, the foundation partners with other local chapters in states such as Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan, Kentucky, Indiana and Virginia to raise funds.

“We’re gaining traction,” says Cella, a former superintendent who also runs the Chicagoland and Midwest GCSA chapters. “It’d be a wonderful goal to have all local chapters be part of the foundation.”



“It’d be a wonderful goal to have all local chapters be a part of the foundation,” Cella says. The foundation’s membership has grown to 270 in 17 states, and gifted almost \$600,000, according to Cella.

**“WHEN A GIFT HAPPENS, IT REALLY HITS HOME. THE IMPACT OF THE FOUNDATION DOESN’T CLICK UNTIL SOMEONE BENEFITS FROM A GIFT.”**

*Luke Cella*

Recipients don’t have to be members of the foundation to receive funds, which often are turned around quickly. The distribution of funds works through a benevolent committee on a case-by-case basis. The committee, which talks to as many people as possible, has never refused a request. Sixty-one people have been helped

since 2006, and 60 percent of those are superintendents. Five people have passed away. When gifts are given, no strings are attached, and recipients aren’t stipulated to pay medical bills.

Funds can be used for items such as a hotel room so family can stay nearby; fuel (driving 100 miles to and from a hospital, for example); a wheelchair-accessible ramp; or a special van.

“When a gift happens, it really hits home,” Cella says. “The impact of the foundation doesn’t click until someone benefits from a gift.”

Until this year, the foundation didn’t invest its money. Funds came in and went out. But it started a 1-percent endowment campaign to fund the foundation long term, with a goal of \$10 million in 10 years.


“The 1 percent idea came from everybody giving the same. We’re all in it together, equal sacrifice,” Cella says.

Still, several challenges to growing the foundation remain, such as obtaining long-term commitments from people, and slower responses from people to trust and give.

Even though the bulk of the founda-

*Continued on page 30*





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tion's support is through superintendents, which makes it a grass-roots organization, it has had support from suppliers from the start. Those include Becker Underwood, Turf Ventures, Barenbrug Seed, Blue Petroleum and Floratine, which is giving \$5,000 a year for the next 10 years.

"Companies don't want to make a long-term commitment," Cella says. "We'd like it to grow faster than it does, so every little bit helps."

The foundation will mark its 10-year anniversary in a rather low-key way — on some of its signage and within its general promotion.

"It will be kept simple because the people involved from the get-go only want to draw attention to the foundation to make sure funds are available to help others," Cella says. "This is just the beginning to make sure it's always around and viable for those who might need assistance."

### Thankful and appreciative

For the Kopkes, life has settled a bit. But by no means is their future certain. Ryan Kopke is thankful he works for a facility that practices a family-first mentality. His crew stepped up to pick up the slack after he had to begin tending to his wife. And the club's general manager and director of golf course maintenance told him not to worry about the golf course and do what he needs to do.

"Everyone has been more than accommodating," he says.

As for Cara Kopke, she experienced nerve damage in her hands and feet as a result of her first type of chemo and felt like she was walking on pins and needles.

She also experienced temperature sensitivity, so anything she ate, drank or touched had to be room temperature. Every two months she has a CT scan to monitor the cancer in her lungs.

After a year of the chemo she had to start a different type of chemo when tumors started growing again. The new, powerful drug knocks her out for days.

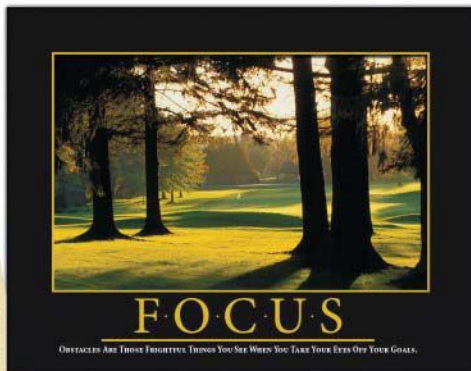
After seeing 15 pea- to BB-sized tumors in her lungs, doctors explained surgery and radiation aren't options because those treatments are too risky. The future is uncertain, but the Kopkes are being as strong as possible in this trying time.

"I'll tell anyone who wants to know what's going on," Ryan Kopke says, adding that no one at New Albany was familiar with the foundation before he found out about it. "Wee One has helped my family during this difficult time in our lives, and we appreciate it." ©

John Walsh is a freelance writer based in Cleveland, Ohio.

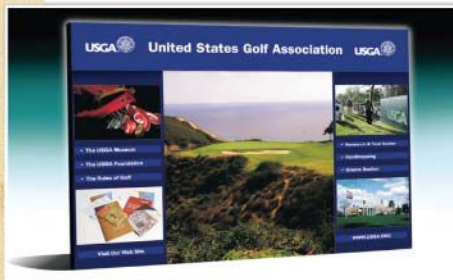
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