



SOME IDEAS TO IMPROVE THE SUPERINTENDENT'S IMAGE

By Rob Schultz

Standing behind a one-way mirror, the GCSAA's Bob Still couldn't believe what he was hearing as several golfers involved in a focus group talked about golf course superintendents.

"Very few people understand the superintendent's role or his education level," said Still, the GCSAA's media director, who helped conduct the three focus groups in Los Angeles, Atlanta and New York. "They understand the superintendent's importance and almost all agree they're important to the golf course...But they don't understand the profession it's becoming."

"They understand they need the degree nowadays to be able to do what he's doing. But they don't understand the complexity of the job."

The whole idea for the focus groups came from the GCSAA's desire for a new advertising campaign to better promote the image of the nation's superintendents. The GCSAA hired an advertising agency to develop print advertising and it is planning to change its TV ads that were done before Still came on board last January. The advertising agency, in a quandary concerning just how to set up its campaign, hired a research company to set up the focus groups to find out where the problems lie.

"One of my concerns is: Is it just the superintendent himself who's worried about himself or did the public perceive a problem?" said Still. "As you read position statements where people have to disagree or agree to certain statements, one of the statements is, 'Do you think superintendents wear blue jeans and just drag hoses across golf courses?' People immediately think of Bill Murray (who played Carl, the crazy assistant superintendent in 'Caddyshack'). And they all agree that isn't the case. The Bill Murray character is the extreme that was done for humor and comedy. They know where to draw the line so to speak; the public understands that part of it."

The trouble is, they don't understand much else.

The focus groups were set up with several golfers of various handicaps—half of whom played at public courses—sitting in a circle with a moderator in the middle. The golfers had no idea that the function was sponsored by the GCSAA. The discussions began with the golfers talking about their games and what they like about the sport. Still sat behind a one-way mirror so the golfers couldn't see him.

"We found out that people play golf because they love to be outdoors and they love to be in a beautiful setting," said Still, who joined GCSAA after a long stint with the Kansas City Chiefs' public relations department. "That was the number one thing that was coming out of this. The second thing was the camaraderie they get with their friends."

The moderator then asked the golfers what they didn't like about golf.

"The country club golfers said it takes too long," Still said. "The public golfers said there is a lack of tee time availability. The public golfers also said that they spend all this money and the courses don't put it back into the golf courses; that they let the courses get all torn up. They say the greenskeepers don't have the money to do their job because the city takes the money and spends it somewhere else and they're not recycling the greens fees money."

Next, the moderator asked the golfers who they felt was the most important person was at a golf course. "More than half said the greenskeepers," Still said. "They never call them superintendents. They call him a greenskeeper or a groundsman. People don't put that word 'superintendent' yet toward the profession."

The other golfers had some surprising answers. "A couple of golfers said they thought the starter was the most important," Still said.

When one golfer was pressed as to why he didn't think superintendents were important, Still said the golfer answered, "Oh, I'm sure that groups like ChemLawn do seminars for those

guys.' That's obviously one of the great misconceptions; he was the only one in the room that said that. But he perceived that our guys aren't as professional as the yard people."

After a few more questions, Still said that the members of the group were asked if they ever heard of the GCSAA. "Several said yes," Still added. "That's a positive. They said they saw our commercials on ESPN. We then asked them what they thought the message was saying and they had an unclear answer."

That has prompted Still to change the adds. "But I don't know what we're going to do yet," he said. "We have another focus group to go and then we'll go with some suggestions made by the agency. They don't need for us to tell them how good the superintendent is, rather they just need to be reinforced of his important role. I think we could do that better with a spokesperson."

Still added that spokesperson may be a famous golf course architect or a player on one of the tours. "(Tom) Watson's name was brought up, so was Palmer's since his father was a superintendent."

Still also said any superintendents should call him if he or she has ideas to better promote the GCSAA.

"The message we need to portray is that he isn't just a good guy or that kind of stuff," Still explained, "but that he is a highly skilled professional and the job takes somebody who's extremely dedicated—it's not a 9 to 5 job—and creative."

On a local and state level, Still said the best way to improve a superintendent's image is through communication.

"Every individual has to pull their own share. They have to communicate, not just with their members and with their club, but the local media," he said. "One of the things I try to push for and tell superintendents is that if you're rebuilding a green or doing something to your golf course that's unique or new, tell your reporter about it. A reporter can't drive by the course every day and figure it out for himself, you have to tell them."

"I think the number one fear superintendents have is that if they call a reporter, the reporter will think he's bragging or is a publicity seeker. Superintendents are very shy about such things, they don't want to come off as a hot shot or egomaniac. But that's not the case. Nobody knows you're doing a good job unless you tell them sometimes."

Still said it also helps to let the public or members of your club know your schedule in advance. He used Pebble Beach as a perfect example.

At Pebble Beach, the maintenance staff is set up in advance so that when a golfer calls for a tee time in advance, the club will let he or she know what the superintendent's crew is doing that week. "So a golfer has a choice to decide whether to play while some

heavy work is going on on the course or just wait a month. Golfers really appreciate that and recognize it," Still said.

Pebble Beach also explains on its scorecards what maintenance work is going on. "They're digging up some fairways right now because of a grass problem. They let golfers know on the scorecard just what they're doing in this three-year plan to get rid of the problem. They even identify the bad grass so golfers can find it while they're playing," Still said.

"It's a great thing because it shows that superintendents really care about what they are doing and they also bring attention to the work that has to go on. Sometimes I think people think the golf course just lies there. They don't realize it's an ongoing 24-hour process

to keep the courses the way the golfers want them."

Finally, Stills said there is a way for state superintendents associations to get more notoriety while at the same time, help raise money toward turf grass research. "They could host a tournament at their club or in the community where a portion of the entry fees go toward the GCSAA/USGA turf research programs," he said.

All of Still's ideas are set up to create a little bit better awareness of all you do. "And as the awareness increases, so do all the other things that are positive with any profession," he said. "Salaries will increase probably and the general respect of the individual will go up."

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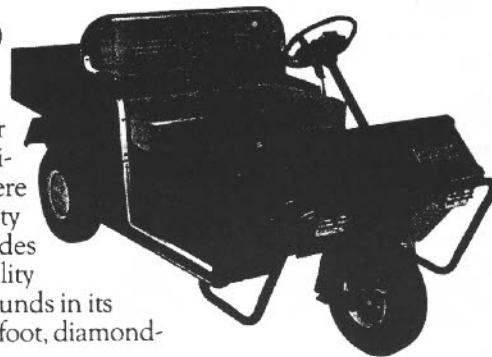
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