

1991 GCSAA Conference and Show: "The Gamble" in Las Vegas

By Monroe S. Miller



We have a problem here, Mr. Miller."

"We hadn't better have a problem here, Jack," I replied. "I confirmed these flights 48 hours in advance just like you recommend. Everything is supposed to be okay."

"Bad weather yesterday, sir."

"But good weather today. Look out the window and see for yourself," came my wise guy answer.

"Ah, but we don't have any airplanes where we need them because of yesterday's cancellations," came the reply from someone obviously trained in how to be nice to angry customers.

Already, the prophecy of "the gamble" was coming true and I wasn't out of town yet.

The clerk's computer keyboard was singing as he searched for alternative routes to Las Vegas.

"We could fly you to Los Angeles and then back to Las Vegas," he offered.

Well, there was absolutely no way I was going to fly into the land of looney tunes and weirdos in these troubled times. It was not worth the risk and I vowed I would stay home before I would go that route.

After a fair amount of searching, we settled on a late morning flight (four hours away) and a five hour wait at O'Hare (there's another place that is mildly crazed by Wisconsin standards) for a late flight to Las Vegas. The only thing I had to accept was flying on an airline I'd never heard of before.

It was an unsettling start to the week in Vegas; the code word "gamble" fit like a glove. The only question was how it all would turn out.

Barely five minutes had passed in the long wait before take off from Madison to Chicago when a guy sat down near me in the waiting area. He

was about thirty, had his greasy hair pulled back into a ponytail and was reading some quarterly art magazine.

It was fairly easy to notice he didn't smell very good.

"What are the chances," I wondered at the time, "of this loser being assigned a seat next to me in the aircraft?"

What a gamble, if I happened to lose.

With a passenger capacity of somewhere around 150, I figured I was probably pretty safe.

Wrong. We got into the aircraft and this scrounge sat right next to me. I couldn't believe it. By now he smelled even worse.

Fortunately, I had an aisle seat that permitted fresh air on one side of me. I buried my face in a magazine, hoping the smell of the ink would overcome the smell of the guy's body odor. It pretty much did.

And after the long wait in Chicago and a safe trip west to the desert, I landed in Las Vegas at 11:00 p.m., Central Time. The city of lights was just getting wound up about the time my head hit the pillow after a busy day of sitting.

A Critique of the 1991 GCSAA Conference and Show

The word "critique" carries an implication of criticism. That isn't my intent in the next few paragraphs. Maybe "commentary" would be a better choice. Regardless, below you'll find what I thought about the 1991 version of GCSAA's conference and show. Remarks that are critical are also constructive, and I hope that planners take them that way. My guess is that they won't read anything here that they haven't heard loud and clear already.

What credentials do I bring to this analysis? What are my qualifications?

Well, this is my 19th year as a GCSAA member and this was my 19th consecutive conference and show. So I bring experience to these observations.

I believe my serious, sincere and long standing attitude about education adds some credibility.

Finally, the equipment and product show influences my buying decisions and plans for next year and beyond. I spend many hours on the show floor, getting questions about machinery and everything else answered. That kind of exposure fine tunes show quality perceptions.

So here are my 1991 observations and suggestions and grades for all aspects of the GCSAA Conference and Show in Las Vegas.

Conference Issue of Golf Course Management Magazine

I hate it. They ought to do away with it or print a supplementary show issue. Or something. But don't do this to a really fine magazine anymore. Enough is enough.

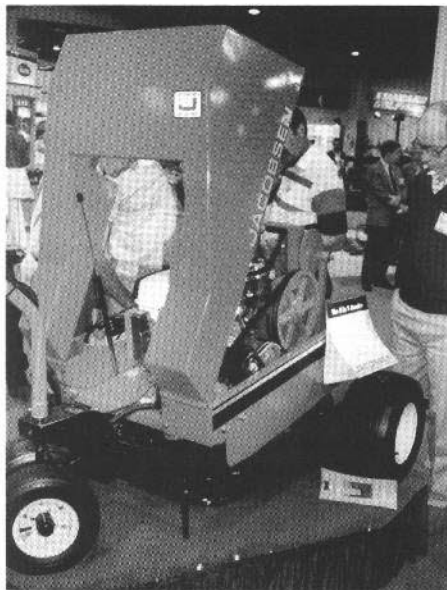
My hope is that Clay Loyd and Chris Caldwell and the rest of the magazine staff don't take offense. I realize the need to make money, and this issue must make a bundle. But the January issue is little more than a collection of advertising and looks very little like the journal we get the rest of the year.

I don't know why an advertiser would want to be in this issue—an ad could get lost. Plus, many guys tell me they don't read the show issue either.

I don't know why the author of a serious story would want his work in this issue. It gets lost in the endless clutter of advertising.

The January issue of *Golf Course Management* irritates me in a lot of other ways. There are pages and pages about where to play golf, how to see UNLV play basketball, where to go dining, and scores of other ways to entertain yourself "while away on business".

You can read about the GCSAA golf championship, find out who is being honored, getting awarded, winning scholarships and running for office.



Jacobsen is now making an aerifier.

You'll learn how to dress, how much to tip, what GCSAA merchandise is for sale (including a schedule of hours) and what your wife will be doing if she comes along.

There is an article about Neil Sedaka and letters from the mayor of Las Vegas and the governor of Nevada. The letters tell us how great we are.

But, damnit, you cannot find out when Dr. Stack is speaking (or where) or if Dr. Beard is on the educational program.

I needed to find out if the NOER FOUNDATION annual meeting conflicted with the educational program before I sent Bob Welch my reservation. After looking and looking to no avail, I called the chapter president to see if he knew.

Rod's answer was that the only place he'd seen the educational program schedule was in registration material. As an early bird registrant (which GCSAA encourages) I ignored all other

registration material and apparently threw the schedule away.

This is an education trip for me. It is expensive. Is it asking too much to provide members with just a teeny little bit of information about who, what, when and where about the education program?

The cover was attractive—it would have looked great on an issue of TRAVEL HOST.

I am glad the green committee chairman at my Club didn't see this issue of GOLF COURSE MANAGEMENT. He'd have to have wondered why I was going out there for a week—to see the Ethyl M chocolate factory (just outside of town, according to the magazine).

The failure to include needed information about the education program, the excessive advertising and a temporary loss of what the magazine should be about (in my view) merits the 1991 show issue (notice I didn't use conference) a very disappointing C—.

Headquarters Hotel

Generally, I hope to get assigned to the headquarters hotel for convenience, if nothing else. It saves some transportation hassles and a whole lot of time. Whenever it has happened to work out that my assignment was in headquarters, I have been glad.

Until this year. The Riviera Hotel was just plain awful. I've been in \$27.50 a night Red Roof Inns and Budgetels that had nicer rooms than this dump.

Wayne Otto moved into three different rooms before finally accepting one. The room I was in just plain smelled bad, and as an ex-smoker I'm fairly tolerant and not all that critical in this department. The mattress was uncomfortable, the furniture was sparse (no desk or sitting chair) and the lighting was poor. If you showered past 6:30



"Best New Booth" Award goes to Waupaca's Greensmix.



Can you believe it—a FAIRWAY topdresser?



Headquarter hotel — the tacky *Riviera*.



The most fabulous hotel in Las Vegas — *The Mirage*.

a.m., you took a cold shower—no hot water. Steve Schmidt went back to his room at 5:30 p.m. one afternoon and the room wasn't made up yet.

Little help from hotel staff was available: they just plain weren't around. Dishes from room service sat around in the hall for 24 plus hours. The building is so poorly laid out that it took a couple of days to find out where everything was located. They should have issued a road map and floor plan at registration.

The whole building needed a good cleaning, painting and sprucing up. Frankly, I cannot believe this hotel was selected for headquarters.

So for being overpriced, dirty, poorly planned and just plain tacky, headquarters for 1991 gets a low end D-.

Las Vegas Convention Center

The convention center is certainly big. But the people who run it must be the same crowd that runs the Riviera. It was grubby, tacky and poorly laid out. I noticed, as did a number of others, that it was staffed with unfriendly and even rude people.

If you needed to attend a lecture or meeting in the CC, you needed a fair amount of luck in finding it. One actually had to ride a bus from the equipment entrance to the meeting room area. How dumb.

The building looked like a huge warehouse, junk was stacked around (not only from the demolition) outside and there was no visible evidence that anyone cared anything about exterior landscaping. This place was ugly.

When compared with other convention centers, this one is a DOG and therefore earns a charitable D.

The Opening Session

I've attended the opening session of every national meeting for the past 19 years. Judgements as to good, average and bad generally come down to the opening session speaker. This year, Mark McCormack handled that address, and he handled it very well. He ranked close to Bart Starr (best ever) and was on par with Jim McKay and Chris Schenkel.

McCormack gave a great lecture with many lessons for me and anyone else smart enough to attend. The 1991 opening session earned a solid A.

Educational Session

The quality of the speakers travelling to Las Vegas to address America's golf course superintendents couldn't have been better. The mix of academic and practical presenters was good; the topics offered had something for everyone with just about any problem. The emphasis, properly, was on environmental issues.

I still hate to see someone like Dr. Beard come to a formidable meeting like this and be given only 15-20 minutes to speak, about 1/3 the length of one single lecture in a college course. It takes a lot of skill to distill a two hour presentation into 15 minutes.

And, quite frankly, with 62 years of experience in planning these conferences, I find little reason or excuse for scheduling a lecture in a room without enough seating for anyone who wants to listen. Yet, during Brian Silva's lecture, there literally weren't enough chairs and the standing room was even at a premium.

Those things notwithstanding, the program was worth the trip and earns a solid B+.

The Equipment Show

Absolutely amazing. The growth of this event each year exceeds one's wildest expectations. This year's edition was no exception—bigger and better than last.

It becomes a major job to see everything. Guys are starting to scout the entire show first, take notes of places they want to revisit, and then go back for detailed information.

It is impossible to describe the show to anyone who has never been there; buying decisions are much wiser for those who are able to attend.

The first show I attended was in Boston in 1973; the convention center there had equipment on two floors. Each floor had booths against each wall and two rows down the middle, as I recall. Very modest.

Someone calculated that this year, which saw equipment and products in three enormous rooms on 2 levels, walking past every booth in the show involved a walk of some seven miles! My weary feet and calves told me that was probably a pretty accurate number.

For its size, quality and pure excitement, this year's show gets a strong and unqualified A.

Banquet

The hall in the Riviera was big enough for this event and permitted plenty of room between tables. And the tables were big enough for 10 people, for a change.

Nice things cannot be said about the meal, however. The food was atrocious—the meat was like shoe leather, the peas like hard BBs (uncooked?) and the potatoes (I think they were potatoes) were two degrees above room

temperatures. At least the coffee was good.

The company at our table made up for a poor meal. Wayne and JoAnn Otto, Vicki and Vince Monahan, Rod and Janelle Johnson, Becky and Tuck Tate, and Tom Harrison reminded me again what great people there are in our business. I sure wish Cheryl could have been there.

And then there was the entertainment. For the "over 40 rockers", it was the greatest. Neil Sedaka is a very talented entertainer. From "Carol" to "Calendar Girl" to "Laughter in the Rain" to Chopin, this guy wowed the crowd for an hour and a half. At one point, I thought the Monahans were going to start dancing!

So, in my opinion, Neil Sedaka rescued what could have been an average affair at best and moved the grade from a charlie to a bravo B.

Food

One thing you should never be in Las Vegas is hungry. You'd think there was an on-going contest for the prize "best buffet at the lowest price". If you wanted to eat in a nice restaurant, you'd have to do some searching. But for the convention goers, the \$3.99 buffet works pretty well a lot of the time. They are fast, the chow is well done and you don't spend a lot. This town is no Boston or San Francisco, however, when it comes to food (and a lot of other things, as well). The food grade is a solid C.

Weather

Absolutely could not have been better. It was gorgeous—the daytime temperatures were in the low to mid-seventies and the nights dropped to the forties. One day it actually hit 80 degrees, and the sun felt really good.

The skies were blue, the humidity was low and the mountains were visi-



Mark Hjartness and Mike Handrich at the WALSAA meeting.

ble at every view. It was the best weather you'll ever see at a national. The weather in the Nevada desert deserves our best grade of A+.

Safety

Generally speaking, Las Vegas is not a place where you find yourself constantly looking over your shoulder. I can honestly say I wasn't terribly concerned about my personal safety. Some friends there had read and heard that crime problems and preying on tourists were increasing problems for Las Vegas, but I didn't sense or experience that. The same cannot be said of cities like Houston, Anaheim or New Orleans. I noticed two things lacking in Las Vegas: you never see a clock and you rarely see a cop.

For a pretty safe conference, Las Vegas earns and deserves a good grade of A.

Overall

Not the best and not the worst. Not very memorable, either. Certainly not the quality of the 1984 convention which was also held in Las Vegas. For

all the reasons noted above, the 1991 GCSAA Conference and Show lands right in the middle. Average. Okay. Bland.

I hope next year is better, but considering the site, I am not real optimistic. The grade for 1991 is C.

1991 Conference Awards

To recognize the obvious and not so obvious, the editorial committee (of one) offers the following awards as a result of the 1991 conference.

The Glitter Award.

When the sun sets in Las Vegas, the lights come on. This is the only time the city looks good. No matter how decadent you might think Las Vegas is, I contend there is no denying the spectacular sight of the strip at night.

I was astounded to see the golden arches of McDonalds looking more like Caesar's Palace or the Stardust than the fast food joint I like to eat in (it was directly across the street from the Riv—how convenient!). Wild, and the winning entry for the Glitter Award.

Best Hotel.

Easy—nothing comes close to the Mirage. It is a manmade wonder hard to describe. You go there to see live sharks, live white tigers and a living seven story high tropic. They are all inside the building. The Excalibur may be new and big (over 4,000 rooms) but it lacks the class and distinction of the Mirage.

Best Line.

Tom Harrison always seems to win this award category. Last year we found him looking for a Norwegian restaurant in Orlando. This year, after the guest superintendent from Germany concluded his remarks at the banquet, Tom leaned over and asked

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Hi-tech spraying equipment was in evidence everywhere.



Toro got the vote for the "Most Colorful Display".

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me if "Ole Swenson of the Norway GCSA was going to speak!" Tom by the way, had his Norwegian flag necktie around his neck and a Norwegian flag in his lapel.

Best Educational Lecture.

Practically impossible to name one person here because of the diversity of the lectures. So I am granting this award to three people who did an outstanding job at the lectern.

Dr. J.B. Beard always does a great job, and this year was no exception. Dr. L.B. Stack had the allotted time packed with valuable information which was presented in a very comfortable and smooth manner. Brian Silva will soon be in as much demand as a speaker as he now is as an architect. He combines the best of advice with wit and humor few others can muster.

Best New Booth At The Show.

Christine and Bob Faulks introduced their great new Greensmix display.

Most Colorful Booth At The Show.

Toro's red and white colors seemed to cover acres.

What's Hot?

Hi-tech spraying equipment with electronic monitoring, boom shrouds, on-the-go calibration, and more. A close second goes to large area rotary mowers.

What's Not?

The drum type aerifiers, so popular only a few years ago, have just plain disappeared.

"You Couldn't Miss It" Award.

Old Glory was in evidence everywhere. It was the greatest!

For The Rubbernecks.

Las Vegas is the place to go if you want to see the famous. My guess is that celebrity watching is nearly as good there as in Hollywood. Here are the celebs spotted by the editor or trustworthy WGCSA members.

SPORTS Most of us saw Sam Snead at the Bunton booth and Ben Crenshaw at the Crenshaw design booth. Rumor had it that Jack Nicklaus was at his design group's booth and that Nancy Lopez was at the show pitching some product. I personally didn't see either Jack or Nancy.

SINGER Darnedest thing. Golf course owner (and singer) Kenny Rogers sat in the front row of the USGA's Green Section Educational Conference. Rogers has his own golf course in Athens, Georgia.

MOVIE STAR Telly Savalas was seen at the blackjack table in the Riviera.

ENTERTAINER I was scouting the golf course at the Desert Inn and who should I walk past? None other than Lou Rawls! He was appearing at the Desert Inn with Marilyn McCoo.

Gosh, It Was Good To See:

Irv Johnson was invited to this year's conference by outgoing president Jerry Faubel. Irv gave Faubel his first job out of college.

Bill Bengeyfield, former national director of the Green Section, looked like a million bucks. Apparently, after over 30 years with the Green Section, the past year of "semi-retirement" has agreed with him.

Peter Trenchard, Sister Bay golf course owner and USGA Executive Committee member, was in attendance at the conference. He is also a member of the USGA Green Section Committee.

Tuck and Becky Tate were there again this year. The dean of the chapter newsletter editors and benefactor to the Michigan turfgrass industry seldom misses a GCSAA conference and show. Now semi-retired, Becky and Tuck divide their time between Florida and Frankfort, Michigan. It is always great to see two of the nicest people you'd ever want to meet. This year was no different.

Danny Quast was dressed fit to kill when I visited with him on the show floor. His hectic year with the U.S. Open hasn't dampened his enthusiasm for our business. He can hardly wait for spring to arrive so he can get back to work on the golf courses.

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