



Be Pro-active Rather Than Reactive

By Pat Finlen

Editor's Note: This is the second time we have featured an article from the plains of America. Pat Finlen is the golf course superintendent at Quiviria Lake Country Club in Quiviria Lake, Kansas and serves as editor of "Heart Beat", the official publication of the Heart of America Golf Course Superintendents Association. This editorial, written by Pat, is from the May 1992 issue of "Heart Beat". Appearing with it is a letter written by Bill Roberts to Pat, complimenting him on the editorial. Bill sent copies of both to all newsletter editors, obviously feeling Pat's thoughts and actions were very important.

The editorial is reprinted here with permission.

While driving home from work one day, I heard one of the many lawn care advertisements that play every spring.

What caught my attention was the first line of the advertisement: "Is your lawn poisonous?"

After listening to the complete ad, I found that this was a so-called all-natural lawn care company. They also stated that they have alternatives to the all-chemical approach to lawn care.

Upon getting home, I opened up our local paper and there on the sports page was the ad for the same company. In bold print was the same slogan used in the radio advertisement—"Is your lawn poisonous?"

Also shown were statements such as "There has been growing concern over the use of toxic chemical pesticides in our environment" and "You now have alternatives to all-chemical lawn care."

They also stated that these chemicals could be hazardous to your children and pets if they were applied to your lawn.

What I found offensive was not that they had alternatives, but that they chose to label all others as being poisonous, toxic chemicals.

Being one whose lawn does need a little help, I decided to call their business number for a quote and some non-chemical advice. What I got when calling was a man who seemed very knowledgeable about their products.

Their program consisted of using organic sources of fertilizer such as cow, turkey and poultry manure and by-products.

So, how do they get rid of broadleaf weeds? This is where it gets interesting. His response was that if I had little or no infestation, they would selectively treat my lawn with potassium salt to burn the weeds. If I had a substantial infestation, they would use more conventional means to rid my lawn of weeds.

Conventional! What do they mean by that? You don't think that they would use the poisonous, toxic chemicals to do that?

You bet they do! But the homeowner has to assume all liability for the use of those products. Their liability coverage is cheaper than typical lawn care companies because they aren't using pesticides daily.

So here, they advertise these products as being harmful, but once they get the customer, they aren't really all that concerned about using them if that is what it takes to keep the customer.

These new, all-natural lawn care companies are using scare tactics to gain customers. Why should we as golf course managers be concerned with what they are doing?

Because at the present time, our public image as pesticide-users is controlled by the lawn care industry. Until such a time comes that we can disassociate ourselves from the lawn care industry, we will be grouped with them. When one company uses such blatant, false advertising, we all get hurt.

I can see the day when a local news show will feature one of these all-natural lawn care companies. The first word out of the lawn care owner's mouth will be how all the other lawn care companies are using toxic chemicals.

Public perception is not always formed by fact. What is said is not always factual, but the public perceives it to be. And what is said on a news program is generally taken to be the truth.

The way to head this off is for our association and its members to be pro-

active rather than reactive. Once the damage is done, it is hard to reverse. Once a lawn care company states that pesticide use will harm your kids, no amount of logic from a golf course superintendent will reverse what that parent thinks. There are sure to be many more lawn care companies following this one, making outrageous claims.

The GCSAA has done much on the federal level to promote our proper use of pesticides, but the time has come for us to promote our safe use among the general public.

There are many ways to do this as individuals and as an association. One way that I brought up a year ago is for us to regulate ourselves. Until we set standards that are much higher than the lawn care companies, we will be associated with all of them, whether we like it or not.

That's not to say that what they are doing is wrong, because it isn't. But we then won't have to be associated with some companies that want to build their business with such false advertisements.

Another way is to voice your concern to the newspapers and radio stations that allow these ads to be placed. I called both the paper and the radio station.

At both, the advertising departments were very interested in what I had to say. The newspaper said they were powerless to do anything unless I could prove that the advertisement was totally false.

The advertising manager at the radio station was very receptive. It turns out that he is a golfer and belongs to two country clubs in town. He said he understood my position and that he would exert what influence he could over the advertiser to change the wording of the ad. So it's not always a dead end when trying to express your side of an issue.

If more would take the time to do this, then radio stations and newspapers might be more reluctant to run advertisements of this nature.

It all again points to the fact that as individuals and as an association, we need to be involved and active to promote our interest. Not to do so will subject our profession to which ever way the wind happens to be blowing.

Right now, it's in our face.

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BILL ROBERTS REPLIES:

Dear Mr. Finlen:

I appreciate your time on the phone today and wanted to take this opportunity to congratulate you, again, on your editorial in the May 1992 issue of the "Heart Beat". I share your frustration with the nebulous tone of the "lawn care advertisements that play every spring." Your assertion that "our association and its members must be pro-active rather than reactive" states, precisely, the posture that the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America has maintained ever since we assumed the leadership role in defining golf's impact on the environment.

We came into this discussion with a high degree of credibility and our ability to deal in the legislative and regulatory arenas at the federal level is a direct result of the credibility. More tangibly, we have the programs and participation to prove that we, as an organization of individual golf course superintendents, are concerned about environmental integrity. We have, through the years, declined to join in "industry coalitions" simply because our motivations,

the conditions under which we practice our profession and our ability to quantify qualification have been somewhat singular. Hence, at the national level anyway, we have not been "associated with all of them". I am not being critical of the rest of the industry, simply stating that it has been and will be in the best interest of golf and golf course superintendents to maintain that autonomy.

Your assertion that we "regulate ourselves" is timely and of particular importance as we discuss significant organizational changes for GCSAA which will be voted on in Anaheim. In these times of increasingly stringent environmental legislation, workplace regulation and employment qualification, it has become prudent and may become necessary to "define" more fully just what is involved in professional criteria. The question then becomes one of whom is in the best position to arrive at and most practically implement such a definition.

It is apparent that GCSAA, with all due respect to more than 107 different local chapters, is in the best position to arrive at those conclusions that can be most easily communicated and adopted by legislators, regulators, owners and

club officials. One-hundred and seven different definitions is chaos and no further definition is simply short-sighted. Empowerment of GCSAA's elected leadership, recognition of the right of individual members to participate in the election process, prudent utilization of the input generated by our committee process and implementation of the new "field staffing" network will go a long way toward strengthening our position professionally. If we, as a national association, are in a position to set our own standards then we are in a position to strengthen our value to the industry, to the game of golf, to the marketplace and to society and that is the ultimate benefit of membership.

The issues you have raised are timely, of major importance and deserving of a focused, mature discussion and your editorial has done much to further this all important dialogue. Thank you, again, for your interest in these matters and for your overall concern for professional affiliation.

Sincerely,
Bill Roberts, President
GCSAA

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