

# GCSAA Conference Signals Renewed Optimism

By **Monroe S. Miller**, Golf Course Superintendent, Blackhawk Country Club



Most golf course superintendents know who have experienced the GCSAA Conference and Show are excited by the prospect of attending the next one. Once we get past Christmas, I think about conference all the time and can barely wait to get going.

In my career, I have never missed one. What a tribute to my employer; Blackhawk has always trusted I would get good value for the cost. And what a compliment that is to GCSAA. The organization has created an event that I would nearly be afraid to pass on, fearful I might miss something important. It was kind of cool to raise my hand when, at the BASF/LESCO meeting a few weeks ago in Sheboygan Falls, Joe Vargas asked if anyone had attended the GCSAA conference in Boston in 1973. I did, and I loved it. But was it ever cold!

The trip to conference is, for me, enhanced in those years when I can drive. That leaves out places like Anaheim and San Diego, but with so few other venues left - Orlando, New Orleans and Atlanta - the trip by car is very reasonable and affordable.

Driving can be a pain in the neck, however. Bad weather, traffic, car hassles and all the rest require some patience. But the payoff is big, really big. Primarily, I have been able to see golf courses I would never have seen otherwise. And, after all, that's our business. On top of that you can plan a route that takes you past some of America's great historical sites. Those many stops over the years have been exciting, too.

There are a couple of negatives I can think of, however. The GCSAA conference conflicts with the

Greater Madison Farm Toy Show in Verona and I hate missing it. I once thought of formally petitioning Steve Mona to get GCSAA to change conference dates, but it seems unlikely he would do that. I would prefer not to have to give up two weekends in the winter. Weekends don't exist for too much of the year as it is and they are precious during the winter season. But in life we have decisions to make that are not always easy!

I find it curious that some of us were actually complaining that conference was "back in Orlando so soon." Is that progress or what? It is one of the great vacation spots in the country and certainly a great venue for a convention like ours. But that attitude only amplifies the saw, "familiarity breeds contempt."

So we drove to Orlando again this year. There were three of us — Chad Grimm and Aaron Goninen and me to share driving and to split expenses. With three travelers, there are no tie votes on restaurants, stops, hotels or anything else. Once in awhile there might be a sore loser, but mostly we were in full agreement all of the time.

We drove east first and then headed south to Florida. Our trip

plan took us south out of Wisconsin to Bloomington, east through Indianapolis and Columbus and a fuel stop a New Concord, Ohio. Not exactly coincidentally, New Concord was the boyhood home of astronaut John Glenn. He spent his childhood in a modest house on Main Street of New Concord. It is the kind of home millions and millions of kids grow up in, and that shows you one of the great things about America - greatness so often comes from humble beginnings.

We continued on through Wheeling, passed south of Pittsburgh (and wished we had time to go Steve Scoville and his family; Steve is our official Grass Roots cartoonist), and drove past dark to get to Bedford, Pennsylvania. Bedford is a historic old town that goes back to pre-revolutionary wartime. Washington commanded a unit of troops that camped in Bedford in the 1700s.

The next day, after an evening of some snow, we pushed on to Lancaster, the home of President James Buchanan. President Buchanan, who preceded Lincoln in office, is buried in a cemetery in downtown Lancaster and his home



**James Buchanan's burial site is in Lancaster, PA.**





The distinctive wicker basket flagstick makes it clear you are at the Merion Golf Club.



Chad Grimm and Aaron Goninen were excited to visit Merion Golf Club despite the cool temperatures.

Wheatland is located on the west side of the city. We walked through considerable new snow to be able to stand at the foot of his grave. Visits to final resting places like this one never leave my memory and I have only a few presidential gravesites and homes left to see.

We left Lancaster and drove out on Highway 30 to Highway 41 to Highway 1, leading us east into Philadelphia. Highway 1 becomes Baltimore Pike Road somewhere along the way into Philly and it took us past the entrance to the famed Longwood Gardens. I've wanted to see Longwood Gardens since the time I took Dr. Ed Hasselkus' woody ornamental classes decades ago. But it is winter - not much to see - and



The cool winter day was a perfect day to grasp the full effect of the Korean War Memorial-poncho-clad GIs dealing with bad weather. The Lincoln Memorial is in the background.



The new WWII Memorial is a must see in D.C.

Longwood wasn't on our mission list this year. So we drove past there and past the USGA Green Section office that houses the Mid-Atlantic region. When we reached Highway 452, we pulled into a parking lot and called Stan Zontek. He and Marti got on their speaker phones and talked us through the best way to the Merion Golf Club. Their instructions were flawless.

Merion has been on my list of courses to visit for years. That interest goes back a long time to a lunch I had at the Symposium with Richie Valentine. Richie was the golf course superintendent at Merion for many years and had succeeded his father Joe. Joe Valentine was a legend and the Penn State Turfgrass Research Station is named after him. Richie was in Wisconsin as a Symposium speaker. Merion is a golf course

with a rich history and tradition and the site of many national tournaments over its long history. The 2005 U.S. Amateur is sited at Merion this summer and that was the catalyst to make an effort to at least get a feel for it. As Stan said, "it's a special place."

Matt Schaffer was already in Orlando when we stopped, playing in the GCSAA tournament I suspect. We always go to the golf shop, introduce ourselves and ask permission to look around. The assistant golf pro was exceptionally friendly and helpful. I left my business card for him to give Matt and we checked Merion out, at least to the extent possible in winter in Philadelphia. It is the quintessential private course, located right in the middle of an older neighborhood of very nice homes. There are two courses at





The sculpture of Korean War soldiers affects anyone seeing them.



The bronze soldier statues of the Vietnam War Memorial were realistic, almost too much so for some visitors.

Merion, and it is remembered by most as the course with the red and white wicker basket on top of each flagstick.

It was a treat to listen to Matt talk about Merion at the podium in front of the "Building of the Green" on the GCSAA conference floor, the perfect topper for visit to his course. I bought a small book in the golf shop that traced the history of Merion and read it before arriving in Orlando. I feel well satisfied now, despite the winter season.

Stan gave us directions into Washington, D.C. where we only wanted to quickly visit the three war memorials - WW II, Korea and Vietnam. We plowed right down New York Avenue until, as Stan said, "you'll think you are lost." We hung a left when it ended, keeping an eye on the Washington Monument, and ended with a parking spot on Constitution Avenue, right directly in front of the IRS Building and across the street from the Smithsonian Museum of American History. It was 3:45 p.m. on Friday. We read the parking signs, which said "no meter parking after 4 PM." Feeling quite savvy and smart, we plugged the meter with a dime, assuming after 4 PM was free. We headed to the Vietnam War Memorial, maybe a 15-minute walk away.

The GCSAA conference was held in Washington, D.C. back in 1985 and

I visited the Vietnam War Memorial with Chris Hague. Chris is a veteran of Vietnam duty in the 196th Brigade of the Americal Division. He was stationed in DaNang. We both knew men who lost their lives in Vietnam. You can look up those heroes from lists posted at various places around the memorial wall. That tells you the panel where their name is cut into the black granite wall. Although you cannot do this without emotion, back in 1985 I was able go through the process without any trouble. This year, twenty years later and nearly

forty years since active duty near Saigon, I lost control when I found Frances Mulvey's name. I cannot explain it, but I quickly got out of sight and off by myself and tried to regain composure. I felt so sad for all the young troops who didn't have a chance for the wonderful and fulfilling like I have been blessed with.

The Korean Way Memorial may be the best I have seen anywhere. It created such a somber mood - the ghostly soldiers seem so real and look right through you. I was impressed and moved. I hope you



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get to see it sometime if you haven't already.

We walked to the WW II Memorial. It is very impressive in its size and looks exactly like I thought it would from all the articles and television news reports I saw during its dedication. It holds you there, looking and thinking and remembering the contributions of America's greatest generation. My father's brother was killed in France, in 1945, so I was anxious to use a computer system on a park station to key in his name. The screen presented all the details of his death - date, location in France, the military action that took his life, and more. It was eerie. And also sad; he was only 19 at the time he gave his life to his country.

It had been dark for a while when we finally walked back to our car. We froze in terror when we arrived at the exact spot to see - no car. "Can't find your car, right?" asked a cop stationed in front of the IRS Building. The sign we carefully read at 3:45 PM meant NO PARKING AFTER 4:00 PM. Period. In our glee, we assumed it meant free parking after 4:00 PM. We had visions of an impounded car locked up until Monday morning, and then only after a \$500 fine plus a towing charge. "Where will we stay?" and "How will we ever find the vehicle?" were among the many questions that rushed to mind.

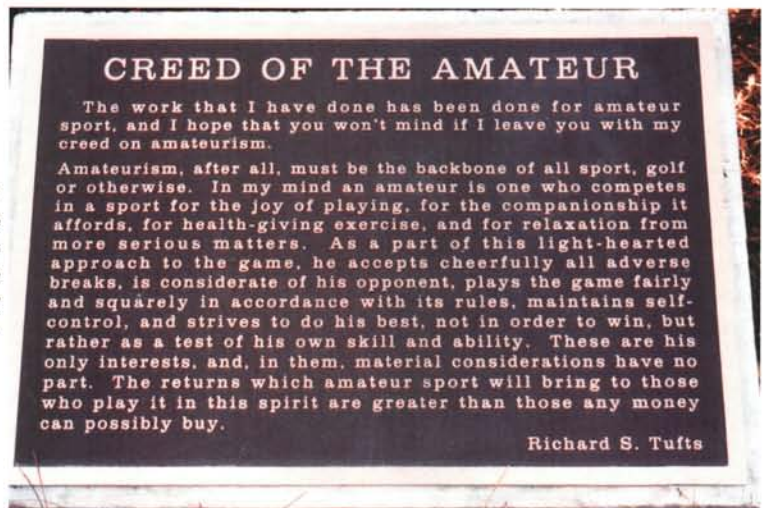
The cop got us squared away. The car was towed, but only a block and a half away. There was an affordable \$100 ticket on the windshield, a small price for us to pay for being stupid.

We beat feet south for two hours, found a place to stay and hoped we had paid our dues for the trip.

We hated not stopping in Raleigh the next morning to visit Emily and Bob Erickson but we had our goal set on the U.S. Army Paratrooper and Special Forces Museum at Fort



The late afternoon February sun created a beautiful setting at Pinehurst.



Richard Tufts' "Creed of the Amateur" is worthwhile reading for everyone.



Statues of Donald Ross and Richard Tufts and...



Payne Stewart grace the clubhouse lawn at Pinehurst.



Bragg. This is an awesome place to visit and you didn't have to be an airborne ranger or even a veteran to appreciate the wonderful collection put together in a new, large and beautiful building. The coolest thing was a Disney-like ride that gives a realistic sense of traveling various landscapes on different military vehicles. We spent a couple of hours there, saluted and headed west to see the site of this year's U.S. Open - Pinehurst #2.

The trip to Pinehurst isn't complete without a walk through the Village. It sort of reminded me of Kohler. The Carolina Hotel is a must see, and we did that. But the real draw is the golf course operation. The #2 course was busy, the turf in excellent winter playing condition, and we decided we couldn't be in a nicer place on earth that Saturday afternoon than on a Pinehurst golf course. We checked out the bulging proshops and sat in rocking chairs on the clubhouse porch and looked at the statues of Richard Turfts, Donald Ross and Payne Stewart. It was heaven.

But conference called. Aaron navigated a cross country route back to

the interstate and we ended the day driving close to our final stop, scheduled for the next morning.

Hilton Head Island was another of those special places we visited. We circled it completely before heading back to yet another golf course on the Tour this year (and every year, for that matter) - the Harbor Town Links. The red and white lighthouse is an icon for this golf course and the guys climbed to the top of it for a bird's eye view of the 18th hole. Three staff members in the pro shop were transplants from Wisconsin, and one of them knew Mike Handrich! It is a small world made even smaller by golf.

In the three years that passed since our last GCSAA conference in Orlando, there have been a lot of changes. There is more traffic on I-4 and more businesses along International Drive. The Orange County Convention Center, huge last time we convened there, has a new addition that is twice as large as the original. Orlando itself has

changed; the news at night has plenty of reports of violent crime, a subtle reminder to be careful of where you go. That's no different



The welcome to the Paratrooper Museum includes a WWII paratrooper (foreground) and modern day paratrooper (background).



The lighthouse at Harbor Town overlooks the 18th hole, a golf course designed by Pete Dye and Jack Nicklaus.

A visit to Pinehurst necessarily begins with a stop at the Carolina Hotel.



What a welcome - the Orange County Convention Center.



The new addition to the OCC is huge beyond words.





Three UW-Madison alumni — Bob Erickson, Oscar Peterson and Jim Van Herwynen.



Three veterans of the golf scene in Wisconsin — Bob Belfield, Jim Spindler and Red Roskoft.

Jack Nicklaus was pleased to receive the 2005 GCSAA Old Tom Morris Award.



Kelly and Trygve Ekern and Josh LePine visit about old times in the Wisconsin Room.

than any other large American city, but it reflects change for Orlando that is unwelcome to visitors like us.

The attractions remain the same, or even better, and they are why this is such a popular spot for our organization. Many families tie the conference to a family vacation.

Like thousands of other superintendents, I enrolled in two day-long seminars. Over the many years, the one-day offerings seem to have become more popular than the two-day or the half-day seminars. Although I have attended some dogs, most of these seminars are an excellent value for the money and the time. The tired and redundant are weeded out, and new and topical material reflecting our constantly changing business is added. The poorer instructors are retired and the up-and-coming are given their opportunity to contribute to the golf turf business.

Drs. John Ball and Roch Gaussoin are good scientists and super instructors and their class on turf and trees was terrific. John has spoken at both the Symposium and EXPO; we need to extend similar invitations to Roch. I attended Bruce Branham and Ron Calhoun's seminar on PGRs and found it valuable. Both have been to Wisconsin as speakers; since Ron was the most recent, I'd see if we could get Bruce up from Illinois for one of our educational events. Dr. Branham came across to me as a very bright guy and an outstanding faculty person. Illinois is lucky to have him. I heard other good reports about pre-conference seminars.

The social gathering on Wednesday evening after the seminars had concluded was fun, albeit crowded. Located around the pool area of the Rosen Hotel, there probably wasn't enough room. But we found a spot and as so often



Randy and JoAnn Smith ventured to Orlando again this year.



Many families took the opportunity to visit the Disney Resorts; Epcot is always a favorite.



happens spent an hour or two with guys from Wisconsin. We don't see one another often enough, to be sure, but it seems weird to travel to Florida to get caught up with personal and family news.

Celebrity events are a favorite of mine, and I always enjoy whatever brings that about. Jack Nicklaus received the Old Tom Morris Award from GCSAA, finally. I have nosed around as to why it has taken so long for us to give it to the man who is arguably the greatest player in the history of the game. Jack has been involved in a lot of superintendent job changes and that has led to reluctance to give him our highest honor, as I understand it.

I sat close to the stage and appreciated how he was willing to be involved in the superintendent awards portion of the program. And after a break, the Golf Channel stage set-up and filming was intriguing



A bird's-eye view of the "Building of the Green" project.

and extremely interesting. Some thought Jack came across as having a fairly good opinion of himself, but I didn't care. He was there, gracious enough to interact with us and respond to Adam Barr's questions and conversation. Jack even signed his most recent book for me, which I had lugged down to Florida from Wisconsin.

Once the Golf Channel filming was over, there was a mad dash to the trade show, which had already

opened. I was barely in time to get a Jacobsen hat, the 33rd in my collection of one for every year I have attended the trade show.

This year the trade show piqued a lot of interest among GCSAA members. It is now "officially" the GIS - Golf Industry Show - since we let the golf course owners in on our deal. There was some assumption that the product lines that would interest owners-kitchen equipment, dishes, furniture, swimming

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pool supplies and the like - would clutter and trash OUR show. We were pleased to see those kinds of displays down on one end where you didn't have to go if you weren't interested. This still was a golf course superintendent's show.

The old excitement that comes from seeing new equipment and technology was still there, despite the change. The solution centers added significantly to the education conference and I cannot even guess how much time I spent at the putting green construction project. In addition to watching the green being built hour by hour, the speaker roster at the headland of the construction site was fantastic - architects, USGA agronomists, faculty and golf course superintendents. I only wish seating had been available so a guy could take notes or be focused more on the lecturer than on sore feet.

Although the putting green con-

struction held, by far, the most fascination, the water solution center and the agronomic solution center were worthwhile. I didn't have time to visit the equipment and maintenance center and couldn't have cared less about the clubhouse solutions schedule.

One thing I felt about the show was this was not the year for much really new technology or equipment. That could be one of the effects of a down golf economy the past three years. But all the equipment and material available for golf course management was there to see and inspect. Literally, there is nothing else like it anywhere.

There was a modest return of excitement to the bookstore. There was a better selection of books than in the past two years, and the selection included some general golf interest books. Book signings returned, giving you a

chance to have Dr. Joe Vargas, Dr. Mike Hurdzan or Dr. Tom Nikolai sign any of the many books they have written over the years, including their latest offerings.

The chance to hear Peter Kessler speak and reflect on our profession was pure pleasure for me. As the long time voice of HBO Sports and the Golf Channel, he was able to share a lot of insights few others could.

Although I wasn't able to attend the prayer breakfast, I really would have liked to hear Dan Reeves, former coach of the Falcons and the Broncos. I remember his as a player for the Cowboys, a small detail that dates me.

The innovative superintendent lectures provide tons of information. So much so that you have to do a lot of picking and choosing to tailor conference to what you need.

Of course, we were proud of Jake Schneider and Kurt Steinke



**Derek Kastenschmidt and Jake Renner, like everyone else, enjoyed seeing Dr. Rossi again.**



**Rick Reilly certainly added to the enjoyment of conference.**



**Peter Cookingham was the very deserving recipient of the 2005 Green Section Award.**



**The 10th hole at Bayhill looks ready for the Bayhill Classic.**

for the scholarships they won. The University of Wisconsin - Madison turfgrass undergraduates did a superb job of offering details of their program in the UW-Madison booth. Thanks to the Reinders for hauling it to conference for them. The Wisconsin Room was great, as it always is. How can you beat spending time with people whom you've been friends for years? And many former Badgers stopped in; everybody was especially glad to see Dr. Frank Rossi.

For pure pleasure and fun, I felt grateful for the invitation to Syngenta's Green Carpet Premier at Sea World. The chow was outstanding and the chance to get close to some of the animals at Sea World was very cool. But the real kicker was listening to Sports Illustrated columnist Rick Reilly. His routine was as hilarious as the book we all received (and the two copies I brought to Florida with me) as a gift - "Who's Your Caddy?"

I waited in line at the book signing and gave Rick my business card. "Hey, my kid wants to attend the UW-Madison," he told me. The only reply I could come up with was, "Give me a call!" Great fun!

If there was a place I wanted to be and was not, it was at the Golf Course Builders banquet where Gary Player received the Don Rossi Award. Player is a golf hero from my younger years and I have always liked him. I was invited but the price of admission was out of my range.

The USGA Green Section is the most consistent educational offering at the GCSAA Conference, and it is consistently outstanding. The agronomists and staff offerings are always right on the mark. It was also great to see Pete Cookingham receive the Green Section Award. He's built the TIF, the Noer Collection and the Beard Collection into the best source of turfgrass material and information in the world. Peter

was the best person imaginable to receive the honor.

I guess the only downer to the trip was calling home to the shop for a golf course update. There were some above freezing temperatures and it was important to keep as much water moving off the greens as possible. Nothing like some good old fashioned worrying to take the edge of a terrific conference.

And it was terrific. The past two years were kind of downers, but the enthusiasm seems to be coming back. I felt it and so did a lot of others. I had a lengthy chat with Steve Mona that was reassuring.

I guess I wish I could be reassured that the ice accumulation on so many Wisconsin golf courses wouldn't spoil the start to what we always hope will be our best year in golf. But we'll know about that soon enough. The GCSAA conference and show has us well prepared to start that season, whatever it might bring. 🌿