

A Surprise!

2006 GCSAA Conference Was Surprisingly Good



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

How can it be that after 33 consecutive GCSAA conferences a person could be so excited to attend yet another one? After all, it was flooded out of New Orleans, NBA'd out of Houston and forced to settle in Atlanta; if there was a reason for at least muted excitement, this would be that year.

And maybe I was a little subdued, if for no other reason than I don't particularly care for Atlanta. The weather's not that great, and there have been plenty of incidents of thuggery in previous years there.

But those concerns were overcome as departure neared.

The three of us who travel to conference together - Grim, Goninen and myself - get along surprisingly well, and we reach common ground on routes and stops on the way to conference each year. The downside is that we give up two weekends of the year to make it happen, and weekends at home are important to most of us who are golf course superintendents.

We left early with good weather and drove south to Bloomington and east to Indianapolis where we stopped, at James Whitcomb Riley's home and the NCAA museum. Riley produced 1,144 works that are read still today, despite being written during the late 1800s to early 1900s period. He's best known for Little Orphan Annie, The Raggedy Man, and When the Frost is on the Punkin.

We continued east to Columbus, Ohio, arriving at 4:45 pm, not the best time to look for a specific desti-

nation. We searched for Scioto Country Club, the course where Jack Nicklaus played as a youth. Good directions from Dr. Chris Williamson got us to the course in good order. We were impressed by the course and interested in the bunker restoration project in progress. The shop was closed, but the daylight and a drive around the perimeter of the golf course gave us a good idea of its quality. The grass was green



Few know that the NCAA museum is in Indy.



James Whitcomb Riley's home in Indianapolis is a wonderfully preserved piece of history.



The clock near the Scioto clubhouse tells you the time and your location.

and players were on the range, a place where Jack surely spent lots of hours. Williamson wanted us to go to see the “shoe” at OSU, but of course we didn’t. Who cares?

We ran out of time before we could drive the few miles to Dr. Mike Hurdzan’s office. I did see him in Atlanta and learned he is the architect of the Scioto CC bunker project.

We spent the night near Pittsburgh and left early enough the next morning to arrive in Morgantown, WV by 8:00 am. We stopped to see one of our former employees and co-worker Mike Bogroff. Mike was our first (and so far, only) MSU student. Mike moved from Traverse City MI (with 30 consecutive days of snow) to Morgantown (he cut greens and fairways on February 4th, right before we got to town). He’s well aware of the work and conditions



We stopped to see Mike Bogroff, his new golf course and his new crew member!



The Greenbriar Hotel is an imposing and inviting building; many famous people have stayed there.

he faces! That has to be the hilliest town I have ever visited.

We bid farewell and hustled south, trying to beat the foot of snow predicted for Mike and his freshly cut fairways and greens. Our destination was the Greenbriar in White Sulphur Springs, WV. I have read about it

for years — Sam Snead was associated with the Greenbriar for most of his career, from 1935 until his death in 2002. Over my career I got to know Bob Mitchell fairly well, and Bob was the superintendent at the Greenbriar for many years. He’s also a past president of the GCSAA. It was a great stop,

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Sam Snead played out of this shop for decades.



Chad and Aaron were on historic ground when they walked the Oakhurst Golf Club, America's first golf course.



Davy Crockett's Tennessee home.



The Lost Sea Caverns were a worthwhile stop on our way south to Atlanta.

exceeding our expectations. There was no golf, however; the rain was arriving and threatened to turn to snow in the higher elevations.

Our next stop was maybe the best in quite a while - we visited Oakhurst Links, the first formal golf course in America. It was a pilgrimage of sorts. Located in the rural countryside a little north and east of White Sulphur Springs, it was "rediscovered" by golf course architect Bob Culp and Lewis Keller and brought back to playable condition. It had been abandoned and pastured for years, but the features were mostly undisturbed. It was quite a rush for a golf course history buff, not unlike that experienced by my visits to the Foxburg Country Club, the Dorset Field Club and the Country Club at Brookline.

We beat feet out of White Sulphur Springs and drove hard toward Atlanta. The heavy rainfall we were experiencing was forecast to turn to

snow in the higher elevations, and given the minimal equipment and commitment to snow removal in the South, we didn't want to get stuck. We landed in Tennessee, just over the Virginia border.

The next morning, with very little snow to deal with, we headed toward Atlanta, only 300 miles away. We stopped briefly in Morristown, Tennessee to visit the Davy Crockett tavern. It is an amazingly well preserved building, constructed of hand-hewn logs and neat dovetailed joints. It was his boyhood home, humble beginnings for a man who was a pioneer, political leader of his time, and a victim of the Alamo massacre in San Antonio, Texas.

By lunch we were at the famous Lost Sea Caverns and could not resist seeing the country's largest underground lake. We made it from there to Kennesaw, GA and stopped for the day. We were close



Bobby Jones' grave in Oakland Cemetery; we weren't the only visitors.

to Atlanta but still able to get affordable lodging.

It was cold and pouring rain again on Monday morning when we arrived in Atlanta. We went through town on our pilgrimage to Robert 'Trye Jones' grave in Oakland Cemetery on the edge of downtown. It is a huge old cemetery and the weather wouldn't

allow us a search for Bobby's gravesite, so we stopped at the office and got directions. Like many who carry a stone from their home to the site of H.D. Thoreau's cabin site on Walden's Pond, many who visit the Jones grave leave a golf ball; some have their club logo (mine did) and some write a message on the ball. We stood there in the rain and one could almost sense his presence, the first and only person to win the Grand Slam of golf in one year. Of course, he also founded and helped design the Augusta National Golf Club in 1931 and started the Masters Tournament there in 1934. He was only 28 when he won the Grand Slam (1930), and he retired from professional golf in 1931. He was diagnosed with syringomyelia in 1948 and died in 1971 when he was 69.

The next trip to or through Atlanta will include some plans and preparations to visit the East Lake golf course where Jones played golf. It is located in a bad neighborhood and it didn't seem wise to visit on the spur of the moment in lousy weather. That would be a heck of a way to lose your life. The beautiful print LESCO gave us at this year's show was from East Lake.

We found Margaret Mitchell's grave on the way out of the cemetery and I told the boys I thought we were close to the Martin Luther King Jr. historic site. I had visited there previously but we agreed it would be a good stop

before finding our hotel and checking in. So we headed in that direction, in pouring rain.

When we were within a couple of blocks of the King grave, we came to the realization that this day was the one for viewing Coretta Scott King at the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Parking was at a premium, so one stayed with the car and two of us went right down to the front door of the church.

Despite the rain, the line of people waiting to walk through the church was long. The thought of going through the church occurred to us, but we had no rain gear, not even an umbrella. We settled for some conversation with people there, a few minutes at King's grave and a walk through the King Center. We also watched, from a very short distance, construction of Mrs. King's tomb.

It was very interesting and also very historic. Later in the week I engaged one of the sentries at an exhibition hall entry in a conversation about Mrs. King. She had been good friends with the older of the King daughters and knew the family fairly well. Her accounts of times in the King home and church only added to the richness of our Monday visit. The funeral was held at a huge Baptist Church east of downtown and the television reporting was extensive and thorough, as one would expect. And



The Martin Luther King site is really on the edge of downtown Atlanta.



Umbrellas were required to wait in line to view Mrs. King.



Workers put the granite pieces together for Mrs. King's tomb.



M.L. King home, only a few houses from the Ebenezer Baptist Church.

one would expect a couple of beauts like Carter and Kennedy to make wholly inappropriate remarks at the funeral. Also as expected, the Presidents Bush both conducted themselves appropriately and with class.

I wasn't filled with great expectations as conference week began. It was the third site and one had to figure something was lost with the time spent on the New Orleans and later the Houston venues. Coupled with the fact that Atlanta isn't very safe and that the weather was either cold or wet, it wasn't hard to understand the lack of enthusiasm.

That changed quickly for me. We were given the rooms we had reserved, eliminating for us the huge hassle some members had. Reservations were ignored and guys were shuffled off to some scary places. The stories were maddening, especially the one about the airport Travel Lodge where the night clerk was murdered mid-week. One placed was so bad that a cab driver refused to leave a person there, a GCSAA member who had a reservation at one of the conference hotels. This is a huge aggravation for which there doesn't seem to be an explanation. It certainly challenges one's confidence in GCSAA Travel. Maybe it is just another reason why I don't like Atlanta as a conference town.

Our hotel, however, was fine. It was not unlike the Marriott in Middleton, which hosts the WTA EXPO each year. It was literally across the street from the convention center, perfect location for a guy looking at his 60th birthday!

The two seminars I enrolled in were subject matters that generate little interest and even less excitement. But they both turned out to be extremely useful - "Writing an IPM Program," and "An Environmental Plan for your Facility." The instructors were great and the areas that are usually gray in color cleared considerably for me. I'm glad I attended.

Not only was our hotel directly across from the convention center, it was also on the edge of Olympic Park. Adjacent to Olympic Park was the new Georgia Aquarium. Wednesday evening saw many golf course superintendents at the aquarium as guests of Syngenta.

The aquarium is new and a very tough ticket, so the chance to see it was awesome. Also part of the evening was the opportunity to meet and visit with Ken Venturi for a few minutes. I was fortunate to be able to go early and listen to him up close and personal. Really, it was a thrill. He lived so much great golf history and told stories about Snead and Sarazan, Hogan and Nelson, and Palmer and Nicklaus. Of course, his broadcasts with Jim Nantz are legendary. He was a disarmingly nice person to meet and signed more copies of his book than you could imagine. He received a standing ovation - a long, standing ovation, at the end of the speech he gave to us. He was moved by the recognition.

Business really gets rolling on Thursday morning when



The very new Georgia Aquarium was beyond words — a great place to visit.



CNN headquarters were adjacent to the convention center.



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Therese Swenson greeted visitors on behalf of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, located in Brookfield.



New Jacobsen president Dan Wilkinson and long-time staff member Dave Legg.



Fuzzy Zoeller was very sociable and pleasant.



Ken Venturi signed a lot of books, and...



gave a great lecture.



Pat Sisk gave an irrigation lecture at one of the solution centers.

the Innovative Superintendent sessions begin at 6:00 am both on Thursday and Friday. I get a kick out of telling people our educational sessions start that early; most people look at you as though you are weird. But it is true! And these lectures were great because they offer nuts and bolts stuff from colleagues doing the same kind of work you are. Of the dozen and a half given over two days, only a couple of them were poor. Great feature.

The Opening Session on Thursday at 9:00 am was excellent. What a lineup! I was so excited to see Stan Zontek receive the GCSAA Distinguished Service Award; more deserving recipients are seldom seen. His speech came right from his heart and those thousands of us who have benefited from his advice were proud as could be of the man.

And then, his undergraduate advisor at Penn State, Dr. Joe Duich, was presented with the Old Tom Morris Award on the same stage. It was perfect. Duich also gave an out-

standing speech. He noted the University of Wisconsin - Madison as among the very first to offer formal short course training on campus for golf course superintendents; the year was 1930.

Tom Cook, Oregon State prof, was given a DSA also. And what a treat it was to see Nancy Lopez in person. She was the Old Tom Morris Award winner a few years ago and couldn't accept it in person then because of a family illness. She was terrific, kind and sweet person who has won so many tournaments on the LPGA tour. I lugged my Nancy Lopez books with me to Atlanta, and after the session ended I was wondering if it was appropriate to go on stage and ask her if she would autograph them for me. My quandary ended when Steve Mona came along and said, "Go ahead and ask her to sign your books." No wonder I like Steve Mona so much!

Nancy, of course, was happy to do that for me. While she was writing I asked her if she remembered riding

in a red Jeep with the golf course superintendent of Maple Bluff CC during the Women's Western Golf Association Junior Girls tourney over thirty years ago. She said, "Why, yes I do!" Tom Harrison was flattered.

Not much else happens once the trade show floor opens at 11:00 am. There is a mad dash for a Jake hat — I have 34 different ones now — and then a walk through what could be described as "heaven for superintendents." Honestly, it is the most thrilling experience I can imagine — golf course machinery and supplies for as far as the eye can see.

The trade show was easy to maneuver this year; why, I don't know. It seemed more compact, although the central aisle was nice and wide. I never had a sense of being crowded for room, either. Exhibitors I visited with were tickled with customer contact; that often means it is too cold to play golf.

The solution centers still seem a good idea to me, but it was a shame to see so many talented



Rod Johnson was holding court in the Wisconsin hospitality "room."



A night on the town — Wisconsinizing at a downtown brew pub.



Al Nees brought his Nitrogen Cycle with him to Atlanta.

people speaking to such small groups. Several from Wisconsin gave presentations — Chris Williamson, Pat Sisk and Ellen Davis. I was tickled on Friday to talk to Fuzzy Zoeller — another book signed. He's a funny guy even though some don't care for him.

There was a general session on Friday morning; not very exciting ever, but especially dull this year. Awards are given to deserving recipients, but the Leo Feser Award presentation really plucked on one's heartstrings. The winner was Mike Hansen, but his wife accepted for him since Mike died before conference. A guy named Marcus Buckingham gave kind of a pat lecture that included nothing new; he was a gasbag.

The USGA Green Section program was up to its usual premier quality, good information always. Bob Shearman, a speaker at our Symposium last fall, was presented the Green Section Award this year. Congratulations to Bob.

The chapter publications seminar conflicted with a good group of lectures and subjects (Coffee Talk with the Experts) and trade show hours ended right after lunch, barely enough time to see remaining vendors. And just like that - it is over for another year.

A report on the GCSAA conference wouldn't be complete without a round of rousing applause for the Wisconsin reception. It was held away from the convention center and hotels this year, for the first



"Colorful" would certainly describe this little corner of the trade show.

Thanks to Kerry Anderson for giving me a bird's eye view of the trade show.



The solution centers deserved more attention that they received.

time, and instead we gathered with friends at a micro pub. It was a great evening — plenty of room, a wonderful atmosphere, and food and fresh beer like you will seldom see again. The list of donors appears below; thank those who were so generous (and ask those missing, “Where were you?”). President Lyons and his committee really deserve praise.

By mere virtue of the experience that comes from attending 34 consecutive GCSAA conferences, I am a pretty good judge of ranking them. I’d plunk this one down in the middle, which isn’t bad considering it had to be moved twice and ended up in a mean town.

It takes a few days for me to get over the melancholy I always feel once it is over. That alone is high praise for GCSAA. But as we moved north on the trip home, spring was on my mind - another golf season, a new crew, tournaments, challenges and all that goes with that new golf season brings out the excitement we all feel.

FINAL COMMENTS

1. Here’s an enduring question: WHY IS IT SO HARD EACH YEAR TO DESIGN A PROGRAM THAT FITS IN YOUR POCKET AND IS

ACTUALLY USEFUL AND YOU CAN QUICKLY FIND THE INFORMATION YOU NEED. THIS YEAR’S EFFORT WAS AWFUL. STEVE MONA: ASSIGN THE TASK TO YOUR BEST EMPLOYEE AND GET STARTED SOON; IT JUST CANNOT BE THAT DIFFICULT. THEN, TRY TO USE IT YOURSELF AND SEE IF YOU FIND IT HANDY.

2. I think we should have a pedometer contest and give an award to the person who puts on the most miles during trade show hours. I am going to wear one next year and as a minimum, I’ll report on how many miles I rack up.

3. It was good to see: Mike Vogt, Ted Woehle, Jim Timmerman, Peter Salinetti, Frank Rossi, Paul Rieke, Ralph Nicotera, Milt Englke, Chris Hague, Carl Grassl, Joel Jackson, Don Hearn, Chuck Borman, Mike Hurdzan, Brad Klein.

4. I missed: Clay Loyd, Rick Anderson, Gary Coulson, Jim Latham, Margo Szabo, Jim Beard, Oscar Miles.

5. New acquaintances: Dan Wilkinson, new prez of Jacobsen. He’s the grandson of the late Frank Wilkinson, director of the UW - Madison Farm and Industry Short Course during his career. Dan comes

from another Textron division.

6. The bookstore was back! Terrific effort by those responsible. Great selection and great prices on great books. Thanks, too, for the book signings.

7. Predictions for lower attendance seemed off the mark. I didn’t notice a fall off if there was one. All events seemed well attended.



An old fashioned windmill was put to a new use as a pond aerator!

The following is a list of the vendors who made the Wisconsin Room possible this year in Atlanta. Without their continued support and generosity the evening would not have been possible. Thank you from all of us in the WGCSA.

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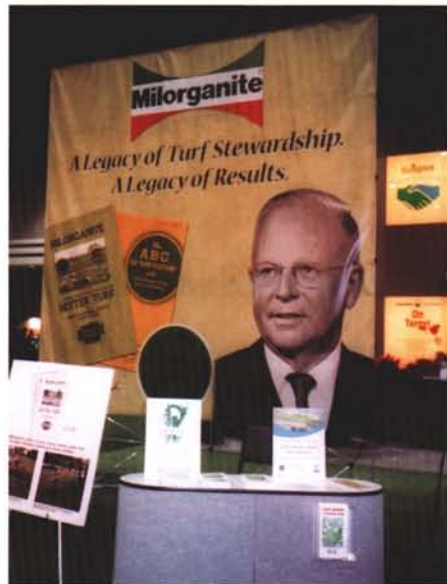
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Milorganite showed its pride in O.J. Noer.

8. Suggestions for next year: Provide seating on the trade show floor so a guy can rest his weary bones. And make sure there is seating near the food court areas. Redesign the conference guide. Shape up GCSAA Travel so that a room reservation means you actually have a room when you arrive as scheduled. Reinvalidate the solution centers. 🌱



Old tractors and...

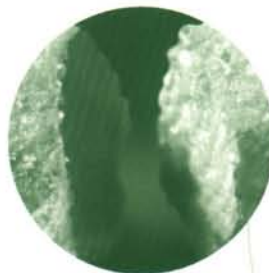


new tractors were on display at the trade show.

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