

GCSAA President Cites Concern For Economy, Environment, Labor

By Ron Smith

Randy Nichols accepts his post as president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America knowing that industry, association and personal concerns will create some of the biggest challenges he's ever faced.

Nichols, CGCS, Cherokee Country Club, Sandy Spriggs, Ga. (an Atlanta suburb), cites the economy, the environment and labor as the biggest concerns for the golf industry.

"This environment is still number one," he said, "primarily because of environmental terrorists who don't know the facts," but cause the industry a lot of trouble.

The association is fighting back, however, by promoting the benefits from golf courses, the professionalism of superintendents and with a new study that may lay to rest some of the misconceptions about long-term pesticide use.

Nichols says a toxicological exposure study could determine what effect, if any, pesticide use has on superintendents. "We think this research will help alleviate some of the concerns. We believe results will prove what we've said all along: that pesticides, properly used, at correct times, rates and with proper equipment and clothing, do not pose an unreasonable risk. And if there are risks involved, we can address them."

The economy also concerns Nichols. "Companies are still cutting back and eliminating jobs. People have less money to spend." That could affect golf courses, possibly with cuts in maintenance budgets.

"We may need to pare back some," he said. "But it is going to be important that superintendents communicate with greens chairmen and club managers. A good superintendent is worth a lot to a golf course. Management must know that."

Nichols sees no decline in golf popularity, even in an economic

slump. "Play will not decrease, at least not in the short run. Typically, number of rounds increase during a short recession. Members play home courses, where their membership dues are already paid, rather than travel and pay to play elsewhere.

"A long-term slump could result in lost members, but that's not as likely with private clubs. The investment is too high."

Nichols says the demographics of the game will change. "More women will play," he said. "Women account for the largest growth segment among golfers. Women are moving into executive positions in business and play golf for the same reasons many men have played, to make contacts and to conduct business."

The labor force also will reflect changing demographics as more women enter the profession, at both crew and management levels. "I expect to see women working in landscape areas on golf courses, but interest among women is increasing from crew level through superintendent training."

Nichols says the number of qualified female employees may not be enough to offset what appears to be a reduction in the golf industry work force. "Qualified labor is getting more difficult to find."

Retaining good help is a continuous challenge, he says. "GCSAA has instituted training programs that will help. A better educated employee will be more valuable. That helps the superintendent and ultimately benefits the club and the individual golfer."

Nichols says the higher education level of superintendents has elevated the profession. "We get more respect. Members understand that we perform important functions and appreciate the job superintendents do."

Nichols sees other positives for the golf industry in general and GCSAA in particular.

"We've developed a closer working relationship with key government agencies. The Environmental Protection Agency, for instance, often asks for our input on impending legislation.

"They know our track record, they see that we're educated and that we're trying to protect the environment. They are aware of how well we train our people, too."

The industry's affiliation with the Audubon Society of New York State also has been a boon to both organizations. "The Audubon sanctuary program has been good for our industry," he said. "It's been responsible for some positive public relations. But it's a two-way street. Audubon gets new memberships through golf course participation in its sanctuary program."

Nichols says the certified sanctuary program demands little of most golf course superintendents that they are not already doing.

GCSAA presented its President's Award for Environmental Leadership to the New York Audubon group during the International Conference.

Nichols faces some daunting personal challenges as well as he balances two full-time jobs this year. "The balancing act will be the biggest chore," he says. "Meeting all the GCSAA obligations and doing an adequate job here will be tough. It will demand a lot of extra effort, a lot more weekend work than I'd otherwise put in.

"More planning, more delegation and better communication will be critical. Fortunately, I have two outstanding superintendents working the two 18-hole courses here. Bryan Holshouser and Jim League have been with me for three years and they both do exceptional jobs. I couldn't take on the GCSAA responsibility without them."

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Nichols says GCSAA business takes some 120 days a year, much of that on weekends. And Cherokee Country Club is a private, highly maintained facility that sees heavy play from its 2,000 members.

"Member demands are high, but I have had tremendous support for participation in GCSAA. Fortunately, most of our meetings are scheduled

for spring, fall and winter. We don't do much during the summer when our course demands the most work. We have bentgrass greens and summer is the most stressful time for them."

Nichols has been on the GCSAA board of directors since 1987 and was active with the Georgia Superintendents Association for 10 years before that. He's accustomed to extra work and balancing the demands of two or more jobs.

But he's convinced that the sacrifice

is justified. "I've gained a lot personally from GCSAA responsibility," he said. "I've met a lot of people: superintendents, folks from USGA, PGA, the Club Managers Association and some from other parts of the industry.

"I've traveled to other parts of the country and to other nations. I understand golf from a broader perspective because I have sat down and talked with superintendents from all over the world. The more I understand the problems they face, the better I can do my job here.

"The worst thing a superintendent can do is spend too much time looking at his own course. Visiting other courses teaches us a lot."

But he adds that working for GCSAA is more than a personal goal. "I'm doing this for the industry," he said. "It's important that we get involved."

That involvement may take him away from his course a good many days a year, but the things he learns, the perspective he gains and the people he meets will make him a better superintendent and will benefit his members.

When Interviewing Someone for a Job, Ask Proper Questions

When interviewing prospective employees, always remember that you can't legally ask some questions:

- What is your religion?
 - Do you have any school-age children?
 - Are you married?
 - Have you ever been arrested?
- You are permitted to ask:
- Will there be any problems if you are asked to work late, or on a weekend?
 - Are there any reasons why you might not be able to make an overnight business trip?
 - Skip any questions on marital status until a candidate has been hired. Then, you may ask only such questions necessary for insurance and other legitimate purposes.
 - Have you ever been convicted of a felony? (Ask only if job-related.)

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