

THRU THE GREEN

October, 1998

The Golf Course Superintendents Association of Northern California
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Dual Member Blaker Hosts Joint Meeting

Imagine trying to operate and maintain a championship resort golf course that in some years may see as much as 150 days of snow cover. Those are the conditions that face the recent host of the Sierra Nevada/NorCal Joint Meeting, Joel Blaker. A member of both Associations, Baker and his staff at Tahoe Donner, now must turn their attention to the task of preparing to close the course until next spring.

The five to six month season keeps Blaker and staff busy. "We average over 30,000 rounds during that period," Blaker says. "With the short growing season, how we emerge from winter becomes critical. Snow removal each spring is a huge undertaking, but it's necessary for good spring conditions," Blaker continues. There is the six miles of drainage that Blaker suggests has greatly decreased the amount of winter turf loss.

Aside from the challenge each winter brings, Blaker is gearing up for a new challenge in 1999. "Next spring we begin the replacement of our irrigation system," he says enthusiastically. The current system has its shortfalls and Blaker is anxious to see and hear the sound of

trenchers. The two year project will replace 9 holes per year.

The history of Tahoe Donner is an interesting one. The public facility was constructed from 1971 to 1975 and designed by Joe B. Williams. Tragically, it was to be Williams last project. Before the course was completed, Williams passed away suffering a heart attack as he landed his plane at the Truckee Airport. It has since earned the reputation as one of Tahoe's finest resorts, much to the credit of Blaker and his staff.

A native of the Midwest, Blaker received a two year degree in 1985 from Des Moines Community College and headed out west where he began his career with the City of Sunnyvale. With the goal of working at a private club, Blaker subsequently moved to Peachtree Country Club and then on to Tahoe Donner in 1991. It appears that Blaker, after seven years at Tahoe Donner, has settled into his role as a mountain superintendent, but he insists there is still more to come. "Some day, I intend to design, construct, own and operate my own course," he says with a smile. I might be 60 years old, but that's my aspiration.

Media Director Continues To Top Board Agenda

Over the last 12 months you have likely seen many references in the Board Room Briefs to a proposal which advocates the hiring of a Media Director. The proposal has been a point of discussion at nearly every board meeting since last October and continues to receive strong consideration.

The idea to promote the Golf Course Superintendent profession is not new. The GCSAA Board several years ago established image enhancement as one of four mandates and since has made great strides in elevating the position of the Golf Course Superintendent within the golf community. On a chapter level, the Oregon Golf Course Superintendents Association has employed a Media Director since 1992. The success of their public relations efforts have been well chronicled. Recently, the South Texas Superintendents Association has likewise hired a Media Director and early reports indicate it has been of great benefit. Other chapters have recognized the benefit of public relations as well and have instituted programs to promote the profession through media days.

Communicating The Message

For years superintendents have groused about the lack of recognition they have received within the golf community. Many of the accolades for course conditioning have fallen upon the shoulders of

the golf professional who have for years enjoyed the stature of the most recognized and important person at a golf facility. Unfortunately, writing articles and preaching amongst ourselves has done little to change the public image of the superintendent. As one golf writer once said, "In the minds of some, the superintendent represents the crazed uncle out back."

It's clear that if any significant change is to occur the message must be carried directly to those that can make a difference in the minds and attitudes of employers, members and golfers - the media. The question then becomes who is going to carry the message.

We have all heard or read at one point in our careers stories or presentations that encourage superintendents to take a more active role with the media. Invite them to lunch they say, or write an article in the local garden section. Not bad ideas in concept, the problem — who has the time? Furthermore, within the world of golf there are important stories to be told about superintendents and the things they do, stories that most golfers find interesting. The challenge is who has the time or the expertise to share them.

At the board level we have recognized for some time that one of our responsibilities is to take an active role in public relations. Yet, in spite of our desire to improve the stature of our profession on a

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Media Director (Cont'd)

local level, we have struggled to make a difference. Sure there have been blips across the P/R screen, the U.S. Open coverage of John Fleming, and the outstanding article by Craig Bestrom in the Mercury last spring, but in the long run will either of those public relations strikes make a difference? What about all the missed opportunities to promote our NorCal superintendents. How often have you watched a golf show or read a local golf publication and never seen any mention of course maintenance or superintendents? Wouldn't a story or two on the havoc of last winter had some appeal? Or how about a little publicity for those superintendents who prepare their courses for a major tournament on the Nike, Seniors, LPGA or PGA Tours?

What Does It All Mean

All valid points you may be saying, but how does the hiring of a Media Director appreciably affect me? Don't expect to see overnight results, but indirectly, in time, each and every superintendent stands to benefit. Through a continued public relations effort, which focuses on increasing the exposure of the golf course superintendent, the profession is certain to gain in stature. As a result of the increased recognition, many things are likely to happen. Superintendents wages will increase, as has been demonstrated in the Pacific Northwest. Within the golf community, a superintendents contribution to the game will be identified and recognized and their value to a golf operation noted. When questions arise regarding course conditioning, it will be the superintendent that will be asked to comment. Finally, due to the increased visibility, superintendents are likely to receive greater consideration for job opportunities within the golf hierarchy.

In the final analysis when you examine all the services your membership in the GCSANC provides shouldn't enhancing the image and stature of its members and the profession be paramount? Interestingly enough, when you look back upon the history of our organization, dating all the way back to 1932, the services that we currently provide are much the same as those laid out by the charter members. Isn't it time that we look, with a sense of vision, towards our professional future and begin to write our own history.

Questions You May Have About A Media Director

Isn't the GCSAA already fulfilling that need?

It's true the GCSAA has made image enhancement a priority, however their focus is exclusively on a national level. The benefit of a Media Director who is employed by the GCSANC is that the focus is on our members. GCSAA is not adequately staffed to concentrate on the numerous P/R opportunities which occur almost daily at the chapter level. Their focus will continue to remain primarily on promoting the superintendent at major tour events, conference and show and assisting chapters and members in their P/R efforts.

Hiring a Media Director can't be cheap, what current services will be affected?

The Board of Directors recognizes that hiring a Media Director represents a major investment and the financial health of the Association cannot and will not be compromised. With that said, the question really becomes not one of cost but of value. Does the investment provide significant value to the members and the profession? The board has carefully debated this question and is convinced that the benefit is there.

To ensure the financial feasibility of the program, a resource committee was formed whose sole responsibility was to examine the financial implications of hiring a Media Director and determine where the funding would come from. In their report they are confident that the funds are either currently available or can be raised through special events. None of the revenue from the recent dues increase will be used to fund the program.

Has the Board considered partnering with the State Association, or another local chapter?

This was one of the first questions asked at the board level. The feeling is that the State of California is simply too large for one media person to cover. Also, there is the distinct possibility that with six diverse chapters involved . . . well, you can guess the outcome. With regard to a regional chapter, sharing a Media Director certainly would reduce the cost, however, the level of service would be reduced as well. With the enormous market Northern California provides the feeling is that in order to achieve the greatest benefit, the concentration and focus needs to be exclusive to Northern California.



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