



## COVER STORY

BY DAVE WHITE, EDITOR



# ENHANCING SUSTAINABILITY REMAINS THE NO. 1 OBJECTIVE

Q&A with GCSAA President Pat Finlen, CGCS  
Interim General Manager, The Olympic Club

**PAT FINLEN, INTERIM GENERAL MANGER OF THE OLYMPIC CLUB IN SAN FRANCISCO, CA, ALSO HAS SERVED AS THE CLUB'S DIRECTOR OF GOLF COURSE MAINTENANCE OPERATIONS AND NOW DIRECTOR OF GOLF SINCE 2002. AS PRESIDENT OF THE GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, FINLEN IS NOW IN HIS EIGHTH YEAR ON THE GCSAA BOARD.**

Pat is a big believer that changed in the industry have required golf course superintendents to expand their expertise and scope of work and will continue to do so. It is a testament to his skills and knowledge, but also a realization that golf course superintendents have perhaps the greatest breadth of knowledge at a golf facility that he was promoted to director of golf and interim general manager. Superintendents are great at making do with the resources given.

Here in this wide-ranging discussion with BoardRoom magazine, Finlen talks about some of the issue facing the private club and golf industries today.



a destination for young and old, big and small, newbie and experienced, casual and hard core and so on. The game of golf has not changed a great deal over time, but how we manage it has. That change has come in every aspect: marketing, course management, customer service, membership/pricing structures, etc.

As GCSAA President, my responsibility is to make sure that we serve our mission and strive to achieve our vision. Our mission is to serve our members, but to also enhance the enjoyment, growth, and vitality of the game. Our vision focuses on the stature of our members and their opportunity for career growth.

That being said, we have some internally focused objectives that pertain to our members and their standing in the industry in regards to career opportunities. Externally, we know that enhancing the sustainability of the game is holistically the number one objective.

The term has become such a buzzword that it risks becoming stale. But quite simply we know the game cannot grow and survive if it does not strike a balance between the needs of the consumer/golfer, the environment and the needs of the business.

### **BALANCE NEEDED**

Here is an example of the balance that must be addresses. Water is a big issue because development is putting pressure on supplies. Golf courses are frequently the targets of limits on water usage. However, if those limits are significant and protracted, the facility could shut down or golfers could quit coming. The impact is revenues are lost, recreational opportunities are lost and tax receipts are lost.

We, as an industry, need to find solutions to those situations when our operations are threatened, thus upsetting the balance. For example, the industry has done much research on water use and we are finding ways to be more efficient without alienating golfers. The end result is we use less water and energy to pump it, thus the facility saves money.

So much plays into the sustainability equation. Golfer expectations continue to be an issue, although I do think the recession in 2001 and then again in 2007 and 2008 served to educate them on the direct correlation between resources and course conditions.

The key issue from our perspective is the price of perfection is high. It costs a great deal to incrementally improve conditions past a certain point. In addition, pushing a course when it cannot handle it because of weather, disease or traffic can be a recipe for disaster. Again, keeping the balance is crucial.

*1) There are numerous issues facing the golf industry including the GCSAA. What do you expect to accomplish during your term? What's your number one objective?*

Golf is no different than most other industries. It needs more customers and it needs those customers to purchase the product more frequently. That is a simple answer, but the solution is obviously more difficult or we would have turned the tide.

In general, facilities need to be more inviting to a wider audience. That means we need to be

*2) What's your responsibility and that of GCSAA members to make golf more playable and more fun for golfers, especially during a time when the number of golfers has dropped off?*

While GCSAA members are responsible for the management of the course, we know there are several bosses, either by design – owner, green chair, GM or by influence – golfers, media, etc. It is incumbent on our members to drive conversations – and they can be tough – at their facilities.

We need to be able to engage all parties – I call this guided discovery – into understanding the implications of their influence. We know the best

SEE COVER STORY - PAGE 22

golfers desire fast greens, but the higher handicap players struggle when courses are set too difficult. We need to find a happy medium to serve all.

In general, our members have the most significant impact on golfer enjoyment. Surveys have replicated again and again that conditioning drives course selection and enjoyment of the game. I take this as a mandate for employers to not be penny-wise and pound foolish in scrimping on maintenance budgets.

**3) How have your personal and work experiences prepared you for your term as GSCAA president?**

I am a bit unique in that I do not have a formalized turf degree, so I have relied on GCSAA, my chapters and my peer network to provide me the education and training to advance in my career. My degree in business administration has been valuable as well. The job of a superintendent requires a solid agronomic base, business savvy, great communication skills, political adeptness and the ability to multi-task.

I will say that hosting the 2012 U.S. Open was a wonderful experience – of course that is easy to say now. But truthfully I never set as a goal the desire to host a major. But when the Olympic Club got the assignment I embraced it as a great opportunity to grow professionally. That is why you see so many superintendents volunteering for professional events. The days are long, but the experience is exceptional.

**4) Are superintendents consulted enough or given credence when clubs look for solutions in growing the game of golf?**

I think it is a two-way street. Do I think superintendents are consulted enough? Yes, for the most part. I think facilities have become so attuned to making sure the boat is being rowed in the same direction that growing the game is seen as a shared responsibility. But GCSAA members need to inject themselves in the discussion if they feel there is a missing element. Remember, they get into the business because of a love of golf and a love of



the outdoors. The days of the superintendent being not seen, nor heard are long gone.

**5) Are golfers expecting too much of a good thing (fast greens, green fairways) in today's business and environmental climates?**

There is nothing wrong with having high expectations of performance. That drives us to achieve and produce at a higher quality. I think the term that is most appropriate is “realistic expectations.”

Adding the word ‘realistic’ injects an understanding of the limitations or roadblocks. Part of the responsibility is on the facility to clearly communicate the issues. You cannot over-communicate enough.

Why are the greens slower today? It's because of the high heat, lack of rain and heavy traffic. We are protecting them today, so we have them tomorrow, next week and next month.

There is no question, however, that the unrealistic demands – if left unchecked – can have detrimental consequences. I have seen the best superintendents in the world lose greens because of the demands placed on them. At some point, science and Mother Nature penalize us for over-extending the limits. I would say that in general, yes, the expectations are too high, but changing human behavior can be difficult.

**5) And as a follow, are clubs and by extension their superintendents doing enough environmentally to meet the demands of society? Does the public understand advances being made the industry ( i.e. more efficient and effective use of water, pesticides etc.)?**

I truly believe that the incorrect assessment of golf being an elitist sport is what hurts its perception regarding the environment. If I told you that I took 150 acres and turned it into a place for people to recreate and congregate as a youth soccer complex I don't think anyone would react negatively.

However, if I told you it was a golf course, I am sure I would get some frowns. Golf courses are not land preserves. They are businesses that feature managed landscapes. They require inputs. The positive is golf course management is based on sound science.

What I have found reassuring is that when golf interests and environmental interests sit down and work collaboratively, there is rarely conflict. We have

some great examples with the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, the Southwest Florida Water Management District, the Vermont Department of Environment and others. I think society demands that we be good stewards of the environment. I believe that we are doing so as a whole.

Today we have environmental programs, we have means to measure water quality, we have GCSAA's environmental profile data and we have research to back up what we are doing. Golf has a strong platform to tell its story. We must be diligent in telling that story not only as industry on an organizational basis, but on a facility level as well.

I almost hate to bring it up again because the word starts to lose meaning, but this gets back to the discussion of sustainability. Why would a superintendent or facility want to overwater or use too many chemicals?

These are extremely expensive and if used beyond the amount dictated by science, turf health is threatened. I think every facility, especially the private clubs where the members own the facility, should engage in a discussion about the environment. I think it would be a great learning experience and no doubt change perceptions on what is good for the golf course.

***6) How has the superintendent's role changed over the years, and what effect has this had on the game of golf, and the betterment of the golf experience for private club members?***

There has been immense change in the superintendent profession. I have heard it said the evolution over the past 100 years began with the artisan (art of green keeping) then

transitioned to the scientist (turf management) and now to businessman (golf course management).

A strong agronomic base is still a requirement. And part of the beauty is the concept that superintendents know their turf better than anyone else, so a pinch of this and a pinch of that is still part of the tool kit. But the reality is golf course superintendents are leaders. They manage the largest department, the largest budget and the most valuable asset of the facility.

I said it earlier, but the number one factor in course selection and enjoyment of the experience is the condition of the golf course. That is quite a testament to the role and responsibility of the golf course superintendent.

I think facilities have had to become leaner in their operations, so the expectations of all leaders have expanded – pros, managers, food and beverage, etc.

For superintendents, this is a positive because there was a point where facilities thought all we were good for is growing grass. I know many, many GCSAA members who have become owners, general managers, directors, etc., because they have the knowledge, skills and abilities to do the job. In my case, I was named director of golf and added the interim GM title because my superintendent base has been seen as being important to the positions as our leadership sees it.

GCSAA has long advocated that superintendents need to be part of the management team at a golf facility. More information, especially in this case, leads to better decision-making that is manifested in a better golf experience, greater efficiencies and savings in dollars. **BR**

