

## 2011 Symposium on Affordable Golf White Paper

**Mission Statement:** The Symposium On Affordable Golf raises awareness and understanding of the challenges of the golf industry through open discussion, exchange of ideas and highlighting successes that promote the health and sustainability of the game of golf.

### Introduction

On November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011 the second Symposium on Affordable Golf was held at the Southern Pines Golf Club. Attendance of seventy was approximately the same as last year's with the same number of non-industry golfers as well. More than one-third were returning participants with the same goal in mind: Improving the business of golf so that the game of golf can both thrive and grow.

The range of topics once again included discussions regarding environmental practices, maintenance, and golf course design. Speakers included Mr. Terry Laurent, who has gone from managing the playing fields of Saucon Valley Country Club (including for two of golf's major championships) to owning his own golf course in Decatur, Indiana; Mr. Paul Chojnacky, Golf Course Superintendent of Pasatiempo Golf Club in Santa Cruz, California; Consultant Tom Mead, a former superintendent who focuses on sustainability in his work on golf courses from California to Michigan; and Gordon Irvine, also a former superintendent turned consultant who brought with him a refreshing presentation on contrasting principles of golf course management in the United Kingdom and the United States.

In addition to Paul Chojnacky's case study about his efforts at Pasatiempo, Ran Morrisett, founder of GolfClubAtlas.com, shared another classic golf architecture success story of Willie Park Junior's Huntercombe Golf Club. Barney Adams, Founder of Adams Golf shared his perspective on the growing challenges of the golf industry and the evolution of the Tee It Forward effort taken on by some of American golf's ruling bodies.

The final discussion was a round table of varying opinions and perspectives clearly demonstrating the conflicting efforts required to develop, build, maintain, and profitably operate a golf course in the United States. Opinions ranged from owners to superintendents, golf professionals, club managers and the most important perspective of the golfer. In addition to golfer participation throughout the day, it was inspiring to hear a golfer debate the usual challenges of a golf operation from the perspective of who matters most, the golfer.

So what has transpired with the golf industry in the twelve months since the first Symposium? By force more so than the influence of the Symposium on Affordable Golf, the business has continued toward a market correction. As many golf courses have closed their doors, many more have been forced to cut expenses in the face of cutting fees as well. Sustainability, albeit always a philosophy among golf course maintenance staffs, has become more and more a buzzword throughout the industry more so than with the general public as it relates to the game of golf.

The public has been slow to embrace the ideals of sustainability on a golf course regardless of the fact that many sustainable practices have been undertaken for many years right under their noses. USGA President Jim Hyler's discussion about brown becoming the new green was taken as a

problem by industry insiders who automatically concluded that the public may not embrace this concept either, instead of joining in Mr. Hyler's efforts to educate and not take the ideal so literally.

Personally, what have I learned from the first symposium that influenced me since? Among many thoughts, I have embraced the idea that 'we don't play the game the pros play' and I consider more and more the concept that tight lies are tougher for the average golfer and they create maintenance challenges as well.

This year's symposium was more of sharing take home ideas more than identifying overall trends and problems within the industry like at the 2010 event. As this year's program began, my first thought standing in front of the audience was maybe that there could have been a different name for our little get-together as I reminded myself of last year's opening discussion entitled, "What is Affordable?" Didn't we already cover that? How much could possibly change in the past twelve months? But I believe our effort goes beyond just money. We could have called it "The Symposium on Excesses in Golf" or "The Symposium on Enjoyable Golf"

No matter what we called our Symposium, though, the primary challenge is money, either in inputs or outputs. The industry has chosen primarily to look at things from the revenue side of the ledger rather than the expense side of the ledger. In other words, the golf industry has fallen into the same trap that most Americans who find themselves in debt face and that is an over-confidence that money will come in the way we want it to regardless of what we spend. If one just focuses on making revenue then the expenses will be covered.

Of course, that attitude is why our country has such a monumental government deficit and our citizens have individually amassed frightening amounts of credit card debt. We all cannot influence the overall debt of our country, nor shall we look to the government to guide us along the way. We, as individuals, must take control of our own lives and our own debts. To me, that is a clear parallel to the golf industry. Efforts to improve revenue and curb expenses must come from personal efforts and that is exactly how I envisioned the Symposium on Affordable Golf: A grassroots effort to share ideas and information in hopes that each of us can take something productive home with us and slowly spread the word.

Something as large as this transformational change in business models some may be expecting surely takes longer than a year. In fact, some took offense with our efforts, declaring that golf indeed is affordable. This is true, yet affordability came as a result of dire economic conditions and years of poor business decisions as an industry, not from true efforts to make the game more affordable as a practicality.

Some also took offense at our selection of speakers this year, "How can anyone from a place like Pasatiempo Golf Club possibly speak in terms of the affordability of golf?" "Aren't owners of residential golf courses and leaders of management groups a big part of the reason the golf industry is struggling to regain footing?" are just a few of the reactions to our program. This year's Symposium again brought perspectives that may seem counter-intuitive but as we did in the past, the focus was on learning from mistakes.

The efforts of both of our Symposiums have slowly taken root in the individuals who have attended the Symposiums. It was never our intention to cause cosmic shifts. We'll leave that to others. Neither have we planned to begin industry-wide initiatives. Again, we'll leave that to others. I am confident that golf is more affordable than it was a year and a half ago, yet I cannot say the Symposium on Affordable Golf had anything more to do with that than just simply the economy and the resultant survival tactics.

What I am also sure of is that our mission is intact and many have seen things in a different perspective through our discussions. This past November's Symposium brought forth many interesting ideas shared from a variety of sources. Some ideas have lead to some interesting trends that can be utilized by "mom and pop shops" and large management groups alike, the most accessible golf courses in the world and the most exclusive clubs in the world, and those facilities with unlimited budgets to those with nary two nickels to rub between their tee sheets.

## **Part I**

### **A New Business Model**

One absolute trend that was apparent long before the second Symposium on Affordable Golf was that in most cases, the business of golf must need a new business model to move forward. The Symposium revealed a few ideas about what that new business model may look like.

It is simple enough logic (yet seemingly an unachievable idea for an industry that seems to make a simple task a bit more involved than it needs to be), but it was clear that the end user should have a better product. It was simple to all that maybe the product the golf industry sells just isn't that good for a variety of reasons. Barney Adams gave us the clearest direction in that regard best, *"Let's improve the product and see where that takes us"*.

Improving the product for me as a golf course architect starts with what is on the ground. My perspective also says that the better product comes from simplicity in design, respecting the lay of the land, and utilizing that land to create strategic golf holes. These basic tenets also are the basis for a sustainable product not just from the design side, but also from the maintenance and operations aspects as well. Simply put, the transition to sustainable values, designs standards, and practices will help make the game more affordable.

Although many may see sustainability as an opportunity to simply reduce costs, Tom Mead warned that *"applying line item or across-the-board cuts will not work and our current model is not going to work."* He also pointed out that *"The simple math created by diminishing resources, increasing operating expenses and decreasing disposable income available for golf cannot be overcome."* Whereas that may be a gloomy outlook, his point is that although sustainability has always been an aspect of the golf business, the new business model will require an upgrade from "Sustainability-lite"

He also points to a revelation from our first Symposium that even if there was a one size fits all business model for golf courses, that model cannot possibly lean toward the Augusta National model. *"The trend of the past forty years of building bigger and more expensive golf courses and continually increasing maintenance intensity and budget might be financially feasible for the facilities that cater to the most affluent golfers who are willing to pay anything to play the game,"* said Mead. *"But for everyone else, the reality of this trend*

*has become financially unsustainable. Plus it's not in harmony with the true spirit of the game and its connection to the natural world. These trends have made the game less affordable."*

The key take home for myself is that the spending trend of past decades is not what the game's forefathers ever intended (those forefathers being ones who brought ancient games such as *Het Kolven* or *Goffe* to St. Andrews Bay hundreds of years ago).

Tom Mead has been in the forefront of what is best described as "Guerrilla Sustainability", covering such out of the box tools as bathtubs for rainwater retention to canine waste. Certainly the idea of alternative fuels such as the above or from fish waste or brewer's yeast is not groundbreaking. But the simple thought that virtually all aspects of the golf business are tied directly to the price of oil puts all aspects of the old business model into a different, basic perspective.

The golf industry's current business model is based on low energy prices and low oil prices. It is based on a robust economy, with increasing personal wealth and disposable income generated in large part from increases in home values and steady growth and financial investments. Those days have been over for a few years now (and many golf facilities have been making budget cuts of ten to twenty percent since), yet most businesses are just now experiencing the increased volatility of oil prices derived from a post peak oil economy.

Tom Mead expects the twenty percent mark is not enough and budget cuts will need to go beyond even the thirty-five percent mark. That is where his Guerrilla-Sustainability comes in and as intense as the concept may be, it simply is in what he calls "the fundamental problem in this business:" reducing inputs (especially water). His ideas are focused on the maintenance side of things as his background is as a golf course superintendent, but the idea certainly can include cutting spending elsewhere within the golf business model as well such as on the operations side.

The current golf business model has also been based on an askew "expense as derived from future revenues" perspective (as is true with personal finance as well). "*Munis and private clubs are failing for the same reason. They thought they had unlimited sources of revenue and they could run their expenses and it didn't matter,*" pointed out Rob Waldron, Business Development Manager for Billy Casper Golf in Vienna, Virginia.

Waldron lays out his revenue versus expense model very easily. From the revenue model perspective, "*Say we are going to do forty thousand rounds at \$30/round and that's \$1.2 million. In the golf shop they're going to spend \$3/round so that's another \$120,000 and we know we're going to generate five dollars in food and beverage per round (\$200,000). So now we have our revenue model and then one builds expenses to cover that.*"

Yet, Waldron follows a model based on expenses, not revenues. He explains that "*We go with the basic expense model. What does it cost to open up that golf course? And then based on traffic flow, how busy you are, you increase or decrease your amount of staffing. Staffing is the most expensive part of your golf course.*" To Waldron, when you look at the operation of golf, there are some basic fixed costs to open up the golf shop and costs to maintain the golf course. "*Once you estimate that base, you determine how good you want to be*" teaches Waldron.

Simply put, the first step in his business model is "looking for low hanging fruit", places where cuts can easily be made (expense model). Once the determination as to how good management wants a

particular facility to be, marketing efforts ramp up to extend the revenue model. But this happens *only after* the expense model is in place.

Because the expense model is somewhat of a static budget starting at a baseline, the challenge to make a profit comes with the basic effort to attract play. For years, the attraction was mis-guided along the lines of aesthetics and reputation. Reputation was typically built upon a name architect that usually resulted in a golf course that matched that name architect's skill-set, not the skill-set of the masses.

Those elements of aesthetics and reputation, in turn, drove the expense model higher than necessary when it came to the product of golf. As a result, the main product - golf - was pushed down the list of importance which drove people from the game because those same elements of aesthetics and reputation made the game too difficult for most people (in addition to being too costly as well).

The revenue model Mr. Waldron described comes from the generation of rounds of golf properly priced based upon covering expense first. That doesn't mean that greens fees should be slashed, only that value is provided to the golfer at specific price points (something Mr. Bill Yates pointed out at the first Symposium on Affordable Golf). But as Doug Thompson, golf professional at the Symposium's host site, Southern Pines Golf Club warns, *"Rounds don't pay the bills, its revenue."*

Barney Adams shared that the new business model for raising revenue should simply be *"about getting more people onto the golf course and getting more people to play the game faster."* With a desire from the golfer to have an enjoyable experience and the ability to move golfers around the course with relative ease, rounds (followed by revenue) will come. He also shares his opinion that *"From a business standpoint the most important thing is to make them want to come back."* Adams believes that repeat play should be the driving force in these efforts, not just the goal of an enjoyable round. Of course, the repeat play will come in an enjoyable experience.

Doug Thompson agrees. *"We're all about giving the customer a good product because it all comes down to value, or perceived value,"* said Thompson. *"Twenty guys in the parking lot is one thing, getting them all to come back, that's the goal."*

On the maintenance side, The British business model is based on the principle of keeping things simple in order to provide as little resistance to a smooth round of golf as possible. Gordon Irvine, a golf course manager in England, offered a blended playing surface of fine fescues, brown top bents, moss, yarrow, and daisy as a playing surface and quickly pointed out that combination is what will *"get people sacked"* in America (losing their job). *"Cut it with a decent mower and people can still play golf on it,"* remarked Irvine. *"It's that degree of what they'll accept, it's that degree of educating people to what they can expect nowadays"* that has worked for hundreds of years in the British Isles yet is frowned upon in America according to Irvine.

It is interesting to note that slow play is not such a problem in the British Isles as it is in the United States, yet American golfers complain first about the *"ragged"* conditions found in Scotland and elsewhere. The prevailing thought behind perfecting conditions in the United States is that the golfer will spend less time searching for golf balls and finding difficult lies which may take more time to recover, yet the pace is still considerably slower in America.

The new business model from a design standpoint is leaning more and more to the goal of getting repeat business by just providing an enjoyable experience and not getting beaten up from the residue of aesthetics and reputation (read: difficult designs). *“You want to get outside and connect with nature and have fun. We don't want to shoot ninety, get beat up, and don't want to lose a bunch of golf balls,”* remarked Ran Morrisett, founder of GolfClubAtlas.com and student of the subtleties of great golf architecture. Because the funds aren't there to design, build, and maintain difficult works of art, a shift is finally occurring. This shift will *“enable architects to build courses that appear simpler to the eye and yet are actually feature rich and play great once you are there”* expects Morrisett.

More realistic conditioning is another aspect of the new business model and Terry Laurent has experienced that first hand as owner/operator of Cross Creek Golf Club in Decatur, Indiana. Every day he must decide how to create realistic, quality conditions for the everyday golfer with limited budgets and resources. Similar to Rob Waldron's perspective, his answer is to prioritize budgets from the expense side and use all available resources. *“By prioritizing your resources and creatively using your budget, I think we can provide realistic and quality playing conditions for everyone, even on the low end.”* believes Mr. Laurent.

The new business model simply appears to be planning what your expenses are, working to cover those expenses, and then making incremental improvements along the way to provide an enjoyable experience and gain repeat play. Of course, if expenses are controlled and golf is affordable but the experience indeed is still bad, then the game will continue to stagnate no matter what sustainable practices are followed or how affordable a round of golf may be.

### **At the end of the day, if the experience is still bad...**

Attendees of both Symposiums on Affordable Golf were quite vocal as to their perception of the many 'grow the game' of golf initiatives that have popped up over the past half-decade without really addressing the reasons why the number of golfers is contracting. Barney Adams believes it really isn't just cost. He likens it to getting people to drive to a bad movie. *“If you tell me that golf's too expensive, just that approach, and then you take me to a bad movie (so to speak), you can't make it cheap enough. All the initiatives to get people to go see a movie are worthless if the movie is just bad. “Let's concentrate on fixing the movie. The other things will happen. If we have to have initiatives to get people playing golf and we get six more [golfers], that's like getting three cars to drive to the bad movie. At the end of the day it still doesn't work.”* Adams said.

So where does the bad experience start? Many may assume the bad experience starts on the first tee, but the bad experience started when decisions were made to spend money, often with little choice in the matter for many golfers, long before opening day. In reality, the bad experience started in the early stages of development, based upon someone's perception of golfing abilities and desires. The rub is that for so long, golfers accepted those more expensive options presented to them based upon those perceived abilities and desires.

One point that was repeatedly made at the 2010 Symposium was that golfers tend to think they are better than they actually are. Watching the best golfers in the world on television soon created unrealistic demands at the golf course. Operators responded to those demands and made them standard practice, whether in design, maintenance, or operations. Those standard practices drove up the cost of golf.

Because of the overwhelming trend to build golf courses just to sell real estate, many courses were destined to be failures right from the start. Since the land for the golf course was always a secondary choice (either from a whole site perspective or once the site was chosen) and the golf holes were laid out) the subsequent choices that best suited the game of golf were secondary to selling real estate. The result was golf holes with excessive carries as well as excessive maintenance challenges; the biggest being in drainage as the golf course was put in the role of catch-all for the residential drainage at the lowest points of the site. Coupled with the need to create visually stimulating landscapes full of water and sand, the movie progressively got worse.

*“The one item that precludes so many of the things discussed today is getting the site right to begin with. Site selection and working with your client developer to make sure you get the right piece of ground is the beginning”* said Drew Rogers. Rogers is a golf course architect who spent over a decade designing residential golf course developments as an associate for Arthur Hills for clients who were not golfers first. The sites were chosen and land was divvied up for the wrong reasons.

Rogers points to the conflicts between affordable, enjoyable golf and real estate sales. *“There are two or three items that you have to design into a residential golf course development that adversely affect the playability of the golf course: One is the space, the corridor widths.”* Usually the result is a golf course that is too narrow for the average golfers. That doesn't even take into account the location of those golf holes. *“They're going to be laid out for the best possible real estate values.”* Rogers stressed. The final item Rogers brings out is the maintenance factor, *“We're pushed to make everything green, wall to wall.”*

*“Why do a majority of amateurs play from tees that are effectively longer than the best players in the world and is that a primary reason why the game is losing players?”* Adams asked attendees. The obsession with length is Adams' primary concern that the game has gotten too difficult for the majority of players. Most players play the golf course from too far back because their collective ego does not let them play from a more reasonable length. For instance, most touring pros average an eight-iron approach into greens and the amateurs are playing much more. In reality, if compared to the professional's length, the average golfer is playing a golf course that is much too long for their abilities.

The issue with this aspect of the bad movie is that the perception of value is based upon length way too often and that value should be measured in fun and enjoyment, regardless of the length of the golf course one may be playing. Adams urges that we focus on perceived value but the question remains how do we define that perceived value?

### **Re-Educate the Current Golfer or Educate the Potential Golfer?**

Perceived value is a tricky concept to define as there are so many perspectives to consider in the golf industry. Too often, though, the perception of what the golfer wants is formed by the industry itself. As a result, the perception of the golfer's value then becomes a part of the golfer's thinking as well. In return, the non-golfer's perception of a game that is high-priced and high-cost becomes a barrier to the growth of the game. Maybe many 'growth of the game' initiatives are failing because the perception of the game to outsiders has not changed.

*“If you can bring the public in and it looks more like parkland or something that they can identify with [it would help], not this rarefied elite, behind the fences. The more we do that, then the public becomes more understanding that*

*these people are human beings that care about the environment. Then it becomes more acceptable and cool,”* said Tom Mead. *“Then it’s, hey they are progressive and doing some interesting stuff.” The more that golf can mimic things that go on in a natural restrained way as far as how its run, I think that only helps the game, the community, the environment.”*

Changing the perception of the game to outsiders, though, will require golf insiders to change their perceptions as well. Unfortunately, the re-education of the golfer will be more of a challenge than the initial education of the golfer new to the game. Of course, that is partially accomplished through efforts such as the Symposium on Affordable Golf.

*“I had a high school golf coach come up to me who had played there with his team. He wouldn’t come back to our course because he said we didn’t have enough bunkers.”* That experience was shared by Terry Laurent at Cross Creek Golf Course. Granted, a golf coach may need to provide as much challenge to his golfers as possible and therefore the need for more sand may be justified, but Laurent instead points to the perception of what a golf course should be based on pictures in magazines and the tournaments we witness on television.

*“Everyone thinks we have to have lots of bunkers and the USGA used to talk about inconsistent bunkers. I don’t know what that is”* shared Laurent. *“It troubles me a bit... a hazard is a hazard. Bunkers shouldn’t be pristine and perfect. There should be some consistency yes, but perfect conditions aren’t warranted. Those pristine conditions, you can’t always do that. We can’t hand rake. We only have seven bunkers on our golf course.”* The point he makes and he also proves through his success at Cross Creek is again that it is the experience that counts and not the conditioning and difficulty. If golfer’s perceptions can move toward the Cross Creek experience of an enjoyable day with reasonable challenges, then maybe that perceived value Barney Adams refers to can alter the cost associated with the game as well. These reasonable challenges can come in the form of grass hollows or other undulation instead of the more common sand bunker. In addition to a more playable hazard, they require less intensive maintenance as well.

## **Overcoming Resistance to Elements of Affordability**

How do we combat the resistance to all the ideas that can make golf more affordable and enjoyable? First of all, the economy has forced the issue for many. Barney Adams put it best when he said, *“If you only have five bucks in your pocket but it costs ten, too bad. You’re not getting it.”* That is certainly the case in many circles now, but that does not have to be a bad thing in the least. That is the whole point of the Symposium on Affordable Golf effort: That golf can be a better game, a better experience, a 'better movie', so to speak, than it was before the economy faltered.

The primary perceptions about golf that most affect the affordability of the game are length of the golf course, extreme maintenance, and the definition of good design. Through Barney Adams’ research, it is clear that the average golfer is playing a golf course that is proportionately longer than what the professionals play.

By just sheer attrition, golf facilities are forced to reduce maintenance efforts and golfers will be forced to re-acclimate themselves to more of a sustainable golf course with a focus on providing acceptable playing surfaces rather than perfect conditions.

The biggest challenge to overcome of these three concerns is design. But if we look to the origins of the game and the industry opens up to accepting strategy and fun over aesthetics, then that perception can be changed as well. All of these elements of affordability must be accepted in order for the business to improve.

The fact is that the game of golf deteriorated as more money was put toward the efforts. My personal focus always goes back to good design. With almost any comparison between what I may think is good design versus poor design, some kind of savings can be realized. That leads straight to affordability. Even if cost is not a factor, there are always better design solutions for the game that can also be less costly, whether you are at a low-end golf course or a place such as Pasatiempo. Good design will always outlast aesthetics and perfect conditioning.

Many ideas brought up at both Symposiums still come down to the golfer accepting lesser conditions. Until the golfer and the industry see that perfect conditions are not what the game of golf is about, there will always be resistance to affordability within some elements of the business.

Just as looking back to the origins of the game can help to change perceptions of design, the same is true of maintenance as well. To this day, maintenance practices in the British Isles are nothing like they are in the United States. In fact, the key difference is that the Scots and Brits don't even call their effort maintenance. Over there, it is called 'golf course management'. In other words, they do not maintain a certain level of conditioning. Instead, they manage the ground upon which the game of golf is played. *"What worries me more is this feeling of completely bypassing nature as if you don't have to worry about nature, you can just be above nature, and that's a really difficult gamble"* said Scottish Consultant Gordon Irvine.

Overcoming the resistance to elements of affordability is similar to the attitudes of the newest buzzword in the golf industry the past few years: Sustainability. But the fact is, just like the elements of affordability discussed at this past year's Symposium as well as the first symposium, sustainability has been around a very long time at golf courses in the form of Best Management Practices. In fact, these BMPs have been in place at the peak of overindulgence within the golf industry at all types of facilities.

Unfortunately, people are associating sustainability with ways to save money instead of just good practice, particularly in these times of financial difficulty. It seems as if a "sustainability by force" attitude is prevalent, therefore a resistance that should not be there settles in and keeps many clubs from going full bore into more and more sustainability initiatives that are downright necessary for the bottom line anyway.

Again, many sustainability practices have always been in place within the business of golf maintenance. But for the longest time, the golfer's demands for perfection were driving the bus and keeping a sustainable plan subdued. Now, the superintendent can play a key role in ratcheting back expectations from the golfers by using cost as a motivator when the golfer would not listen to science or agronomics previously. The result will be good for the environment as well as the bottom line of many golf courses, whether it is 'by force' or not.

When high-profile clubs such as Pasatiempo display a penchant for sustainable practices by cutting back on maintained turf areas or replacing fuel-dependent vehicles with goats, for example, hopefully other clubs will follow suit, whether they are above or below Pasatiempo on the food chain or, more importantly, whether they need to cut costs or not. It is just good practice. As Tom Mead continually pointed out in his presentation, clubs in this economy will absolutely be forced to transition from a fossil fuel-based business model to a model that allows clubs to be as sustainable as possible, whether it is using animals for labor or collecting rainwater from rooftops in bathtubs.

### **How Cost and Time are Related**

The Symposium on Affordable Golf clearly focuses on cost more than any other issues with the golf industry. An argument that shouldn't be is which is the bigger problem, cost of the game or the time to play the game. Instead of choosing sides we should work to show the connection between the two and share ways to overcome both challenges. I mentioned earlier that I could very well have called our efforts the Symposium on the Excesses in Golf and that is where the cost of the game and the time to play the game intersect.

Although this white paper and past Symposiums focus on golf, many of the ideas shared can easily relate to the time it takes to play a round of golf. Just as over-maintenance in the form of tight, unplayable lies for golfers who demand pristine conditions and lush rough requires much effort (and cost), these playing conditions also contribute to the time commitment as well. Eliminating excess and speeding up play together will make the game either more affordable to play or more affordable to operate. So we must all think of affordability as how to improve the business to increase participation in the game, not just saving a buck.

Barney Adams goes back to the reasons why people leave the game, *"No fun, too slow, too expensive. I believe in two out of three. I don't believe in too expensive* (he points to perceived value as a more relevant problem). *I think that going on the golf course and hitting fairway woods into par fours that are not designed to receive fairway woods unless you can hit them straight up [slows play and eliminates fun]"* he says. *"Having to hit the ball as hard as I can to get home in regulation is not a lot of fun, and I believe that's one of the reasons why people get discouraged with the game."* The result is slow play and less rounds as people walk away from golf. In turn, operators lose revenue and are forced to raise prices or cut expenses as a result. That is an example of how cost and time are intertwined and must be addressed together. Both problems limit fun.

When people ask me what do I gain out of my efforts with the Symposium on Affordable Golf I immediately posit that it always allows me to return the discussion to good golf course design, which I believe is the crux for the bulk of the industry's challenges. As evidenced above, the fun

factor will increase with good design and as a result, golfers may find some more time to dedicate to the game. At the very least, when design focuses on strategy and enjoyment over aesthetics and penalty, the need for excessive hazards and heavy rough is reduced, thereby speeding up a round of golf.

### **Returning the Game to its Origins**

It all goes back to the origins of the game, which was another theme of this year's Symposium. The game of golf was originally a commoner's game played on the ground that nature provided. Man's hand wasn't in it but once it showed up, the game changed forever. This applies to designers, equipment manufacturers, and maintenance crews. Good design (a focus on the lay of the land to create strategy) should trump the extraneous elements of "the golf experience" and if we look at the links courses of the past and those elements that came from links golf we can affect change, reduce cost and time, and increase fun.

Our two case studies this year were golf courses whose design focuses on strategy, the lay of the land, and enjoyment. They were also designed in 1901 and 1928. Huntercombe Golf Club and Pasatiempo were built by a Scot and a Brit (Willie Park, Jr. and Alister MacKenzie, respectively) who discovered the game in a links environment and made links golf a cornerstone of their design philosophies.

Mr. Adams puts things on the right course when he says, *"So if we really want to get more people playing, I say we have to look at the game itself, we have to look at the product that we call the game."* The game starts with design and the simpler that design is, usually the more effective, fun, and inexpensive. In addition, by using the ground to determine design, one develops a layout that is more sustainable and memorable as well. Both our case studies are textbook examples of the above.

Ran Morrisett's discussion about the unique ground features at Huntercombe point directly toward what using the lay of the land can mean for the golf experience. In detailing one particular shot, he describes the action the ball takes on the ground as much more interesting to experience than the aerial game that is played more often, *"They [golf balls] would take the slope and feed down to the hole and it's a shot that is a very rewarding shot. Part of its reward is because it takes a very long time for it to play out. You see the ball slowly roll and you see the drama unfolding. It's fun. It's not this immediate return that you have with aerial golf"* said Morrisett.

Leaving the site more intact to take advantage of the unpredictability of the ground game goes hand in hand with a reduction in maintenance. Introducing some inconsistency in conditions like those that were prevalent in the early origins of golf can also bring fun back into the game. As a group, the American attitude toward maintenance comes in the need to make everyone comfortable with conditions and eliminate 'surprises'. The irony is that Americans constantly boast about the enjoyment they derive from trip to the British Isles, yet we cannot seem to embrace those management practices in the United States. Accepting those management practices, not 'maintenance' practices is three-fold as described above: More fun, more interest, and less cost.

That was a primary goal for Pasatiempo as they worked to get the MacKenzie layout back to how it looked in the 1930s. *"The goal was to restore the rugged appearance of the 1930s and get that contrast out on the golf course"* said golf course superintendent Paul Chojnacky. The previous irrigation system (installed

in the 1960s) was wall to wall for all one-hundred acres. In addition, full-circle heads were installed along the canyon edges, throwing water into the canyons, creating a green mono-culture.

In the club's effort to return to a previous time period (1930's) the intended goals were to reduce costs, speed up play, and become more sustainable. The result was less irrigation, less manicured turf, and to create a less dense but playable course. *"Some areas aren't so playable but at least they can get out there and find their ball."* shared Chojnacky.

What is amazing is how the goals of cutting maintenance and restoring architectural merit to a golf course continues to point to less expense, more fun, and sustainability. That is why Tom Mead's presentation on the topic of a sustainable golf model crosses so many different agendas. Knowing the above benefits are obtainable at almost every level, his warnings can be looked at in a refreshing light. *"While the [past] boom has generated increased golfing interests and expanded the industry, our current standards and practices are not justifiable if we are interested in preserving or improving our environment."* Mead said. He clearly sees that a return to the origins and spirit of the game is a solution for many concerns within the golf business.

### **What Can Golfers Do Without?**

When we only have five dollars and it costs ten dollars, Barney Adams bluntly tells us *"too bad, you're not getting it"*. We can yearn for all the bells and whistles but if the money isn't there, then we are forced to do without. Golf course operators and superintendents have been dealing with that new reality for the past half-decade and now it is time for the golfer to accept less. Hopefully they will gain by having to pay less too. So what can golfers do without at the golf course? Throughout the Symposium, various considerations were brought out that golfers could, and would, do without.

Recently, spending on sand bunker maintenance has overtaken putting greens maintenance. Sand bunkers as penalty hazards have slowed play and increased costs to the golfers. Typically in modern times, certainly in the last fifteen years, one of the key defining features of golf courses has been its bunkers. They were there for aesthetics and specifically how they photograph in order to help sell real estate.

*"When Huntercombe opened it had twenty-two bunkers yet everybody raved about the golf course. Today it has thirteen bunkers, three of which are on the 275 - yard seventeenth hole, a very short par four. And it still plays fantastic."* said Morrissett. He repeatedly made the point that a wonderful example of fun and challenge found at Huntercombe comes with a minimum of sand bunkers. The course has stood the test of time. Think of how many sand bunkers elsewhere can be removed to cut down on expense yet increase enjoyment and speed up play? Tillinghast and MacKenzie spent years after the depression advising clubs on how to eliminate sand bunkers for the PGA of America. I'm sure there are others in this day and age that can do the same. Golfers may actually enjoy the experience more as a result.

Another aspect of aesthetics was done away with by Terry Laurent and his members never blinked. *"What I found was at Cross Creek, I tried to stripe my fairways for two years when gas was still low priced. After the prices went up so high, we changed our patterns. We now mow from the tee to green [direction only]. It's not perfect,"* said Laurent. *"We tried to do two directions, but we lost depth perception. It changed our budget*

*considerably. It took us two days to mow the fairway with a criss-cross, now I can do them in eight hours. Just by changing patterns, you can save money, especially with today's gas prices"* he said.

Here is an irony to consider: Augusta National, one of the most highly aesthetic golf courses that prides itself on perfection, does not stripe its fairways. They mow those features just like Cross Creek does today. If Augusta does it, then I think many others can as well. This gem of possible cost savings comes from a place where there are more on the maintenance staff during Masters Week than there are competitors playing on the weekend. *"Only ninety-nine competitors compared to 156 [at a regular tour stop] competitors play at Augusta, out of those ninety-nine that start only forty-four to fifty-five make the cut. But everyday there's more than sixty people actually maintaining Augusta"*, claimed Laurent. By the way, there are forty-three sand bunkers at Augusta National as well.

Continuing the pattern of mowing expenses, many speakers pointed out that not only the variety of grass types contributes to cost, lower mowing heights contribute as well. The simple rule of thumb is: Higher cut equals lower budget. *"When they [superintendents] come in and they're young, they want to come in and cut everything so low, there's hardly any leaf tissue alive. That leads to affordability issues because now you have to spray with fungicides to combat the various diseases you get. Speed has a lot to do with cost, as well."* Bob Ehrler said as part of the Resolving the Conflicts of the Typical Business Model Roundtable at the Symposium.

Ehrler is President and Founder of Organic Golf Maintenance & Design, Inc. He is a Certified Golf Course Superintendent and Master Greenskeeper and teaches at Rutgers University.

My immediate related rule of thumb takes it a step further: *Higher cut equals easier for the golfer.* Remember that we regular golfers cannot handle the playing conditions of the professionals (those very conditions the regular golfer seems to always want). The idea of golfers doing without low mowing heights can not only cut outputs regarding maintenance, it can make the game more playable and speed up play as well. What many operators don't realize is that the speed of the playing surfaces directly relates to the speed of play, whether that is on the greens or in the fairways dealing with tight lies.

For Terry Laurent at a facility like Cross Creek, his budget is based on mowing. *"Our priorities at the low end are to have the best equipment I can possibly have and mow whenever I can,"* he said. *"With triplex mowers, I can't mow twice a day, but my members are happy [they're] even mowed (tees and fairways)."* One place he does not cut corners is on the putting surfaces where he is sure to mow every day.

A higher height of cut on those greens allows for a more manageable budget. *"The need for speed is the need for a bigger budget."* said Laurent. Each club's height of cut should dictate the budget and vice-versa. Again, the simple take-home maxim for all: ***Higher cut, lower budget.***

Barney Adams' Tour Neighborhood concept effectively suggests to the golfer he/she could do without excessive length as well, particularly when compared to how long a golf course the tour professional plays. He wondered aloud if the fact that the majority of players play from tees that are effectively longer than what the best players in the world play from, could that be a primary reason why the game is losing players?

His target length for the majority of male golfers is 6,200 yards long. Many golfers might consider 6,500 yards as an appropriate length for the majority of relatively decent male golfers. Of course,

many of us play from much farther back in many cases. Adams is frustrated by the dismissal of his idea by the very players who should be asking for this type of adjustment. After ego, the resistance comes in the conclusion that the tee boxes for every hole must be re-designed to accommodate the Tour Neighborhood concept.

*"This is not about going to the front tees, this is about playing the correct tees" warned Adams. "I can take you to any golf course in the country and pick a couple holes from the far back tees that are perfectly applicable. Running people up to the front tees is lazy and won't work. And then they'll get insulted. You've got to convince them that they're picking eighteen applicable tees."*

## **PART II**

### **You Can Learn From The Most Unlikely Of Sources**

#### **Pasatiempo Golf Club in Santa Cruz, California**

In these times, so many golf courses (private or public, high-end or inexpensive) have had to face the same budget cuts across the board. So when a club like Pasatiempo Golf Club makes significant changes it should be an eye-opener to the many clubs that need change for survival. Even the higher end facilities can contribute to the educational process. It certainly makes sense when you peel back the image and realize that at the end of the day it is all sand, grass, and labor.

It may seem odd to cue in on Pasatiempo but the fact is that in 2008, the board finance committee and general manager challenged Superintendent Paul Chojnacky to cut his operating budget by \$300,000. That is a significant amount of money considering Pasatiempo finished a major restoration of the golf course in which the club regained almost an acre of putting green area and added an additional 120 bunkers. These bunkers aren't just simply shaped, sand-pro maintained bunkers, either. They are intricate Alister MacKenzie designs that have to be 100% maintained by hand.

So how do they come up with cutting the budget by \$300,000? Besides labor (they cut staffing from twenty-three down to sixteen after the 2008 season), their second biggest focus was water. In 2007 the local water authorities raised water prices by 30%, meaning the water cost for the year was about \$375,000. Factoring in drought years of 2008 and 2009, things weren't getting easier. In 2008, the club spent \$480,000 for a six to seven month timeframe.

*"A portion of what we did was simply start to take out areas of irrigation. That's the only way to stop the bleeding. We sat down with the head pro and went through the golf course," reflected Chojnacky. "The easy solution was to start moving sprinklers to the edges of fairways and edges of cart paths. From an architectural standpoint, this is less than ideal [because] nobody wants to see a hard-line effect. It's much more natural to have a scalloped effect," he concluded. The big reduction came in the removal of heads that threw water into the canyons of the property. Those were full circle heads installed as part of a wall to wall system from the 1960's.*

After the club identified areas on the golf course where it could remove irrigation, the staff went hole by hole and sprinkler by sprinkler changing out nozzles, making sure they could improve the overall efficiency of the irrigation system as best they could. *"But the big one was completely removing areas out of irrigation" said the superintendent. "At this point heading into the 2009 season we ended up with about*

*twenty-five acres that had previously been irrigated we knew we were not going to [irrigate] this year, which is a huge change to this golf property," he said.*

Then the club went a step further by showing the members a plan which required irrigation of a mere seventy acres. Restoring the greens and bunkers only partially returned the course to MacKenzie's original vision. The next step was to return the places in between the holes to how it was in the 1930s when the scalloped rough and native grasses dominated the landscape. Ironically, that's essentially what MacKenzie fell in love with when he first walked the property. For many years it was lost to over-irrigation.

*"Surprisingly our members overwhelmingly decided to go with that seventy acre plan," Chojnacky said. "At this point Pasatiempo really made a statement to the golfing world. We're bucking that Augusta trend. We are not going to go green and we want that contrast," Chojnacky said. The first part of the equation was to commit to limiting the amount of manicured turf at Pasatiempo (the easy part). But to take the sustainability issue further, Chojnacky decided to introduce turfgrasses in these out of play areas that would thrive without regular attention.*

He decided on a variety of grass types which he was most familiar with from his home state of Wyoming, which included fescues also akin to the British Isles. The grass mix he chose included Rocky Mountain fescue, sheep's fescue, and Idaho fescue as well as three different types of prairie grasses: Western wheatgrass, Prairie June grass, and a pine bluegrass. *"I knew that those grasses would be able to stand not being irrigated the entire season. They were clump style grasses. They would grow slowly over time. They would not achieve much more than eighteen to twenty-four inch heights," he said.*

Clump style grasses of modest heights were a major selling point to the membership because they did not want heavy grass. *"A group of our members went to Crystal Downs. They came back and said if you make native grass areas like that we'll shoot you. They did the same thing with Shinnecock. They did not want those heavy native areas," Chojnacky semi-joked. "So we did a lot of research on grasses and came up with this specific blend that really compliments the course and gives us that look that was originally out there."*

The final prong of this four-pronged approach to restoration (restoring features, removing irrigation, removing manicured turfgrass) was the most sustainable concept of them all. *"What we decided to do was bring in 150 brush goats [to remove the overgrowth in the canyons]" Chojnacky said. For ten weeks, at an average of one acre per week, the goats were going to eat themselves to a bare canyon. The alternative previously was men with machetes and weed-eaters but once the rainy season started, the vegetation grew right back. The herd of goats is now a regular part of the maintenance regimen at Pasatiempo.*

The removal of growth within the canyon margins benefitted the club in a few ways. One of Mackenzie's architectural points was that he wanted you to anticipate from hole to hole, which means unobstructed viewsheds. One can now see from one hole to the next and it allows for that anticipation. From an agronomic standpoint, there is a lot more air movement and a lot more sunlight for the remaining turfgrasses to thrive.

One final benefit that was unexpected was that some of the fescues at Pasatiempo were semi-resistant to low rates of Roundup. *"It's been very cost effective to go out there with a quarter of an ounce of roundup per thousand square feet. It dings the fescues and prairie grasses a little bit, but it completely knocks out the*

*poa, the rye grass, and any of the weeds out there"* said Chojnacky, who recently won the **2012 Herb Graffis Business Person of the Year award** for his efforts at Pasatiempo.

### **Huntercombe Golf Club in Oxfordshire, England**

Most people in the industry would dismiss a golf course built in 1901 with only thirteen sand bunkers as an influence on their business. Huntercombe Golf Club, though, shows the world that great architecture should be the focus of the business of golf. This is a course that was widely heralded as one of the best in the world at the turn of the last century and it plays fantastic to this day. It is not expensive to maintain. It holds people's interest from the first shot to the last shot. The funny thing is that there are probably hundreds more just like it tucked away in all corners of the world. Unfortunately they hardly exist here in the United States.

Why is that? The high school golf coach who commented on the lack of sand at Cross Creek and everyone who ever fancies themselves "golf course raters" probably have similar reasons formed around a low number of hazards. Whether mis-interpreted as lack of challenge or lack of visual interest, most who honestly feel that a club like Huntercombe can't possibly compete with their facilities may want to re-examine their thought process in this day and age. *"I only wish there were more courses that were built with these designed features that we can find in this country"* lamented Ran Morrisett.

Huntercombe Golf Club is the ideal case study for the Symposium on Affordable Golf because of its simplicity of design. That simplicity is based on the concept of 'less is more', one of my favorite challenges to the expert who raves about the next great golf course with over one-hundred bunkers, deep rough, and more than 7,300 yards of "muscle".

Architectural genius comes not in complexity of design or the most expensive construction bill. Nor does it really come from the full-time efforts of golf course architects who worked the site from sun up to sunset for six months straight developing "something from nothing". Odds are, there was probably something there already and the architect and his/her merry band of shapers set about "replicating nature" on top of it.

No, the true genius in golf architecture comes in leaving well enough alone and allowing for nature (and commonsense) to stand. I believe that this can apply to operations and maintenance also. Maybe we should stop focusing on food & beverage, number of rounds played, and banquet opportunities on a golf course. Instead, let's first make the golf fun and then let the other elements fall where they may. By the way, I never go to a restaurant or a wedding looking to play a few holes of golf.

### **Thinking Outside The Box May Just Be Common Sense**

One thing that led me to the idea of the Symposium on Affordable Golf is the notion that so many ideas, solutions, and concepts in the golf industry just didn't make sense to me in the least. I was sure that I was smarter than what my mind was telling me and was also sure that others had the same inkling. It was so refreshing to meet others in the industry that shared some common sensibilities. We all seem to have that common sense gene, yet the end product of so many efforts throughout golf seems out of touch.

Since the 2008 recession, common sense has made a huge comeback, followed closely by the idea of simplicity. Here are some great common sense thought, ideas, and suggestions revealed at the 2011 Symposium on Affordable Golf:

- *“It’s the input that affects all the other inputs. The more you water, the more you fertilize and the more you mow, and typically the more disease problems you have (as far as fungicide applications). All of which resolve in increased maintenance budgets.” - Tom Mead*
- *“The ethos of our greenkeeping and golf course maintenance is all based on the fact that nature gives us the game of golf because nature created [our playing] surfaces two or three-hundred years before there were any greenkeepers. The ethos and principles of what we do today haven’t changed in over one-hundred years. Traditional Scottish greenkeeping is the same today as it probably was when Donald Ross left Scotland. Yes, we’ve refined it. We’ve changed some of the detail, but the actual principles haven’t changed.” – Gordon Irvine*
- *“If the grasses can't tolerate it, Charles Darwin made it quite clear that you have got the wrong plan in the wrong place. Start looking for the right plans for the right places.” - Gordon Irvine*
- *“In the United Kingdom, one of the biggest challenges we've got is that the pro golfer hits the ball a mile with the new equipment. Every golf course on the planet is suddenly being lengthened because these guys can hit the ball so far. My suggestion is when you turn professional take the tee peg away. It was an implement that was added to the game. If you take the tee away from the pros, you don't have to shorten another golf course because they will not hit their big drivers, and all of the little short courses remain in play. You don't have to irrigate so far, you don't have to fertilize so far, you don't have to clear as much space. It's as simple as removing the tee peg. The tee boxes are manicured surfaces, let them stand between the markers and drop the ball and play golf.” - Gordon Irvine*
- In response to the above statement from Gordon Irvine: *“Or we could just ignore the professionals.” – Richard Mandell*
- *“Golf's not meant to be uniformly fair. You stay on the short grass and you can pretty much know what to expect. But as you get off [the grass], there ought to be some mix and match of punishment and he captured that here.” – Ran Morrissett (referring to Willie Park Jr.'s work at Huntercombe Golf Club*
- *“However, if you're going to get me going [with interest in the game of golf], teach me to play, and then take me out to a 460-yard par four, you're giving me a wrong message. I say take them to golf holes where they can have a chance of success.” - Barney Adams*
- *“6,200 yards provides a tour equivalent experience for a round of golf and that gives a positive message. This is not about going to the front tees, this is about playing the correct tees. I can take you to any golf course in*

*the country and pick a couple holes from the far back tees that are perfectly applicable. Running people up to the front tees is lazy and won't work and then they'll get insulted. Everything goes downhill and so on."* - Barney Adams

- *"Why don't the golf pros say 'okay on Tuesdays and Thursday mornings from eight o'clock to 10 o'clock I'm going to have [golf] school.'" - Barney Adams*
- *"A less is more approach will once again rule and you will see a true return to a new golden age this time around. Not the golden age of the past twenty years of "minimalism" as a design fad. It will now be more of minimalism for function and the result will truly be sustainable golf courses."* – Richard Mandell
- *"At my home club, the forward tees at one course are six-hundred yards shorter than on the other course. The women at my club consistently select the longer course, and the reason is that the short course is inundated with obstacles. It's not about length, it's about carry. Golf course design in the last thirty years is all about landing areas and not about playing the golf ball on the ground. So I don't think the issue has anything to do with yards. Golf courses were very long in 1950 and women played them happily. The problem is that they (golf courses today) are too slow, because they're green as green can be, too wet, and full of little white holes that are usually not in play. It is design, not yardage that is causing the (slow play) problem."* - Betsy Mitchell
- *"Buddy Loving said: 'Never compromise the golf course. Always send the land planner back to the drawing board.'" That's what I did there (at Waters Edge Country Club in Smith Mountain Lake, Virginia) and I was really happy. If I were starting tomorrow, the first person I'd want making decisions is the golf course architect, and then I'd lay out what the real estate model would be. Then I'd have the land planner come the day after the architect."* - Ron Willard, Sr.
- *"Smooth greens and good customer service were numbers one and two from a survey we (Billy Casper Golf) did with 5,000 of our golfers."* - Rob Waldron

## **Conclusion:**

***"When the spirit of the game, the financial aspects of the golf business and the environmental aspects of the business are all compatible, the game will thrive."***

**- Tom Mead**

Tom Mead's quote sums up not just this past year's Symposium but also why we started the Symposium on Affordable Golf. It seems simple enough, but as long as we don't compromise the spirit of the game first and then never put financial aspects ahead of everything else (spirit of the game, environmental aspects, playability, fun) then the business of golf can be one with the game of golf.

One characteristic of the Symposium is that it is non-discriminatory. In other words, we have put together a group of people from a variety of locales, backgrounds, and roles in the golf industry with

a variety of ideas that can hopefully lead to a better golf experience, business environment, or way to make progress, all in the name of improving the golf industry for all.

The most important way we can make the Symposium on Affordable Golf relevant to the golf industry is to share some take home ideas for those in attendance. The Symposium is not an effort that will lead the charge to wholesale changes or improvement for the golf industry. It is just a step in the right direction where hopefully each attendee and participant can take something from the experience and apply it to their corner of the golf world.

This second white paper provides some perspective on what we accomplished this past November and provides some of those take - home ideas. But this information is not as valuable as attending the Symposium in person. Many attendees will say that the value isn't just in the information shared within these pages, it is the experience of being there among others. That is what makes the Symposium so successful.

The 2012 Symposium on Affordable Golf will be expanded to one and one - half days on Monday October 29 and Tuesday morning, October 30th. Following Tuesday's session we will all play golf at Southern Pines Golf Club once again. Next year, though, our goal for attendance is two -hundred people. We need everyone to spread the word about making plans now. Please forward this information to any and all who you may think can benefit from this information and visit [www.symposiumonaffordablegolf.com](http://www.symposiumonaffordablegolf.com). When you visit the website, please take the time to participate in our **Golf - Your Way survey**. The link is above our mission statement and we will discuss the results at the next Symposium. More than four-hundred and forty have participated. Our goal is in the thousands by October 29th.

Thank you,

Richard Mandell (4-30-12)