

GOLF 2% GREEN

by: Richard A. Baril ASGCA, RLA

“Sustainability” was a major theme at the recent World Forum of Golf Course Architects (WFGCA) in St. Andrews, Scotland. After the WFGCA, working my way through Europe, I continued to seek a compelling strategy to promote a “brown is the new green” initiative. One idea finally materialized in Madrid – GOLF IS 2% GREEN!



During the two day WFGCA, a theme emerged; the need to change golfer's expectations from picture perfect golf courses (the “Augusta syndrome”), to a more ecologically responsible standard. I remember feeling overwhelmed midway into the second day, contemplating the task of convincing millions of golfers, regardless of what you've been told or what you think; “brown is beautiful”.

In fact, in the American Society of Golf Course Architects panel session, I posed (essentially) this question: “How do we (the +/- 150 people sitting in the room), propose to convince millions of golfers that the message the golf industry has so successfully crafted and delivered the past few decades, was the wrong message?” This is a question with no easy answer.

Intuitively, it seems peculiar for the golf industry to promote a “brown” initiative, while the rest of the world seems focused on “going green”.

Clearly, golfers will not enthusiastically embrace “brown and scruffy” golf courses. Why should they? Every weekend on television, and in glossy monthly golf magazines, golfers see green! Indeed, lush and perfectly coifed courses are relentlessly flaunted as “the best” golf courses.

This is how the golf industry has programmed golfers and marketed golf. We shouldn't be surprised golfers expect the same perfect conditions on every golf course. One small problem; we forgot to inform the golfing public these lavishly built and



extravagantly maintained golf courses are unsustainable – financially or environmentally.

Visiting clients and projects throughout Europe after the WFGCA, I continued to wonder and question people about how we could bring more awareness to this issue. I found;

- 1) Significant “sustainability” awareness already exists. But, I also perceived a hesitancy to assume a leadership role.
- 2) I was surprised by a common expectation: Golf Architects, by virtue of our prominence in the golf industry, should assume a leading role advancing sustainability.

My travels finally put me in Madrid, where we are constructing a 36 hole project in Alcala de Henares. While in Madrid, I also had a meeting scheduled with Royal Spanish Golf Federation President Sr. Gonzaga Escauriaza Barreiro. I had a chance to meet with President Escauriaza during the WFGCA and we agreed to another meeting during my visit to Madrid.

During the meeting at the Centro Nacional in Madrid, discussions soon focused on sustainable golf. President Escauriaza expressed appreciation for the WFGCA's concern about sustainability, an issue so important to future golf development.



Pictured at the *Campo de Golf Centro Nacional* (The Royal Spanish Golf Federation's golf course and headquarters in Madrid) from left to right – RFEG Director of Infrastructure- Julian Zulueta, RFEG President - Gonzaga Escauriaza Barreiro, Rick Baril ASGCA and RFEG Director of Agronomy - Davide Gomez

I remember the odd feeling, sitting in Madrid seamlessly engaged in this discussion concerning salient golf development issues. Golf is truly a small world. These exchanges quickly reveal we all share a love of golf and we share the same concerns about golf's future.

It's good to see these industry leaders clearly grounded and able to articulate issues quickly and with focus. It wasn't long before it was suggested; "the architect's" have the ability, a platform and play in vital role in this initiative. This is the second time, in as many weeks I heard comment about the role we must play in this initiative. And, again, it caused me to pause and wonder; do we (architects) truly have this power, or significantly more influence than our industry partners?

(It also left me to linger on a concern; as leaders in the golf industry, when has the ASGCA taken a firm position, made an absolute proclamation, on an important issue, affecting golf development? Perhaps this is the time.)

Our conversation continued, wandering through issues and events. I was happy to learn and wanted to gain understanding from the perspective of a National Golf Federation.

Sr. Julian Zulueta - made a point, which I particularly appreciate. *He said professionals could and should play the same golf courses we play, instead of the perfectly groomed (and unsustainable) courses, set up specifically for golf tournaments. He made a very valid point that golf courses as well as tournament sponsors have the ability to dictate that tournament venues are not altered, but presented in a conventional fashion. And, golf course owners and sponsors can help this initiative by demanding tour events are played under normal golf course conditions.*

I couldn't agree more with these comments. Professional golf consistently presents golf courses in the wrong manner in my opinion. Examples of this are obvious and too numerous to mention. Nearly every venue conforms to the Tour's pre-tournament preparation. The result is uniform, ideal conditions every week. You'll find very little variety and very few unique venues on the professional tour. Whose fault is this? How does this change?

Sr. Davide Gomez - the Federations Agronomist, made the point: *Instead of focusing on equipment advances (clubs and balls), presenting more sustainable golf course conditions, will bring challenge and unpredictability back into the game. A sustainable golf course presents unpredictable conditions which are much more challenging. How often do we see players whining, when they face a less-than-perfect lie?*

If you want to see the magic unpredictable golf course conditions can produce, find a video of Tom Watson's chip in on the 17 hole at Pebble Beach in the final round of the 1982 US Open.

President Gonzaga Escauriaza - *made a precise and compelling point; golfers obsess about the condition of the greens. And, the remaining golf course area could be less groomed.*

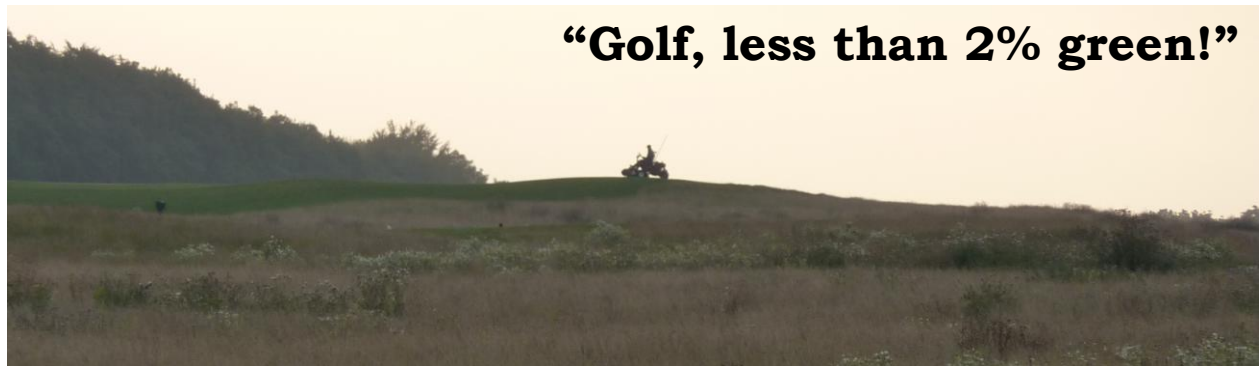
For some reason this final point found particularly fertile ground with me. A light went on! It's true. Golfers fixate on putting greens. How often have we heard golfers brag or complain about "the greens"? I can't remember how many times I've asked an



June 2009 President Gonzaga Escauriaza Barreiro and members of the Royal Spanish Golf Federation visit Alcala de Henares to discuss construction progress.

opinion about a golf course, only to get a report on putting green conditions. So, why not use this knowledge to our advantage?

Golfers obsess about putting greens, putting surfaces. Conveniently and notably, putting greens occupy **less than 2% of the surface area** on a typical golf course. That's the message!



It's catchy. It's memorable. It's truthful. It provokes further inquiry. It's timely. It speaks of the "green" initiative. It focuses on what's important to golfers – "green". Most importantly, it doesn't say, "No more green golf courses for you Mr. and Mrs. Golfer." It calls attention to the negligible land area (less than 2% of the area of a typical golf course) that receives intense management on golf courses.

This seems like a better platform to discuss sustainability, focusing on what is important to the golfer; the greens. This engages golfers in a cooperative manner, concentrating on their priority, the greens. It provides a basis for golfers to be engaged in the sustainability dialogue: If the priority is good putting greens, what are we willing to compromise to maintain good green conditions?

GOLF=2% GREEN also suggests a way forward; golf courses can reduce their carbon footprint and environmental impact; by focusing resources on putting greens and allowing the remaining golf course area (98%) to be more natural.

Now, this is a message which holds promise....