

GCSAA's President David Downing Leads Members Through A Year of Change

Since his election as the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America's 72nd president in February, David S. Downing II, GCSAA certified golf course superintendent, has already had to face a monumental task – seeing the association lose its 14-year chief executive officer, finding the right person to replace him and keeping the association on firm footing during the interim.

Downing, vice president of operations & construction, Signature Golf Group in Surfside, S.C., and his fellow GCSAA board members have been up to the challenge. Mark Woodward, CGCS, was to take his place as CEO at the association's headquarters in Lawrence, Kan., July 1.

In a recent Q and A with BoardRoom, it is easy to see how Downing will lead GCSAA through the tough economy the industry faces in 2009 with that same determination.

BOARDROOM MAGAZINE: What is your view of the state of the industry and are there any specific goals or priorities you have as president this year?

DAVID DOWNING: The economy, gas prices and flat growth in the game will continue to challenge the business of golf. Having said that, I am excited about the prospects, as I believe we are on the cusp of moving forward in a successful manner.

As for GCSAA, we have made our selection of Mark Woodward, CGCS, as our CEO. Our goal as a board is to have him operating at a high level in the first 100 days after completing his duties in hosting the U.S. Open at Torrey Pines (which was played in mid-June).

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This will be a challenge, but we feel Mark is capable and we will provide the support he needs to get there. We are continuing our focus on serving members, their facilities and their customers. Our mantra is for our members to focus on the “Success of the Facility” – where our members are a key part of an integrated team that is managing the facility to help it succeed. This is moving beyond just the individual facility.

The allied associations coming together at the Golf Industry Show and other venues have created a new movement in golf. We are reaching out to each other in ways we have never done before. The best example is this year’s first ever National Golf Day. All of golf came together in Washington, D.C., to demonstrate the positive impact of the golf industry on our communities - environmentally, economic and recreation/social. We need to continue to build these relationships so that “golf” can speak with a more powerful voice.

BR: Golf course superintendents, many will say, are the stewards of a valuable asset...the land, the course etc. What are the many factors golf course superintendents must consider when maintaining a balance with the land, the investment and the future direction of the golf course?

DD: Superintendents have long been recognized as efficient managers, maximizing the available resources to provide an enjoyable product while minimizing expense.

Water restrictions and the escalating cost of fertilizers and other inputs will continue to be a challenge. This is why it is more important than ever that superintendents pursue continuing education about every aspect of our business. We must also continue to communicate effectively about what we do and what we need to be effective, not with just our members but with our local, regional, state and national elected officials.

BR: Water scarcity is a reality in almost all parts of the country. Water issues (lack of water, having “good quality” water) might be the number one concern of golf course managers today. What do you see on the horizon for superintendents and how they can help advance the ‘intelligent and reasonable’ use of water on golf courses?

DD: We use less than one half of one percent of the water used in this country on a daily basis and from that small percentage we generate \$76 billion as an industry. I could debate that we are not big users of water, but we know technology and education will make us even more efficient.

We have to be better about communicating how effective we are at managing water and the economic value golf brings to the table. More access to gray or effluent water would be a win for everyone. We have had the ability to use computers to control our sprinklers for more than 20 years and the software is getting better and better.

Facilities need to upgrade to these systems to maximize their efficiency and effectiveness in applying water. We also need to make sure when our facilities are investing in this new technology we maximize the design and installation to take advantage of the control systems we have. Lastly we must continue to educate golfers that playability is more important than aesthetics.

Wall to wall green should not be the goal.

BR: What do you see with emerging technologies that can help manage the many challenges (i.e. irrigation, water, pest control and that labor sponge – mowing crews) facing golf course superintendents?

DD: We have created terrific playing surfaces at every level of golf facilities across this country during the 30 years I have been in the business. We have mowers that can cut lower, irrigation systems with great technology, and new grasses that are more adapted to our regions. But we have lost some turf care products to assist us and labor is becoming tougher and tougher to find.

With all of the technology offered to us, we are still a pretty labor-intensive business, and we need people to get all the tasks done on daily basis to provide the conditions golfers are demanding. The alternative is to develop new technologies that will allow us to get the majority of the work done either faster or with fewer people. Robotics will likely play a part in helping us in the future with labor issues.

BR: How can a superintendent foster a positive and productive relationship with green chairs/committees?

DD: I think the quality of the interaction of owners, managers, builders, architects and superintendents has increased dramatically. Communication has been enhanced through technology and events such as the Golf Industry Show. But communication and education will always be important. Both parties need to become familiar with the perspectives of each other.

From the superintendents’ perspective, we need to continue to speak the same language of green committees and chairman – and usually that’s the language of business. We need to be clear in explaining the return on investment when we submit our operating and capital

budgets. We also need to always be looking for more effective and efficient ways to achieve our goals and allow our facilities to maximize the revenue opportunities. We need to have a facility focus and explain the “why.”

BR: How important is continuing education to the golf course superintendent?

DD: It is not an option it is a necessity! When we lose our desire to learn and improve we will fall behind. GCSAA is great at providing these opportunities to stay current with the issues facing us each and every day. Technology and science never stand still.

BR: Tell us about the Golf Industry Show and the focus on the team environment?

DD: This is a great opportunity to stay current, and communicate with employers. I see this as an opportunity as the catalyst to build a great team at a facility. We can learn about every facet of each other’s operations. Once we learn how each of us is involved in our overall success, then we gain a greater respect for each other.

BR: What would you tell a non-GCSAA member golf course superintendent and his green chairman about the value of GCSAA membership?

DD: GCSAA is like the good housekeeping seal of approval. It’s like the Verizon commercial with a legion of support behind each superintendent and facility. GCSAA is the network of members to share solutions, it is the database of research, it is the source of best management practices, it is the marketplace for the latest products and services, it is the leading technical journal, it is 55,000-plus web pages. These are the tangible benefits.

But what GCSAA truly is about is advocacy, environmental stewardship, professional development, education and community.

BR: What can you tell us about GCSAA’s new CEO Mark Woodward?

DD: Mark has been and will continue to be an asset to GCSAA. His tenure as a volunteer, board member and president, along with his professional career prepared him well. The energy and passion he has for our profession and our industry is tremendous. His experiences, education, relationship are all what we were looking for as we went through an extensive search process. We are excited about getting Mark on board to begin a new phase in GCSAA history. **BR**

MARK WOODWARD ASSUMES GCSAA CEO’S POSITION

Mark Woodward, CGCS, in assuming his duties as GCSAA CEO, brings with him a unique perspective to the position as the first golf course superintendent to serve as the association chief executive on a permanent basis.

Before starting work at GCSAA, Woodard had to finish his duties as golf operations manager for the city of San Diego, which included hosting the 2008 U.S. Open at Torrey Pines in June.

Woodward, a 30-year GCSAA member, is no stranger to the inner workings of GCSAA, as he served as the association’s president in 2004. Before moving to San Diego, Woodward served for 31 years in various capacities with the Phoenix suburb of Mesa, Ariz. His last position there was parks and recreation administrator.

We’ll feature a more in-depth look at Woodward and his plans for GCSAA’s future in the next issue of The Boardroom.

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