

The Business of Golf

By: Nathan Crace Date: September 20, 2007

Golf is big business, no doubt about it. Not only is it a recreational activity you can learn when you're young and play until you slip free from your mortal coil (and there may be golf in Heaven too), but it's also a game that undergoes a continual evolutionary transformation seemingly daily. From the courses we play to the technology we buy to play the game, change is a constant in the golf industry. And as with any big business industry, there will be entrepreneurs who move in to fill a demand and thrive in the great miracle of human ingenuity we call capitalism. That's where the PGA of America's Professional Golf Management (PGM) program comes into this equation. I strive to be fair and balanced in addressing issues in my column and paint pictures with a broader brush stroke for the benefit of you the reader, but this is my bully pulpit and I have total editorial control for this one page. That being said, I am going to laud the praises of my alma mater, Mississippi State University (MSU), and its PGM program because it is relatively unknown outside the "inner sanctum" of the business side of our industry.

If someone had told me when I was growing up in a small Indiana town that I would move to Starkville, Mississippi to attend MSU and end up staying in Mississippi after graduation and living here for the rest of my life, I would have thought that person was crazy. Looking back, it was the best experience of my life and prepared me in ways I had not yet realized for not only what I do today, but also life in general—not to mention that's where I met my better half. When I entered my freshman year at MSU, it was one of only three programs nationwide along with Ferris State in northern Michigan (too cold for me) and New Mexico State (too far away for my folks). As an added bonus, graduates of the PGM program at MSU also earn a concurrent BBA in Marketing. I couldn't begin to tell you how many graduates MSU has turned out since the program began in 1985, but there must have been more demand than we could supply because now there are schools across the country with PGM programs.

The reason for this column, however, is not merely to toot the proverbial horn of my alma mater, but rather to demonstrate the wide range of success of my fellow graduates and toot our collective horn. As far as I know, I am the only golf course designer and/or member of the Golf Writers' Association of America who has graduated from the PGM program at Mississippi State (which in a roundabout way was the reason I enrolled). However, two of my fellow graduates from that year also chose to get away from the club professional route for which we were trained and instead took teaching the game of golf to a higher level. Joe Assell and Mike Clinton moved to Colorado and began teaching golf using high-tech computer software and their knowledge of the golf swing to eventually found GolfTEC—if you haven't heard of it, you probably don't play golf. Soon after, they had teaching centers in Atlanta and Chicago and now they blanket the country and are wildly successful as the company continues to grow. To their credit, they have also hired many fellow PGM graduates throughout their company and employ more than 150 PGA professionals.

Others making strides in the golf industry include 1999 graduate Jeff Akerson, who was recently named the new Director of the PGM program at Mississippi State; Doug Wert, Director of the PGM program at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs; Mark Tschetschot, Director of PGA of America member tournaments; Ray Roessel, VP of Golf-North Asia for World Sport Group; Derek Jennings, Director of Marketing for KZG Golf; Josh Trivett, Director of TOUR Operations for Nickent Golf; Chris Larizza, Account Executive with *Golf Digest*; Mike Cutler, VP of Business Development for Billy Casper Golf Management; Blane Merritt, General Manager for the TOUR at TPC Southwind; Brooks West, Ahead Golf; Scott Railing, Nike Golf; and many more too numerous to mention here. Additionally, four MSU PGM graduates are also adjunct faculty members for the PGA of America's education program. Beyond the world of golf, MSU PGM graduates have made an impact in the business world, including Chris Day, Financial Analyst for Corporex; Sam Lines, VP of Mortgage Services at Legacy Bank in Kansas; Don Fones, Regional Manager for Arthrex; and many others.

More than twenty years ago in 1985, Mississippi State saw the potential to help meet the demand of a multi-billion dollar industry and I for one am proud to be a part of it. Those who made the decision to begin the program should be commended and the opportunities that the program's mandatory cooperative internships provide students are far and above anything one could ever learn in a classroom—no offense to the world-class faculty members who teach. After all, they are kind enough to let me back on campus to guest lecture the "Design of the Golf Environment" classes. Yet even now, some 13 years later, I still get the occasional "You can major in that?" when people I meet ask me why I left Indiana at 18 years of age to go to Starkville to further my education. So now instead of answering "To get a degree in Professional Golf Management" when quizzed about why I went to school at Mississippi State, I simply reply "Because they let me in." The resulting looks of puzzlement are almost as entertaining as those arising from the aforementioned answer.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Assoc. of America whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from his archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2007.