



BY SETH JONES AND GRANT B. GANNON

This is the year, it seems. The year the economy starts to really bounce back, the year golf's grow-the-game programs start taking hold.

But it's probably not the year you find the assistant superintendent of your dreams.

In late December and early January we surveyed our readers, asking 16 multiple-choice questions and two open-ended questions. We learned a lot about the industry from the 591 responses we received. Here are the results of those questions, with a few stashed away for future use.

We learned that readers are confident that the national economy will grow in 2015 (see page 21),

that they don't believe oversized golf cups will help the game (see page 23) and that the ability to retire is their biggest concern (29 percent), trumping stress (18 percent) and job security (15 percent).

We were also excited to see another uptick in our own numbers: 54 percent of respondents said *Golfdom* was their favorite turf magazine. That's up from 45 percent two years ago, and 51 percent last year. Sure, it was our own survey, but we like the direction that number is going.

Read on to see how the most valued readership in golf sees 2015, from the economy to their most important tools.

2015: LET'S DO THIS

Confidence in the economy jumps, remains steady in the facility

Jeff Leuzinger, sales manager for Illinois-based Healthy Grow, travels the country to visit with superintendents. A former superintendent himself, he might call Illinois home, but his office is the road.



Jeff Leuzinger

And he likes what he's seeing out there. "I'm very optimistic for 2015. I see more activity and more rounds played and I see clubs more willing to spend money," Leuzinger says. "Not new courses, but the courses that are operating are looking to invest in their courses."

One key indicator he sees is in fairways hit. No, not a driving statistic, but as an application area. The fairways are back in play, he says. The survey seems to echo that sentiment, with 29 percent of respondents saying their maintenance budget has increased for 2015.

"I see more superintendents interested in using our products on fairways," he says. "That hasn't been the case in the last couple years."

It seemed that everyone we talked to — and 50 percent of our readers — are optimistic that the national economy will

improve in 2015. That's up from only 31 percent last year.

Tim Kreger, executive director of the Carolinas GCSA, was enjoying a five-course meal when we contacted him to ask the question.

"Five-course" as in five golf course maintenance crews celebrating the holidays together with a barbecue. Clearly, his mood was jovial, perhaps a combination of the biggest Carolinas Conference and Show ever, along with the fun atmosphere of getting so many maintenance workers together.

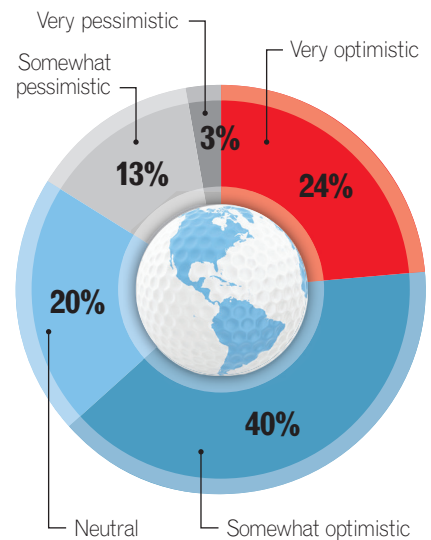


Tim Kreger

"Things are looking pretty positive — I feel like all the Tier 4 decisions have been made and are done with, I think rounds are headed upwards and there's some reconstruction and a couple new course constructions in our area," Kreger says. "And mostly I'm looking forward to a good spring in 2015."

Incoming GCSAA president John J. O'Keefe, CGCS, director of golf course management, Preakness Hills CC, Wayne, N.J., says he's also optimistic, sensing more money available at clubs for more

OVERALL, HOW OPTIMISTIC ARE YOU ABOUT THE ECONOMIC HEALTH OF YOUR FACILITY?



capital improvements.

"There are a lot of initiatives that the allied (golf) groups are working on, a lot of programs dedicated to the growth of golf that are gaining traction," O'Keefe says. "As far as GCSAA, I don't see an increase in membership, maybe a slight decline, but we're almost flat. The important thing is we've leveled out."



John J. O'Keefe

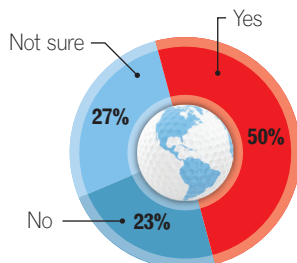
At GCSAA headquarters in Lawrence, Kan., GCSAA CEO Rhett Evans says he'd check the "somewhat optimistic" box in our survey.

"I do look at things glass-half-full," Evans says, "but I think there are going to be some opportunities out there in 2015."

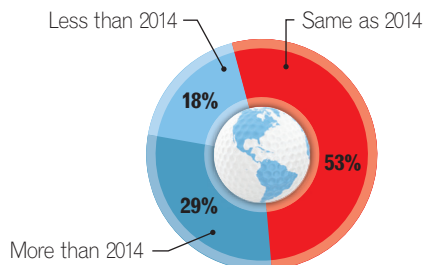
One of those early opportunities for

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DO YOU THINK THE NATIONAL ECONOMY WILL IMPROVE IN 2015?



WHAT DOES YOUR MAINTENANCE BUDGET LOOK LIKE FOR 2015?



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Evans and the GCSAA will be the 2015 Golf Industry Show, which hits San Antonio for the first time since 1978. (For more on his expectations on the 2015 GIS, see sidebar.)



Rhett Evans

"We certainly are going to be met with our fair share of challenges... I don't see the amount of rounds and traditional golf picking up, but I do think golf pros are having some clubs adopt the initiatives that are under way — whether that be changing the way their business model looks, junior golf leagues, catering to families, etc.," he says.

David Withers, president of Jacobsen, was on his way to the Sports Turf Managers show in Denver when we reached him. He counts himself as "slightly optimistic."

"If the U.S. economy continues on its path of recovery and we can get a nice early spring as we did in 2013, we could see more money being allocated for maintenance equipment," he says. "The possibility of a resurgent Tiger Woods could also have a positive impact on the industry, with his success typically bringing more people into the game."

Steve Mona, CEO of the World Golf Foundation, says he's optimistic. In typical Steve Mona form, he gives three reasons why: a better spring, a better economy and a nicer news media.

"The chances are pretty much in our favor that we'll have a better spring (golf weather) than we did in 2014," Mona says.



Steve Mona

"In 2014 much of the country had a terrible spring, which really set us back from a participation standpoint.

"Another reason is we had a really tough media cycle in 2014, in the way the media portrayed the health of golf. That may not have any direct influence on the success of a facility, but I do believe perception influences behavior," he says. "A negative media cycle didn't do anyone any good, trust me on that.

"The third one — and this is hard to judge, I'll admit... but we've been on a good run, from an overall economy standpoint. Look at the stock market. Look at the price of gas," Mona says. "Generally speaking, the economy will be favorable toward golf. A lot of golf participation gets fueled by how people feel about their general economic condition."

Healthy Grow's Leuzinger, who recently attended the 2014 *Golfdom* Summit, says he feels strongly that 2015 will be a good year based on what his clients are telling him.

"I ask (superintendents) the same question you're asking me: how does your 2015 look?" he says. "They say the same thing I'm saying... they think 2015 is going to be a good year."



David Withers

BIG EXPECTATIONS FOR SAN ANTONIO GIS

Is everything bigger in Texas?

The GCSAA has something special, it hopes, with the Golf Industry Show returning to San Antonio. It'll be the first time since 1978 that the show has been there, bringing an element of freshness. And the association is excited that the hotels are within walking distance of the convention center, which will make it easier for networking, GCSAA CEO Rhett Evans says.

"Our biggest indicator of how the year is going to be is the Golf Industry Show, it sets the stage for 2015," Evans says. "Right now in December (2014) I already have an indicator of what 2015 will look like."

Everything in Texas is bigger, and Evans is hoping that will include the GIS... but it will be close. That indicator shows currently a GIS that will rival the size of the 2014 show in Orlando.

Still, the fact that the 2015 GIS is nearing the size of the 2014 Orlando show is a good sign.

"Orlando is always our high-water mark, and San Antonio is rivaling that," Evans says. "We recently increased our square footage goal from where we started. We're currently only slightly below Orlando. We're extremely excited about that."

Incoming GCSAA President John J. O'Keefe, CGCS, says he believes there's a positive buzz about this show.

"Our numbers are tracking great. People are going to love this show," he says. "Everything is centrally located, so no bus service will be needed... everyone will be together."

Evans says that hotel bookings are ahead of where they have been in recent years. But the key indicator, of course, will be how many people actually make the trek to San Antonio.

"We're close to having 12,000 people, like we've had in the past," Evans says. "We've got a lot of good feedback that San Antonio is a city people want to be in — it's easy to do business there, it's easy to network and it's fairly inexpensive."



ANY LUCK WITH BIG CUPS?

Readers remain skeptical about alternative-size cups

In the November 2014 issue of *Golfdom* we took a close look at how superintendents were handling oversized golf cups, from 6-inch to 15-inch holes, on their courses. When the question was posed to our readers, a whopping 70 percent said the larger cups would not help grow the game.

Jay Neunsinger, superintendent at Tilden Park Golf Course in Berkley, Calif., is a rare breed. He's one of the 11 percent of our respondents who have used oversized cups on his course and has seen success with them.



Jay Neunsinger

"I do think there have been some positive results with cups that have helped grow the game of golf," says Neunsinger.

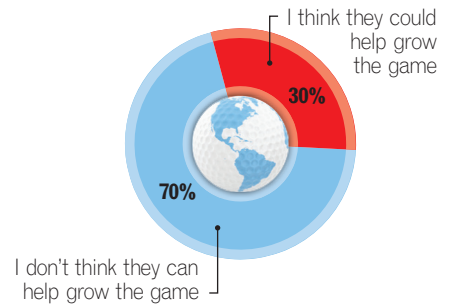
"Some of the demographics that are a little bit younger and have higher handicaps enjoy using them because it's more enjoyable for them."

Neunsinger's success has not come without its drawbacks. The majority of monthly pass holders are not using the oversized cups at all, and an unexpected challenge for golfers has arisen when greens have both sized holes open.

"The only problem I see with the big cups is (if) we put them in the back of the greens, (for) the people who are not playing those cups, if the big cup is in their putting line, they wonder what the rule is and if they can move their ball," Neunsinger says.

Pete Tescher, superintendent at Golf Granby Ranch in Granby, Colo., agrees with the majority of readers that golf will not be grown through oversized cups but says they can serve a purpose.

OVERSIZE GOLF CUPS... GENERALLY SPEAKING, WHAT'S YOUR OPINION?



"I think they're fine for fun novelty occasions," Tescher says. "People like the one (oversized cup), but not nine of them."



Pete Tescher

Tescher cites the amount of labor it takes to cut and maintain two sets of cups as the reason why he, like 81 percent of readers, has never used the larger holes before.

Tom Kaplun, superintendent at North Hempstead CC in Port Washington, N.Y., says the larger cups are not feasible because the tradition of the game is too strong. He has his own solution to grow the game. With his plan, changes happen off the course and not on the greens.



Tom Kaplun

"Courses really need to look at ways to maximize their facilities. For example, looking to add practice facilities," Kaplun says.

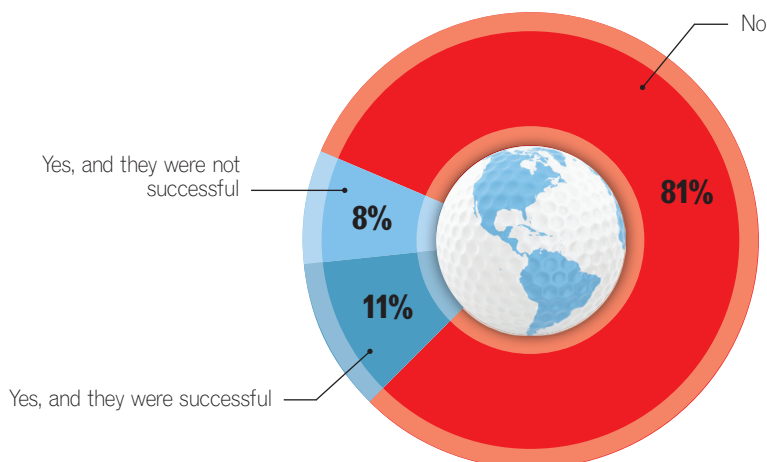
Kaplun thinks improved practice facilities will attract business to golf courses and more people to the sport because it allows beginners to build up their confidence. When people spend time at a course's practice facility their comfort level grows, and they play more rounds.

Tescher shares a much simpler way for the sport to increase in popularity again: "Golf needs a new Tiger Woods," he says.

Some things are easier said than done.

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HAVE YOU TRIED OVERSIZED CUPS AT YOUR COURSE?



HELP WANTED

Survey shows an interesting trend: good help is getting harder to come by

Tom Bolon, superintendent at Lake Forest CC in Hudson, Ohio, is in need of a new assistant superintendent and looks over the résumés he has received. Bolon advertised the position nationally and locally but only had a total of 25 applicants. He was not optimistic about the talent pool.

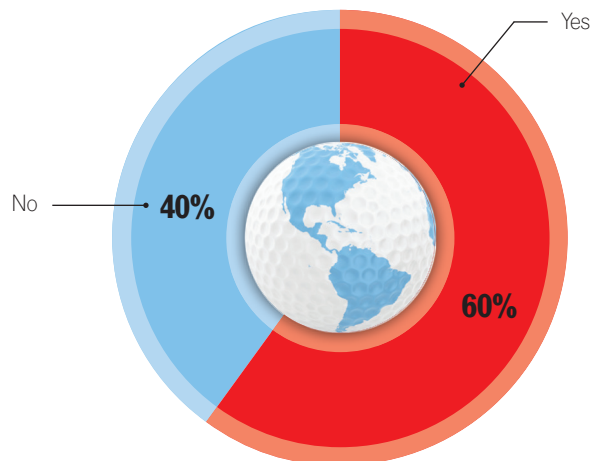
“It is hard to find someone really ready and willing to put in the time and effort,” Bolon says. “When I was an assistant superintendent my job was to take as much as possible off the superintendents’ plate, and people are not willing to do that.”

Sixty percent of readers agreed with Bolon that it has become harder in recent years to find and keep good assistant superintendents. The amount of applications being received and work ethic are not the only problem seen by readers.

David Groelle, GCCS, has not encountered any issue retaining assistants, calling himself “blessed” that he has only had to hire two in his 14 years at Royal Melbourne CC in Long Grove, Ill. Still, Groelle noticed a difference in the candidates’ education the last time he hired a new assistant.

“Those (assistants) who hang in there and get promoted, they love it,” O’Keefe says. “You only get into this industry if you love it.”

DO YOU BELIEVE IT’S BECOME HARDER IN RECENT YEARS TO FIND AND KEEP GOOD ASSISTANTS?



“There aren’t as many applicants with full 4-year bachelor degrees. It seems to be becoming more of a trade, so to speak — where guys are learning on the job and getting experience in the field and maybe taking some classes on the side or going through programs online and getting an education that way,” Groelle says.

GCSAA’s O’Keefe usually retains three assistants at one time and he tries to provide a fair wage as they work their way through the ranks. But the current vice president of the GCSAA believes the cost of living is the reason it has been more difficult to find assistants in recent years.

O’Keefe, who will take over as president of the GCSAA at the 2015 GIS in San Antonio, says it takes the average assistant superintendent seven to eight years to attain

their first superintendent job. In those years, it can be difficult for assistants to work a lot of hours and make a living on \$50,000 a year while getting married and starting families.

“What I’ve found is that these guys are having to find a higher salary immediately, and they just can’t afford to work those eight years before getting that higher salary,” says O’Keefe. “And keep in mind, the eight years as an assistant is if you’re lucky.”

Those who make it through the years as an assistant are there because of the passion for the job, he says.

“Those who hang in there and get promoted, they love it,” says O’Keefe. “You only get into this industry if you love it.”

FROM THE SURVEY

GOLFDOM ASKS: WHAT'S YOUR BIGGEST CONCERN GOING INTO 2015?

"FEDERAL OVERREACH INTO OUR INDUSTRY. ONE EXECUTIVE ORDER AND OUR INDUSTRY COULD CHANGE INSTANTLY."

"Trying to change the perception that golf is too expensive and takes too long to play."

"BUDGET CUTS, ROUNDS UP, BUT COSTS ARE UP MORE. AT THE CURRENT PROJECTIONS, BY THE TIME I AM READY TO RETIRE I SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO ANYTHING WITH ALMOST NOTHING AND STAY UNDER BUDGET AND HAVE THE COURSE LOOKING THE BEST IN THE LAST 50 YEARS, BUT OF COURSE I JEST! ...OR DO I?"

"Staying alive until March 10th so I can retire."

"MOSTLY MOSS ON GREENS. WORST I'VE SEEN IN MY 25-YEAR CAREER IN LONG ISLAND."

"Labor. Cannot find good assistants and the pay we offer just does not entice good candidates."

"NOT HAVING A JOB, HEALTH INSURANCE, LIFE INSURANCE. HOW'S THAT FOR CONCERNS? I'M THINKING MY GLASS IS HALF EMPTY..."

"Getting younger folks interested and playing golf."

"Obama and the left."

"How facilities will address the price erosion created by GolfNow."

A SUPERINTENDENT'S BEST FRIEND?

Sorry, course dogs. When it comes to getting the job done, you're in the doghouse.

Superintendents utilize numerous resources every day to make their jobs run smooth and courses looking great. These implements vary from employees, technology, vendors and pets. Each has a function throughout the day, but we asked our readers to pick just one that is the most vital to completing the job.

When it came to their most important resource, 56 percent of readers stood up for a superintendent's best friend: their assistants.

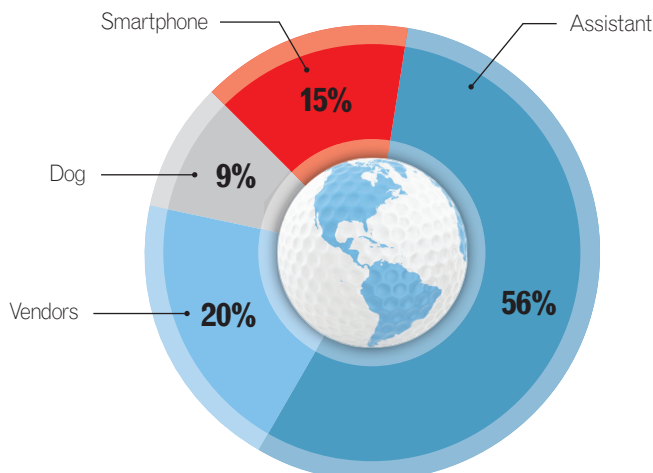
Vendors and their knowledge and help with products came in second place as the best resource, with 20 percent of the vote.

Smartphones allow superintendents to control their irrigation systems and track the path of the sun all from the palm of their hand. But it still came up in third place.



Border Collies like Tori, the course dog at Victoria National in Newburgh, Ind., are known as workaholics... but even they can't outwork assistant superintendents.

FINISH THIS SENTENCE: I COULDN'T DO MY JOB WITHOUT MY...



Andy Engelbrecht, superintendent at Rotonda G&CC in Rotonda West, Fla., was among the 15 percent of readers who said his smartphone is the most important tool he has.

"I do so much on my smartphone, I almost don't need an assistant," Engelbrecht says (but don't tell his assistant).

The companionship from a course dog, obviously a sentimental choice, only garnered 8 percent of the vote.

And what did we hear from our 3,000 followers on Twitter? That we left out the most important choice of all: the course mechanic. 

THE BEST OF THE REST

From future story ideas to social media advice, our readers know best

We hope our subscribers enjoy reading the *Golfdom* Report as much as we enjoy compiling it... because every year, our readers come through with some insightful feedback.

For example, we learned that some of you would like to read more stories on sustainability. And at least one of you wants us to write a story declaring the death of the term; that in no way could golf ever truly be “sustainable.”

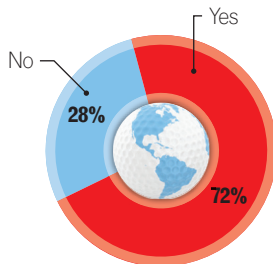
And we tip our cap to the reader who begs us to give up on the fad that is Social Media. After all, he writes — who the

heck has time to write and read all that stuff? (We often find ourselves asking the same thing.)

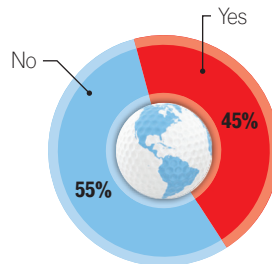
To close out this installment of the *Golfdom* Report, we share a few more results from our survey. Half of you still don't use Social Media for work. The GCSAA again gets an overwhelming thumb's up. And happily, most of you, if given a choice, would do it all over again.

We'll also do it all over again — in 2016. With your participation, it'll be another fun, and insightful, project.

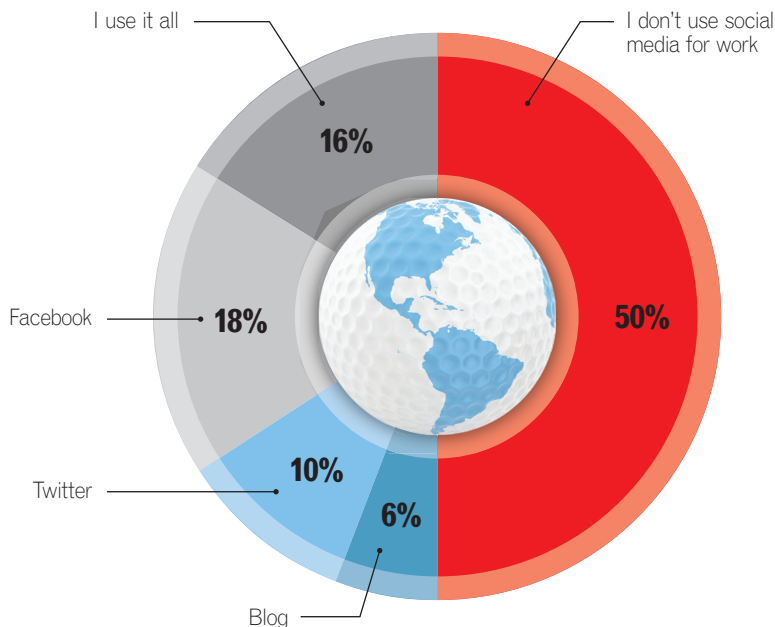
IF YOU HAD IT TO DO ALL OVER AGAIN, WOULD YOU STILL CHOOSE A CAREER IN THE GOLF INDUSTRY?



DO YOU THINK THE PGA OF AMERICA MADE THE RIGHT DECISION FOR OUSTING FORMER PRESIDENT TED BISHOP FOR HIS QUESTIONABLE TWEETS?



WHAT FORMS OF SOCIAL MEDIA DO YOU USE FOR WORK?



OVERALL, HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH THE PERFORMANCE OF THE GCSAA?

