

When the flag is down

BY JEFF BALL

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The storms of life will bring out the best and the worst in a club.

The Panama Country Club is a 67-year-old Donald Ross course on St. Andrew Bay. The American flag flies daily, and when there is a death in the club, the flag flies at half staff in memory of the fallen member. When the chips are down, the members flock to each other's aid with Southern style hospitality that warms your heart. On the days following the passing of Hurricane Opal, the flag was down for our course. This is a story of member stewardship in the face of great adversity.

October 3, 1995 — Tuesday afternoon: We have watched Hurricane Opal float around in the gulf and churn itself up to a Class 3 storm. This is the third storm of the season and my maintenance staff had already cleaned up damage from two previous hurricanes. The look in their eyes was that of a fat Thanksgiving turkey. You know the look. You're going to

get it, and bad. We are spreading out maintenance equipment in various buildings on the course, along with enough fuel in cans to get us through the first week after the storm.

My wife packs our Jeep Cherokee and I finish tying down the last few things that all coastal superintendents know to do — pull all the flags, lower the level of our lakes, and move everything that we can under roof. Having lived in the aftermath of Hurricane Camille in Biloxi, Mississippi, the damage that storms of this magnitude can do is always in the back of my mind.

We are packed and ready to go north to high ground Tuesday night. I watch where the storm will make landfall. We went to bed and tried to sleep. It would not come, so I turned the Weather Channel on. The storm was a category 4/5 and the pressure was dropping. I grabbed the family and jumped in the Jeep. As I closed the garage door to our home, I wondered



Hurricane Opal topples an ancient oak across the 8th tee at the Panama City CC.

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what we would have to come home to.

On the way out of town, I stopped by the club to make one final check. The crew was sent home with my prayers for their safety and with instructions to come back when the storm was over and their families were secure.

The storm made landfall about 6:00 p.m., and the old course took it right on the chin. The club is 67 years old and is filled with live oaks and longleaf pines. The damage to the Gulf Coast was extensive, and repair crews would be hard to

come by. The FEMA estimates were over \$1 million in damage to the course, and months later we are still finding things that do not work properly. To compound matters, my home was in a restricted area equipped with Florida National Guardsmen. We could not even go look and see the damage to our home. We were really frustrated and the work load was unbelievable.

The pump station had 3 feet of water in it, and we had several greens covered by the surge. We finally got the power on

and I was going to flush the greens with a deep well that was tied to our irrigation system. That ran for about one hour when a broken limb fell out of one of our large pine trees across the line. We only have 400 yards of power line above ground, and the limbs found it. Balls of fire raced toward the wells and destroyed any hopes of flushing our greens.

"I quit," I said to the Green Committee Chairman, Ted Buckley.

He laughed and said, "Tomorrow will be better."

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Panama City CC Superintendent, Jeff Ball (left) and member, Gary Walsingham (right) admire the work of sculptor Ken Bauldree as he turns the old oak stump into a fox squirrel.



I said, "It better be. It can't get any worse."

Just as the words came out of my mouth, Charles Commander drives up and asks, "When do you think the course will be open?"

I told him that it would take at least two weeks just for debris removal from the fairways and intermediate rough. He said that he wanted to play before he went to the Florida State University football game Saturday. (At this club they take two things very seriously—golf and football.) In the meantime, Buckley knew

that I could not go home and invited me to stay with his family. We dined that evening with candlelight and watched the Braves game on a battery-powered TV at a neighbor's house.

Mr. Commander had exercised his leadership ability by recruiting 75 members ready to work. We started the next morning at 7:00 a.m. and looked like Sherman on his march to the sea. Members arrived equipped with golf carts, rakes and sheets to haul off the limbs, pine needles and Spanish moss. We removed 200 tons of debris in a day and a

half. Our maintenance crew drove the tractors and utility vehicles while the members loaded. We cleaned the fairways and surrounds in eight hours. Ross Weaver, the General Manager, cooked up a great feast, and members insisted the crew join them at the club for barbecue.

The next morning we finished the green and tee surrounds. Then at noon we had a shotgun golf tournament. Two days after the storm, we were playing golf. We had saved ourselves from the defeat nature had handed us and decided to make lemonade with the lemons.

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Member Work Day. Some of the 75 members who helped the maintenance crew remove 200 tons of debris in a day and a half. Two days after Hurricane Opal the Panama City CC was open for play.

The story does not end at the tournament. We had a huge oak tree on the #8 tee that fell and drove the cart path 6 feet in the ground. The tree was so large that we could not even move the logs. I cut off all but 10 feet of the stump and then set the old stump back erect so we could repair the path and tee. I said in passing to

a member that I would like to have it carved into the likeness of a squirrel. The next thing I knew, a sculptor was carving the stump into a fox squirrel.

I know that this does not happen a lot in our profession, but I am very grateful to my membership for the support and help during those difficult times. Having

gone through Tropical Storm Alberto the summer before in Alabama and receiving very little support there, it means a lot. No, it means everything when the membership extends their hands. That is real stewardship at work.

By the way, wives are still looking for the missing fitted sheets.



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