

# When Mother Nature Calls

By MIKE SONNEK  
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It was Saturday evening August 8th and I was in Stillwater at the ice arena watching my daughter play hockey. That is not a typo, 12-year-old girls are playing hockey in August in Minnesota, but that's another story. Anyway, I stepped out to the lobby between periods to see Bel Jensen of KARE 11 on television pointing to a mass of colors on the radar and throwing out terms like "hook echos." As I moved in a little closer I heard Bel say that there was a tornado in the Plymouth area. She went on to say it looked like the tornado touched down in Minnetrista traveling northeast through Orono and Long Lake and on into Plymouth.

**My first thought was oh great, she basically described a tornado path going right through Spring Hill Golf Club.** Of course, Superintendent Tim Johnson who lives just a few miles from the property happened to be out of town that weekend so it was my responsibility to check out what the tornado left behind. I told the Mrs. that I was going to have to skip the 3rd period of the hockey game and make the trek across the metro to check out the golf course.

As I headed to my car the threatening skies were moving into the Stillwater area and the lightning show to the west was incredible. My journey to Long Lake included periods of zero visibility due to the deluge of rain, hail, high winds, and the most impressive display of lightning I have ever seen.

**With the meteorologists on the radio screaming of Armageddon,** I expected to find the worst. I was within two miles of the course and I was relieved to see very little damage. Leaves and some small branches were down, but nothing like I was expecting. Things looked good until I was about a /mile from the course. At that point I came upon some brake lights and a police car blocking the road, definitely a bad sign. I walked up to the officer and asked him what was up. He said "power lines are down and the road is closed." I then told him who I was and if he had heard of any damage at Spring Hill. He said "I think that is where they were saying the tornado touched down, on the golf course." Not the news I wanted to hear.

I got back in my car and proceeded to back track to see if I could get to the golf



Mike Sonnek, Assistant Superintendent at Spring Hill Golf Club, showing the "Ghost Tree" logo.

course from the west side. Now my thoughts were is the clubhouse standing? What about the shop? As I drove around Long Lake I was still surprised by how few branches were down. I have never been around tornado damage before so my expectations were to see much more damage in the area. I was able to reach the entry to Spring Hill from the west and I was relieved to see no signs of damage around the clubhouse. I then headed towards the maintenance shop which is a little less than a half of a mile from the clubhouse entry. I soon learned a lot can change in that short distance as far as tornado damage is concerned.

**I pulled up to open the gate to the maintenance shop and saw that I needed to maneuver my car around a couple of trees** that were down in the entry drive. It was very dark but I could see the maintenance facility was still standing, huge relief! I could make out a bunch of objects scattered around the yard in front of the shop. A closer look revealed that it was our trailers we use to carry our walk mowers around the golf course. When I had left work earlier that day the trailers were all lined up in their usual spot but now they were all scattered around the yard in a circular pattern. I opened the door to the maintenance shop and the first thing I did was look up to make sure the roof was still there, more relief. Our main facilities had made it through undamaged, so I started out on the cart path to take a quick look around the course. After driving about 300 yards I came to a tree across the path and at this point I decided to head home and I could only imagine what I might find in the morning. I was surprised that I had arrived home before my wife and daughter who I left behind at the hockey game. They told me of all the excitement they had in Stillwater after I



The tornado left its mark in a few places at Spring Hill.

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## Tornado at Spring Hill -

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left. At the end of the game a tornado warning was issued in the Stillwater area so the girls and all of the parents and others in the building spent close to an hour sitting in the locker rooms of the St. Croix Rec Center. The locker rooms are the

*"The other amazing part of this picture was that a large, long dead oak on the 13th hole was still standing, right in the middle of this path of wind damage."*



The tornado had touched down in the wetland and had completely flattened the cattails in a line about 100-200 yards wide. At several spots in this area the cattails were twisted together to look like little cones or teepees. Just out of this photo, to the left, is a large, dead oak tree that defiantly stood its ground. This damage was between No. 7 and No. 13.

storm shelters for the facility during tornado warnings.

I arrived at Spring Hill early the next morning and found that we had lost about 12 trees to the storm. The bulk of the damage was confined to a narrow line across our 7th, 13th and 12th holes. As I pulled up to the tree damage I

looked over to see an amazing sight. The tornado had touched down in the wetland and had completely flattened the cattails in a line about 100-200 yards wide. At several spots in this area the cattails were twisted together to look like little cones or teepees. The other amazing part of this picture was that a large, long dead oak on the 13th hole was still standing, right in the middle of this path of wind damage. The oak looked defiant standing in the path of the storm while healthy trees on the other side of the fairway had been brought to the ground. The sight of the tree standing in the path of the storm became quite the buzz around the course. The boys of the proshop decided the dead, defiant oak was now to be known as the 'Ghost Tree.' They even went so far as to have some shirts made up embroidered with the trees image. It had reached folklore status.

**That morning we did enough cutting to open up the cart-paths and clear branches off of one of the tees on #12.** I did want to thank Jim Ostvig and his crew for coming out on a moment's notice on a Sunday morning to drop some hanging branches. Without their help we would have had quite the cart-path detour for our members. The course was closed on Monday so we had a good day to get everything cleaned up and back to normal. When the staff showed up on Monday they were quite surprised to hear about my busy weekend and see the results of the storm. Tim made it back in the afternoon from being out of town and unknowingly asked how the weekend went. Of course, being the wise a-- that I am, I told him it was a pretty quiet weekend, other than the tornado! We were extremely fortunate. The path of the tornado through the wetland was only about a 100 yards north of our maintenance shop.

Three days later the National Weather Service concluded that an F1 tornado (73-112 mph winds) had touched down at 8:30 p.m. August 8th and stayed on the ground for roughly 9.5 miles with an approximate width of 200 yards. I have the pictures to prove it!



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