

The Naturalized Golf Course



*Patrick Norton
Nettle Creek C.C.*

During the fine month of October in the year of our Lord 1994, we all came to know Leon McNair. McNair, it was said, was a man who “knew the score,” who “understood intimately” the game of public golf, who “could advise us wisely” in our quest to become an established,

profitable public golf operation. Our group, after a stormy first year of operation, decided to have McNair come in as our consultant.

Therein lies the beginning of our tale. It’s a story, you see, that many of us in this golf business, *(continued on page 20)*



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The Naturalized Golf Course

(continued from page 34)

whether we are architects, superintendents, contractors, developers, or golf professionals, could recite from memory.

Our very inexperienced golf course ownership group, you see, had purchased a potentially fine, but still very raw, public golf course the previous spring. The original developers had dreamed, conceived, planned, financed, sweated, and finally constructed this golf course/real estate development from the ground up. They built this golf course at a much lower cost than most contemporary courses.

As the story goes, it also required a huge risk by Midwest Irrigation, who installed the irrigation, finish grading, and seeding, all with the real possibility of not getting paid for their work due to another collapse of financing. There was no capital for such luxuries as USGA greens, extensive grading and earthmoving, car paths, landscaping, sodding, a well-known course architect, or the routing, grading, and grassing plans that accompany such an architect. Needless to say, the clubhouse was, and still is, a glorified office trailer. This October will see us begin the construction of our new clubhouse—nothing fancy, but it will be very tasteful and functional.

After about four years, the dream of these original developers finally died. Financial problems forced them to sell off first the golf course, then finally almost all of their financial interest in the real estate development.

The sellers then were in the unenviable, but inevitable, position of looking back on “their project” in hindsight: what could have, and should have, happened

for them on their golf development journey did not happen, for a variety of reasons.

Many of the negative circumstances were just beyond their control; and they did not have the financial resources to keep “weathering the storm,” ultimately resulting in their selling the course to us. Of course, the golf course, which my ownership group acquired, was purchased at a very favorable price by us.



In doing so, the buyers assumed the debt of the seller and thereby “got them off the financial hook.” It’s an often repeated story in American business in which entrepreneurs sometime don’t reach the pot of gold at the end of the golf rainbow.

What was designed and ultimately built was a solid, 6,300-yard very playable golf course. There are some very easy golf holes, and there are some great, challenging holes. We have very large tees, which serve us very well. We have very large, easy-to-putt greens built of native soil. We have a very good, double-row Toro system and a very good pump station.

Over the past five years, these greens, tees, and fairways, ably grown in by Doug Eggert, now superintendent at the

Sanctuary in New Lennox, have developed quite nicely with Penncross surfaces. Today, of course, I’m sure that either Doug or I would probably make some different bentgrass choices. But all of us as superintendents play the cards dealt us in the most intelligent manner possible, and almost always produce playable results that our golfers do appreciate.

The original routing of this course did not utilize all of the available land, resulting in huge, out-of-play areas spread out over our 190 acres. In one sense, it’s a shame that the routing didn’t take full advantage of the landscape. On the other hand, that mistake permitted us to establish our pheasant habitat / prairiegrass / wildflower areas on a fairly large scale.

So, among his recommendations for our ownership group, Leon highly recommended that we incorporate “the natural look” into our rather large golf course. Initially, we were all thinking of fine leaved fescues along with wildflowers. There was not much talk of the prairiegrasses being used.

After a few months, one of our owners contacted Pheasants Forever of Grundy County. It seems that almost all of our owners were longtime boosters of PF. It also became quickly known to us that PF sponsored a pheasant habitat improvement program within the county, utilizing mainly prairiegrasses.

And, best of all, they were looking hard for landowners willing to convert idle land to wildlife habitat for “a long-term, indefinite period of time” and were willing to donate all seed and use of

(continued on page 22)

The Naturalized Golf Course

(continued from page 20)

their Tye rangeland drill, tractor, and extensive manpower!

"Hey, hey," I say, "Here we are, boys!!" This was all too good to be true!

So, in May of 1995, we proceeded with the naturalizing of Nettle Creek. Thus far, we have:

- Established about 25 acres of prairiegrasses utilizing a blend of Big Bluestem, Indiangrass, Switchgrass, Canadian wild rye, and a bit of wildflowers/forbs/prairie legumes, with a total of 10 lbs. seed/acre. These areas have been overseeded three times and were initially burned in spring of 1997. Mowing has happened, but I definitely prefer spring burning. We suffered some stunting back of both prairie and wildflower areas as a result of the mowing.

- Established about four acres of wildflower areas over the same two-year time period using a commercial blend of annuals and perennials. The flower areas were rototilled following the initial Roundup application, which created a great seedbed for the introduced seed and also for all of that

"lovely inherent weed seed" that we all learned about back in Agronomy 101!

- Used the naturalized areas for interesting framing of tees, appropriate boundary separation between fairways, and for nice

(continued on page 24)



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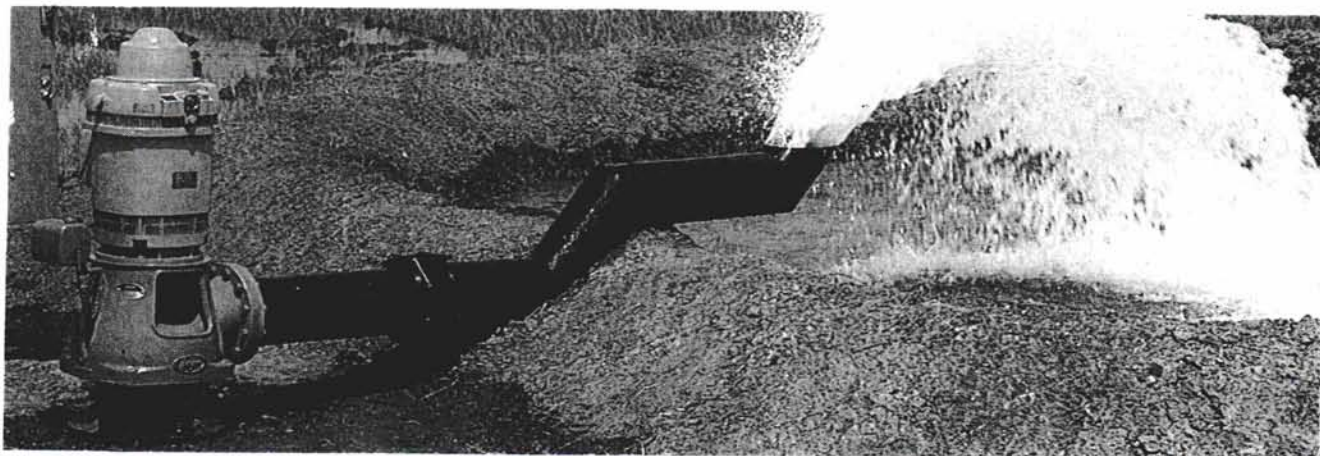
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The Naturalized Golf Course

(continued from page 22)

backdrops on greenside mounding.

- Utilized this same concept in establishing additional adjacent areas with "poor man's prairie," the simple outlining of bluegrass/ryegrass rough areas as "no-mow areas" permitting the turf-grasses to grow long, seed out, and add to the natural beauty.

- Gained a much heightened appreciation for alternative landscapes, including the presence of "weeds" such as red clover, milkweed, leafy spurge, numerous weedy grasses, and many others. About the only plants I really dislike are the lambsquarters, giant ragweeds, and other aggressive species that only serve to remind me that we never should have worked up the soil prior to seeding any of these areas.

- Realized that for our open golf course, nothing looks nicer than the contrast between the manicured and mowed golf course proper and the taller, more natural wildflower/prairiegrass areas.

In addition to the beauty, these areas all nicely fulfill our objectives of providing direction and definition for the public golfer who may otherwise be somewhat unfamiliar with the layout.

Since our program began, we have greatly changed the appearance, playability, and maintainability of our golf course. These natural areas have been instrumental in helping our golf course gain somewhat of a positive identity. Much has been accomplished in three growing seasons.

By no means, however, are these areas to be considered

"established prairie." We are totally hoping that these areas fully develop in the minimum three, but more likely five, years necessary for establishment. We have very limited labor resources for maintenance of these areas for such problems as weed infestation. Possibly, we are letting nature take its own course a bit too much!

Overall, though, we are very pleased with the progress to date. I cannot imagine this golf course without these natural areas.

They will hopefully still be here – fully developed prairies providing a home to many different species of plants and animals long after we are all dead and gone. ■



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