

Hell Hath

On May 18, a powerful storm devastated the North Shore and its golf courses. Affected superintendents shared their stories.



No Fury...

Do you remember last summer? I'm talking July 30, to be exact: Black Friday. A 120-degree heat index and way too many hot spots requiring immediate water. Despite cart restrictions, every 30-handicapper with a buggy was on a direct collision course with a wilting patch of grass and your turf was going up in flames. God, Mother Nature, Whoever or Whatever you feel is putting the earth in motion was winning on that particular day. Damage control was the name of the game. Doesn't it seem to come down to that—trying to make the best of what we are dealt? In fact, in our own minds, we're often out to one-up the Force behind it all. Fast forward from last July . . . a moderate August, a bunch of aerification, some seed, a little fertilizer, a whole bunch of water, maybe some more seed, definitely more water, a mild winter and we win again. The place looks great; you can't even find those nasty cart marks on the fairways. Experience and maybe humility tell us that we are never really one up, can't ever really win the game and that the Force behind it all, always has the final say.

This spring, that Force has brought a large group of superintendents more wrath than a little aerification can mend. The saga begins during the overnight hours of May 8, when an isolated storm hit the south side of the city and devastated Olympia Fields Country Club. According to Kevin West, 150 trees classified as “in-play” required removal, and when the entire course is accounted for, up to another 150 may either need removal or severe pruning. As of early June, Kevin reports a great number of disfigured trees still standing. Nels Johnson Tree Experts was on hand immediately with three crews and two chipper trucks. Also employing five of their own chainsaws and a chipper truck, the majority of the staff worked two weeks straight on the clean-up.

Olympia Fields was fortunate in that the north course had not reopened yet due to the construction of last fall, but Kevin says the storm prohibited staff

from addressing several details prior to the May 27 opening. “Old, hollow red oaks” were a particularly popular choice of the winds clocked in the 80-90 mph range.

A fateful Thursday

On May 18, heavy rain and severe winds cut a large path through the North Shore, leaving behind damage that will impact the playability of several courses for years. Generally speaking, every meteorologist around had forecast the potentially potent storms. In fact, according to Paul Voykin at Briarwood Country Club in Deerfield, “Dante’s Hell” was forecast two days earlier by one of Paul’s veteran employees. He reported a vulture (yes, a vulture) at Briarwood looking to make quick lunch of a sick raccoon. Paul confirms the sighting: “Red-faced, curved beak and ugly as hell!” This employee recalled from childhood that his grandmother said this was a terrible sign, a disastrous omen and a sure signal that Mother Nature would soon visit with a fury. I don’t know how Paul could have ignored such a sign and not prepared for what was sure to happen. I know a few superintendents who could have used a “heads up.”

(continued on page 8)

Photos of the damage, clockwise from top: A massive tree uprooted at Briarwood C.C.; hail damage at Onwentsia C.C.; tornado-like destruction at Briarwood; more hail damage at Onwentsia; Sportsman’s C.C. looking like a scene from The Wizard of Oz.

No one I talked to confirmed a tornado touching down, but funnel clouds were spotted in the area. Observers clocked winds at 85 mph and reported hail to be marble-sized in Highland Park and lemon-sized in Lake Forest. The official storm description featured terms like “wind shear” and “microburst.” I know a few superintendents who are not buying those explanations.

“Microburst, my ass,” pretty much sums up the sentiments of Brian Green at Sunset Valley Golf Course in Highland Park. Initially,

pretty bushed after several 12-hour days and probably not working with maximum alertness. Chainsaw work is particularly hazardous under these types of conditions. Lastly, Brian reports that his course is looking for a state declaration of “disaster area.” You wouldn’t figure that should be hard to come by.

Next door at Bob O’Link, things were not any better. Rick Bowden reports 50 trees removed and 150 more requiring corrective pruning. Looking for any silver lining he could find, Rick beams

ers that were awaiting planting. The marble-sized hail did them in.

The prize goes to . . .

It would be hard to proclaim a hardest-hit winner, but Sportsman’s Country Club in Northbrook may get the prize. Workers tallied 800 man-hours in the three days following the storm, putting a small dent in the clean-up. Some 130 trees require removal and another 250 need corrective pruning. Kevin Czerkies estimates that the park district may spend as much as \$100,000 for contracted tree



Northmoor C.C., red #3 tee.

Sunset Valley tallied 85 trees down (most of the large variety), and a significant section of the golf course was flooded for 48 hours after the storm. Brian reports 24” trees “twisted off” and several 36” willows in the canal that probably won’t be cleaned up until the off-season. An 8” limb pierced a hole in the side of Brian’s shop, and the course was without power for four days. Brian praises his staff and is very thankful that no injuries occurred during the storm and the subsequent cleanup. This was a common theme—talking to several superintendents gave the overall sense that their crews were

that 30 of the 50 downed trees were willows. Clean-up slowed when the canal flooded, leaving 24 acres under water for 36 hours. Bob O’Link was without power in its shop/grounds dorm for 60+ hours. Rick is also quick to point out that Nels Johnson Tree Experts was on hand immediately to expedite clean-up and that a dozen caddies helped out for the weekend following the storm. The course reopened on May 24, delayed one day because the insurance company required a railing be reinstalled on a bridge prior to opening. Almost as an afterthought, Rick mentions that he lost \$6,000 worth of annual flow-

work assisting in the clean-up. The storm also snapped off several of the huge poles holding up the driving range netting; Kevin figures the range to be closed until August. More than 100,000 square feet of netting was destroyed; it will cost \$250,000 to repair the damage at the driving range alone. On the bright side, Kevin inherits the two-man driving range staff until the range reopens.

To make matters worse, the dome used for indoor, off-season practice blew up. Kevin theorizes that a tree fell into the dome and it exploded. Parts of the 30,000-

pound fabric were discovered 800 yards from the site. Ironically, the dome was slated for removal the following day. Now it appears that the \$350,000 structure probably will not be rebuilt.

Kurt Galisdorfer at Exmoor Country Club remains completely convinced that a tornado touched down on his property. The storm left several twisted trees, and Kurt's latest figures have 120 trees already removed, another 80 that still need to come down and 100 more needing corrective pruning. Although his club has eight chainsaws of its own, Kurt estimates the club will spend up to \$100,000 for contracted tree care and that eight semi-trucks full of wood chips had been removed from the property. He figures eight more truckloads would finish the job. To add insult to injury, a large oak crashed through a fairway and pierced an irrigation line.

(continued on page 11)

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Kurt was one of several superintendents who found themselves managing very large staffs after the storm. Kurt had 15 extra people initially, and seven extra for an entire week. One day, he even had up to 10 members raking and stacking branches. The eats were pretty good too. Without power for roughly 75 hours, the club was forced to make quick work of its supply of steaks. For Exmoor, the devastation came on the heels of some major spring construction during which a new practice green and a great deal of clubhouse landscaping were taking shape.

Down the street at Northmoor Country Club, Stacy Wallace was on the property at the time of the storm and reports a very green sky and a train-like noise prior to the storm hitting. He saw large trees bent over 90 degrees before heading to the basement for cover. Now, due to extensive damage, club staff are in the process of removing 172 trees with another 50 expected. Roughly half of the tree loss was on the southernmost nine holes of the 27-hole property. Stacy says he called his tree care contractor of choice before he even looked at the damage; word of the conditions spread quickly as there was a Board of Directors meeting already scheduled for that evening.

Stacy reports that because the damage was so far-reaching and because many of his own members had damage to their own properties, his golfing clientele has been very understanding of the situation. Downed trees severely damaged two tees and slightly damaged three greens. The staff at Northmoor were in the process of installing 1,700' of 8" line for a new effluent supply when they inherited the extra work.

Casualties mount

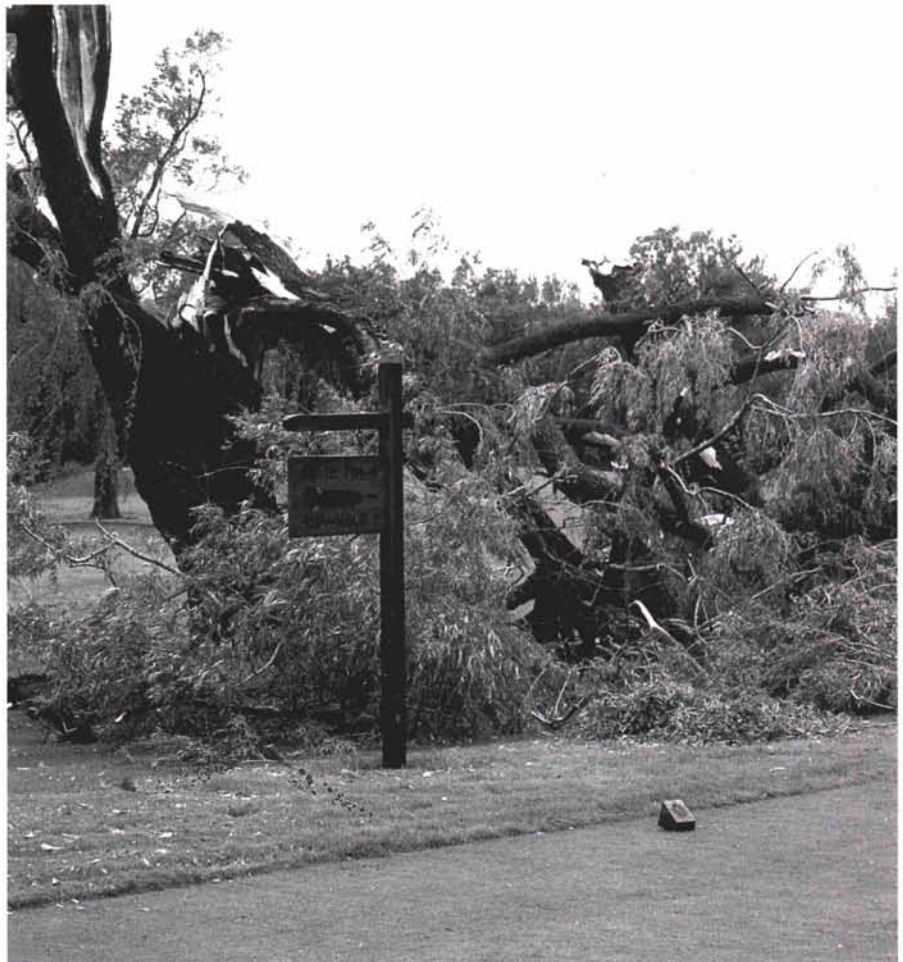
Unfortunately, the list of affected clubs goes on and on. It includes Ravinia Green, Lake Shore, Briarwood, Skokie, Green Acres and Highland Park Country Club. In fact, the magnitude of this story and a little confusion in assignments had both Brad Anderson at Midlane and myself researching the event. Two superintendents writing an article on the same topic! Not so long ago, the news would have had Fred Opperman doing cartwheels in his canoe.

Green Acres was closed for a week after losing 75 trees. For a day, Dave Radaj had 50 caddies assisting in the clean-up and used the chipper and dump truck from Park Ridge Country Club for 10 days. Mike Mumper has really

developed a certain kindness since his election to the MAGCS Board! Again, Dave had a great deal of help from an outside tree contractor.

Paul Voykin at Briarwood reports trees falling in all directions—a sure sign a tornado had touched down. I talked to Paul several times and he definitely seemed pretty composed throughout the trials. In fact, all of these superintendents demonstrated great professionalism and their respective clubs are touting them as heroes for the organized, “safety-first”-type efforts that came forth. In addition to turning me on to the term “widow-makers,” Paul also reports several friends in the business stopping over and sending some of their

(continued on page 12)



Briarwood C.C., #12 tee.

staff to assist in the clean-up. As for replanting, Paul states that this would be an excellent opportunity to get an architect involved and only replant where needed. This is not a time to panic, as over the years, tree planters have often lead with the heart.

Remember all the knocks those management companies take? American Golf really came through for Steve Schendel at Highland Park Country Club. Including his staff, he had 45 people reporting for work the morning following the storm. The number included 12 employees from Mill Creek Golf Club (another American Golf property) and five general managers from additional properties. (Unfortunately, we had no photos to confirm the general manager sightings.) He also received on loan several blowers, rakes and chainsaws. He estimates 120 tree removals with another 110 trees needing corrective surgery. The club was without power in its shop for five days, and Steve still isn't sure of the rainfall total; the storm relocated the rain gauge and the fence it called home.

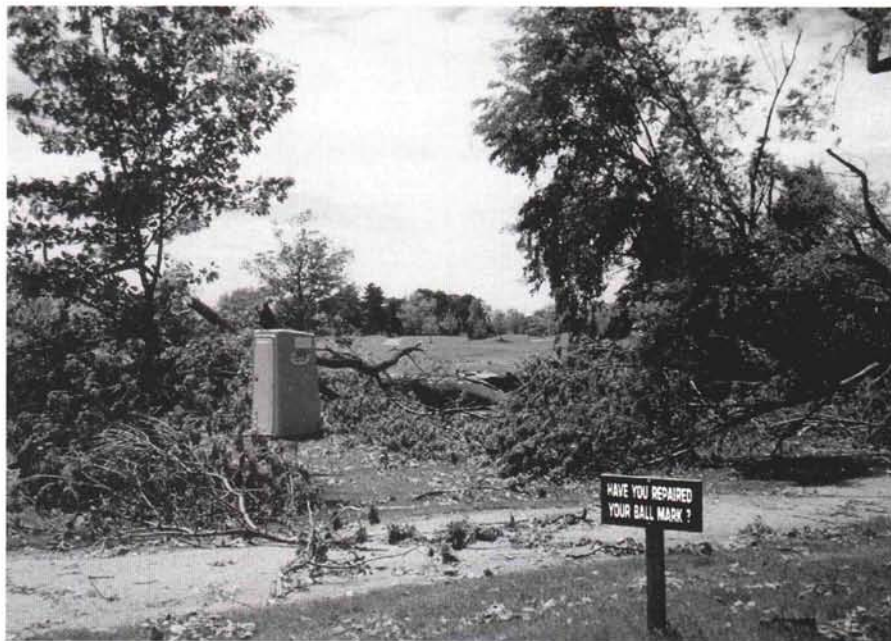
Also helping Steve's cause: the city of Highland Park rented a tub grinder that was stationed at the city's public works department. Steve was able to take advantage of that, as the public works department is located near his #14 hole. The city arborist also assisted in accessing the damage. Steve thought that the club's insurance adjuster would better receive a report of that nature. Additionally, as of May 31, the waiting list in Highland Park was at three-four weeks to have parkway debris chipped.

Karl Johnson at Johnson Tree Experts reports more work than his team could possibly get to, requiring staff to make some very tough decisions when it came to prioritizing clean-up. Then more wet weather hampered the efforts. However, the company allocated 25 crews for golf course work; several courses could never have put a dent in the clean-up without their help. Karl reports that this will be an ongoing process of reevaluating the condition of the trees; he suspects the tree-loss numbers to go up as the season progresses. He also

remarks upon the tremendous camaraderie he witnessed, the camaraderie that we all know makes this business so unique. Several superintendents whose courses were less severely affected waited more than a week for service until other clubs had their situations under control. Also, several clubs deferred their routine maintenance pruning until later in the summer.


Hurricane-force winds were not the only factor contributing to the damage, however. Onwentsia Country Club was among those pelted by severe hail. Skip Willms reports golf-ball-sized hail for 30 minutes and 4" of the stuff on the ground when it was all over. The greens suffered eight-ten marks per square foot. After calculating some 70,000-80,000 marks per green, Skip decided against fixing the greens by hand. He estimates three weeks of rolling and topdressing before the greens are back to normal. However, 5" of rain had already delayed the topdressing process. Additionally, the hail ripped small limbs and all the foliage from many of the trees. Skip reports huge piles of green leaves and being closed for three days. Lastly, hail totaled some of the parked cars, while others sustained up to \$9,000 worth of damage.

You would hate to label it the storm of storms, because Nature has the ability to create a new set of conditions at any moment. It *was* an opportunity for superintendents to rise to the occasion and demonstrate again why they are such valuable assets to their own golfing communities. As mentioned, I heard of several instances of people pitching in to help the guy down the street and putting their own needs secondary to the needs of those who were less fortunate. Nearly everyone I talked to had made extensive efforts to communicate the situation to his golfers and



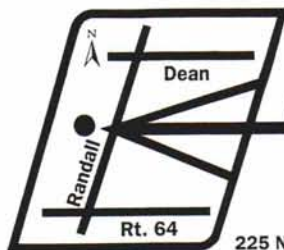
Sportsman's C.C., #8 green.

had taken precautions not to open up too early due to the hazardous conditions that still existed. Several colleagues note that the typical climatic stresses of summer will surely claim more trees weakened in the spring storms. A few ponder that perhaps Dutch Elm disease and oak wilt could be a more extensive problem than usual.

On my part, I know talking to this group of superintendents has made it much more difficult for me to complain about my rough being a little too tall and the rain keeping us from accomplishing everything we would like to. Be grateful for the good times; remember that it can always be a bit worse and that golf is, after all, a game. The storm on May 18 did claim the life of a man in Wilmette, done in by a falling tree while driving his car. Fortunately, we endured no news like that in the golfing community. 



Northmoor C.C., white #4 fairway.



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