



# Over the Banks We Go

*The author's little brother wonders, "Where's the ark?"*

*Flashback to late February. The rains have just stopped; all the snow is gone and things are looking pretty bleak. It's just not a pleasant sight. This has to be the worst time of the year for the course; everything looks dirty and old. So I daydream, looking out the window of my office. Lo and behold, there is my crew, trying to pick and cut through the ice on the course to install the pumps. Yes, the course is flooded once more.*



Scott Speiden.

FLOODING! For better or worse, this is something I know about. I have worked for Itasca Country Club since the early '80s. Since that time, I have seen large and small flooding events. But all floods are not created equal. There are those floods that just raise and lower water heights, but leave no sediment. Those are considered the carry floods. Then there are those, like the '87 flood, that leave behind a sediment layer of over three inches. Once you pump the water, you had better have a game plan. The silt does not give you much time before it kills the turf. In the past, we have lost fairways, tees and greens due to floods. Having a good pumping system and equipment helps considerably. Itasca has two 12" Cristifulli PTO driven pumps that can pump 5,000 gallons/minute, one 16" Cristifulli pump that can pump 10,000 gallons/minute, more than six 3" pumps, and other assorted electric pumps on the course. I always figure I can pump over 23,000 gallons per minute. Even with that capacity, however, we can sometimes pump as long as 48 hours straight, with no downtime.

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Here, I'd like to give a little insight on floods and how they affect us and the courses we call home. To that end, I posed a list of questions to a group of superintendents who have a tremendous knowledge of flooding through real-life experiences: Sean Creed of Oak Brook Golf Course, Dave Braasch of Hughes Creek Golf Course, Oscar Miles of Merit Club, Joe Reents of Oak Meadows Golf Course and Jim Meyer, retired superintendent of Itasca Country Club. I chime in myself with a few comments.

### **In your opinion, what is the worst part of flooding?**

"Seeing your previous work go down Salt Creek!" was Oscar Miles' comment. All joking aside, money is the real issue. We all seem to agree that the worst part of flooding is the loss of revenue. This is one of the biggest problems for any course, private or public. It is very difficult to analyze actual loss of revenue due to extreme variations among budget-

ing systems. A major factor is timing of the flood: summer, winter, during a tournament, an outing day, etc. Flooding puts a huge damper on the season for any golf course.

Other comments touch upon the clean-up after the waters have subsided. Clean-up is a huge headache. We have turf under water and turf that still has to be maintained. The hours you spend cleaning, for days on end after the flood, seem like a waste of time. We spend astronomical amounts of money on labor, pumping, fuel and hauling, to name but a few costs. Sometimes I think, is it really worth it? Rest assured, after you have been able to get the course cleaned, overseeded and back into play after an event like this, you do think differently about whether your efforts were worthwhile. Once the course is back in shape, you know that it was a learning experience and it was well worth it.

### **How many acres do you lose during a flood?**

It seems commonplace for much land to be disabled due to floods. Sean Creed says that Oak Brook has lost in the neighborhood of 40 acres due to flooding. Joe Reents adds that his course has lost 40 to 50 acres to floods, but feels very fortunate in that the waters at Oak Meadows subside quickly. This limits the loss of turf at his course. Hughes Creek loses 20-plus acres, or 80% of the front nine, reports Dave Braasch. We at Itasca Country Club lose 40-plus acres due to reservoirs upstream of our location. These reservoirs create elevated flows in our creek for long periods of time. State and local agencies have control of retention basins upstream that can reduce downstream flooding. Working with these agencies may offer remedy to those who want to improve flow through and off the course.



*A view of no. 15 during a flood event.*

## What kind of strain does flooding put on your budget?

Dave responds that flooding throws his overtime and fungicide expenditures over the projected amount. He adds that oddly enough, flooding always seems to come during the Pythium season. As the saying goes, when it rains, it pours!

In all seriousness, we are wholly aware that the bottom line is exactly that. Even if we come through the season in excellent shape, if the budget is out of whack we will hear about it. So this is a huge issue for those courses that flood. When a flood hits, it will crush your budget and there may seem to be no way of recovering that loss during the season. But options do exist for recovering money lost on the floods, as Sean explains. Floods do not affect his budget; he simply applies a surplus charge of \$1.50 per golfer, which is designated for a flood fund. Oscar adds that the flood of '87-'88, during his tenure at Butler National, caused a considerable loss of income. Accounting for loss of income to the club and the cost to repair the course, Butler's membership was assessed \$5,000 apiece to cover the strain. What great ideas! We at Itasca have always tried to forecast how many floods we will have during any given year. Whether big or small, flooding hurts the budget. These add-ons will allow us to stop forecasting and set a charge for flooding.

## Do you remember the '87 flood and how did it affect you?

Joe is reminded of the '87 flood everyday. His barn has a permanent stain line on the wall 3-1/2-feet high, left from the floods of '87.

Dave was a crew member at Idlewild Country Club then and remembers this event vividly. He

spent days on end with a high-pressure hose in hand, washing off the greens in hopes of saving them. Jim Meyer, too, says he remembers the '87 flood very well and would rather forget it. He remarks that it was one of the worst experiences he had as a superintendent. The stress was almost unbearable and he hopes no one has to go through that.

As for me, I was an assistant at the time for Jim and I agree completely. What I saw Jim go through, no superintendent should ever have to go through. Thank God, a crisis like this hasn't happened since. Being an assistant in '87, I commend Jim and all superintendents for the way they dealt with that situation.

## What is the one thing you will never forget about the '87 flood?

That smell!

I bet you are thinking, what smell? The smell of fish, silt and dead grass was something indescribable. Unless you have ever worked a flood, you will never completely understand it. I will never forget the aftermath of the flood of '87 here at Itasca. Our pro shop staff came out to *try* to help us in the clean-up. Needless to say, they did not last long. Two of our greens were completely surrounded by water, much like little islands on the course. It's not everyday that you have to float your cutting machines out on rafts to get to the green. Despite the fact that the course is flooded, though, it still needs to be maintained and sprayed for disease. Dave comments that the disease outbreak that followed the flood was a close second to the smell in terms of impact. After a flood, you can bet that disease will be knocking on your door next. As if dealing with the water weren't devastating enough, now you have to deal with the rest of

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*This is no. 15 again. That's the author's brother dog-paddling up the fairway.*

the course. It seems to be a never-ending struggle.

Flooding can torment a superintendent. The flood itself is easy to take, but it is the next couple of days, dealing with the golfers, higher management and golf pros, that will test you. I am a firm believer that with experience

comes knowledge. Oscar, a veteran in our industry, tells me that our profession learns and gains respect from challenges such as these. He adds that we can never handle situations like these alone; we would go nuts trying. The main thing to remember is to ask for help; extraordinary work **can** be accomplished under duress.

Yes, being a superintendent is a great job. Times exist, however, when a boulder is thrown onto the road. How we deal with it is what makes us good at what we do. Here's hoping we're having a great (flood-free) season—keep your feet dry! 



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