



The author.

Ask the "Idiot" Part II

The Saga Continues

Inevitably, I have found myself compelled to share the hilarious stories I have heard from local superintendents. My request for superintendents' funniest moments elicited dozens of responses; now I relate these unforgettable moments in time to you, the reader. Without further delay, here is the second edition of "Ask the Idiot."

In last month's installment of "Ask the Idiot," we saw the "Ford tractor that could" break through the ice that actually couldn't . . . hold it. We learned about poor Enrique, who had a life-altering moment after being "framed" by a Toro 657 irrigation head. We observed beautiful trees erroneously transplanted on putting greens, and don't forget about our buddy Todd, who could still be stranded in the middle of that pond wearing his waterskiing gear.

I left you contemplating a superintendent who, after the stresses of Labor Day, is thinking of finally getting some relaxation by going south on a whitewater rafting trip. However, this relaxation abruptly comes to a halt when, after checking into the outfitters', he receives a phone message: "You better call work, something about a bomb threat."

Our story begins on a warm summer day in mid-September, after the Labor Day stresses and shortly after the 9/11 attacks. The day begins just like any other ordinary day at a golf club, code name River Forest. The crew is out finishing their daily morning duties of cutting greens, tees, fairways and collars, and changing cups and tee marker positions. At this point, it is approximately 9:00 a.m.; the crew members are heading in for their morning break and for reassignment.

A Hispanic crew member by the name of Alfredo, who liked to be called Junior, is cutting collars and approaches that morning. Junior is on his second hole, hole no. 11, when he notices a cylindrical metal object just ahead of his Lesco Tri-Plex mower. Baffled and bewildered, scratching his head, Junior gets off his mower and thinks of which way is the best to dispose of this awkward and out-of-place object. Picking up the object, Junior thinks and thinks and thinks of the next move. Finally Junior decides the best idea may not be to chuck this object into the bushes, or toss it in the garbage, but to take it inside to management for further analysis. After all, it may have some relevance to something, anything! Junior completes his work after stashing the cylinder-shaped object (with a little string coming out the top) in between the back of the Lesco Tri-Plex mower's seat and the

gas tank, which is located directly behind the seat. It is now time for Junior's morning break and he drives his mower in from the far end of the property. Nonchalantly, Junior parks his mower, walks into the shop and has his break.

Time passes and before too long the crew is reenergized and back on the course to complete their daily objectives. Of course, Junior continues to cut his designated areas as though it were any other ordinary day. However, for Junior this is already no ordinary day. Little does Junior realize, he is taking his life into his hands, cruising about the golf course with a pipe-bomb strapped to the Tri-Plex mower. Junior, the wiz he is, couldn't have offered a more potentially explosive location for the bomb, placing it next to the gas tank with the fuse right next to the hot engine.

It's almost lunch time and Junior is finished with his mowing. He washes his mower, parks it in the correct place in the storage area, and starts to mosey into the shop for lunch. "Oops!" Junior exclaims. "That thing-a-ma-jig, I better get it." Junior shows the object to the whole crew before slowly creeping into the office area and placing the unknown object on the desk in front of the assistant superintendent.

"Are you crazy?" shouts the assistant superintendent. "Where did you get that?" He immediately directs Junior and his newfound bomb outside. A phone call to the police is all it takes; within minutes the bomb squad makes an appearance. "Hut, hut, hut, hut, hut!" The bomb squad shoots onto the scene with several squad cars and a blazer hauling an explosion-containment vehicle. The 9/11 incidents freshly in mind, the bomb squad confiscates the object, surmises it is a bomb and begins a search for others. The police, however, do not go it alone, but involve the grounds crew in the search. By this time, the country club has been closed and everyone evacuated. The crew rakes over the course, rummaging around for suspicious objects. The superintendent is called at his vacation destination and left a message: "Joel, you gotta call work, something about a bomb scare." The superintendent is worried as to whether he should return. After hours of searching, no hard evidence of a second bomb is found, and River Forest is saved from total

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annihilation. The superintendent continues his vacation with an ulcer, fielding a call from a member who reassures him, "It's just a pipe-bomb and in Ireland that's just a free drop."

This story stands out as one of the most unusual golf experiences shared. To this day, Junior still doesn't have any idea what was going on and has received several phone calls since from police questioning his involvement. Meanwhile, the culprit has never been found and continues to be at large. For all we know, he could be walking amongst us, so keep an eye open for sabotage. In this next story, however, the guilty party had no chance of evading capture. The victim was painted, literally, with this nightmare for the rest of his days.

Amazingly, a Hispanic worker is involved again. This time the gentleman's name is Lalo. The time is early spring and the grounds department is working determinedly to prepare for the upcoming golf season. As spring objectives are being accomplished, one priority is staining a new lattice fence surrounding and camouflaging a transformer box located at the "Men's Grill" entrance, facing the main parking lot where most members enter the club. The idea is to stain the fence to blend it in with the club and some ivy that has been planted around the fence's base.

Unfortunately, the grounds department does not own the implements needed to paint the big fence, so a power painter is purchased. After collecting the power painter and materials, Lalo zips through an abbreviated training session. Soon he is sent on his way to stain the fence. Everything is working smoothly, or so Lalo thinks, until he is staining the inside of the fence. Little does Lalo realize that although the fence is turning out beautifully, the stain that does not hit the fence is spraying through the lattice openings. Sure enough, eventually a member struts by to enter the club. On this day, the member happens to be wearing a pair of very stylish, bright yellow slacks. Within moments the solid pair of pants is no longer solid! The member suddenly owns a pair of new pants, checkered yellow and brown.

One would predict that the grounds department would soon be attending Lalo's funeral. Astound-

ingly enough, the member does not take issue with the incident. He just walks on into the locker room to change, as though accepting that sometimes, "?! #@% happens." Yet, who knows—perhaps he simply likes the new fashion statement. Lalo never receives a "thank you," though, so I doubt this to be the case. Lalo's heart, meanwhile, is beating almost out of his chest!

Accidents do happen, and sometimes they are beyond our control. This wasn't the case for Lalo, who experienced a mental lapse. This also wasn't the case for Lidia, who once claimed that she was attacked by the "chupacabra" as she was driving a utility vehicle into a dump-area to dispose of some brush she had cleaned up from the course. The chupacabra is a Hispanic mythical beast that sucks the blood from goats. During this supposed chupacabra attack, Lidia lost control of her cart and totaled the vehicle into some trees, where it in turn flipped over. Lidia was ejected, injured and crying hysterically. "It was a beast from the trees with a long wingspan, and sharp long fangs!" Lidia claimed. One eyewitness to the accident, also a crew member, saw no sign of the legendary beast. Could it have been that Lidia, who had just moved from Mexico, was simply new to driving? In any event, the chupacabra never struck again.

Another similar incident once occurred at a public golf facility in Michigan. A mythical beast wasn't at fault this time; instead, an overconfident high-school attitude causes this catastrophe. Some of you may know the individual implicated, but I'll keep Erwin's name confidential for reputation issues.

This event takes place in the late 1980s, when the young man is working at a public golf facility in Michigan. It is a time when friends all work together and the rules are more lenient; you can work without shirts on, for instance. This is a summer job, and when the opportunity arises, the crew is known to goof off. One day, our subject is alone and driving a Ford tractor with an end-loader attached. The day is nearing its end and the proud, shirtless high school student is cruising in on the tractor. Cruising to say the least—he's driving fourth gear in high, and bouncing around like a stud, but this

isn't the problem. The problem occurs when he decides to drive that way with the bucket-loader three inches off the ground. He looks really cool standing up, speeding in until the front-loader catches a stump and stops the Ford tractor dead in its tracks. "Bang!" The impact echoes through the air and the tractor's rear tires come off the ground an easy two feet. Erwin almost flies over the machine, but is miraculously held back when the steering wheel punches into his stomach. After 30 minutes of catching his breath, he restarts the stalled tractor and continues into the shop for the day. No one is seriously injured, thank God, but the tractor didn't seem right for years after, and the bucket needed to be welded back together in several fractured areas.

The things we do in our youth! Sometimes, in reflecting, we may wonder how we are still alive. Some of us will acknowledge, though, that times really don't change that much, they just seem to. Even experienced superintendents note some of the oddest events taking place under their watch, and at some point decide just to chuckle, having developed immunity to ill effects from the never-ending cycle of chaos. On that note, I conclude with this last outrageous happening that took place at a golf course named after the French city, Cantigny.

On a perfectly sunny day in July 1996, the superintendent receives a call on the radio from the pro shop. They are requesting assistance to retrieve an "errant golf cart." After driving out to no. 6 on the Hillside course, the superintendent is surprised to find only a few feet of the errant golf cart visible, as the majority of the cart is submerged in water. Only the top portion of the canopy of this "Club Car" can be seen. The golfer, questioned as to what happened, replies, "I was looking for my ball, and then I ziggged when I should have zagged." Well, the zigster had ziggged right over a two-foot steel retaining wall into the lake. Inspection also reveals that many of the golfer's personal items are floating around in the lake. The rescue operation retrieves items such as potato chip bags, tees, a scorecard, a hat, wallet and a number of empty beer cans . . . hmmm. The next question is obvious;

sir, are you under the influence of alcohol? "No way!" the golfer explains. "I am totally tober!"



I would like to thank several local superintendents for their input and experiences that resulted in development of this article.

*Joel Purpur,
Park Ridge Country Club*

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Aurora Country Club*

*Paul Voykin,
Briarwood Country Club*

*Scott Witte,
Cantigny Golf Club*

*Erwin McKone,
Briar Ridge Country Club*

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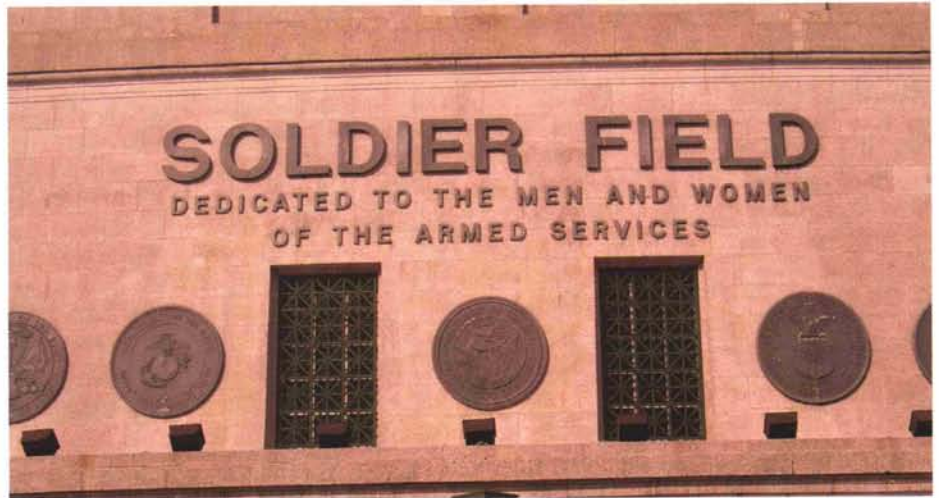


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Ken Mrock, John Nolan -N-



Ken Mrock (L) and John Nolan.



Ken Mrock and John Nolan: they are the one-two punch responsible for conditions at Soldier Field, the Payton Center, Halas Hall and the Bourbonnais practice facility. With all this on their plate, I can see why there is a need for TWO head groundskeepers.



The spirit of the American Doughboy. Originally on display in Garfield Park, this newly restored statue from the 1930s has a place of honor at the new Soldier Field.

Since 1988, Ken and John have been working behind the scenes to provide the best possible conditions for countless players and fans to enjoy. The true breadth of these two men's accomplishments over the last 17 years is staggering when you consider how many people have stepped into and out of Soldier Field. The depth of Soldier Field knowledge that Ken Mrock and John Nolan have is readily apparent.

Ken started out in 1970 as superintendent for the Chicago Park District golf courses. Throughout the '70s, during his off-season, Ken used to work on the "tarp crew" at Soldier Field. He made the big switch in 1987 when he became a head groundskeeper at Soldier Field. Ken's office is at the Payton Center in Lake Forest. He resides in Gurnee with his wife of 30 years, Debbie. Ken has three children: Jennifer, 28; Tim, 25; and Tina, 22. Ken is especially proud of his granddaughter, Megan.

John started working part-time for Soldier Field in 1976. After five years of hard labor, in 1981 he earned a full-time position with the landscape department of the Chicago Park District. In 1988, he made the transition to a head groundskeeper at Soldier Field. John's office is at Soldier Field, and he resides on Chicago's southwest side with his wife, Susan. John has two stepdaughters: Sharon, 24, and Lindsey, 21.

So who is responsible for what?

John's primary responsibility is overseeing the playing field and the outside grounds maintenance for every event held at the historic Soldier Field site. During the 2005 season, John will oversee approximately 46 events. This includes NFL games, college and high school football games, soccer games, concerts and, believe it or not, a Girl Scout sleepover! Other types of events also require his attention, such as black-tie charity dinners where it is necessary to place an interlocking plastic material called "Terraplas" over the field. Terraplas is a special ribbed material that is designed to breathe so it does not smother the field. After hosting an event like this, John and his crew work throughout the night to pull the 80 pallets of material off the field as soon as possible. The field also hosts corporate outings, a 10K run finish line, the Special Olympics opening ceremony and anything else the marketing offices

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can dream up. John has no real off-season anymore. During the winter months, he makes snow for the sledding hill on the grounds. His crew also plows snow outside the building, starting at the end of the NFL season through the beginning of the soccer season.

Ken's primary responsibility is overseeing the Payton Center Practice Facility and Halas Hall, the Bourbonnais practice fields at Olivet Nazarene University, and any day-to-day and game-day issues concerning the Bears. Ken actually lives in Bourbonnais during "training camp" so that he can make sure everything is in perfect condition for practices. Ken is busy this off-season as he is preparing for a Payton Center renovation that will include a new artificial surface for the indoor facility, as well as a new roof for the building.

So, are there any parallels between the life of sports field superintendent and golf course superintendent? Not surprisingly, there are. When I asked Ken and John what

some of their greatest challenges were, they both agreed on one thing. It was the daunting task of maintaining "perfect playing conditions every day." Ken even used the term "Augusta quality" on a day-to-day basis. Expectations are very high, whether it's game-day field conditions or practice-field conditions. Unfortunately, just as we experience, the only time you hear **anything** is when there is a problem.

When I asked John about his biggest challenges, he replied, "Just



Ken Mrock (L) with Jim Duggan (head groundskeeper, 1962-71) and the general manager, 1988-94.

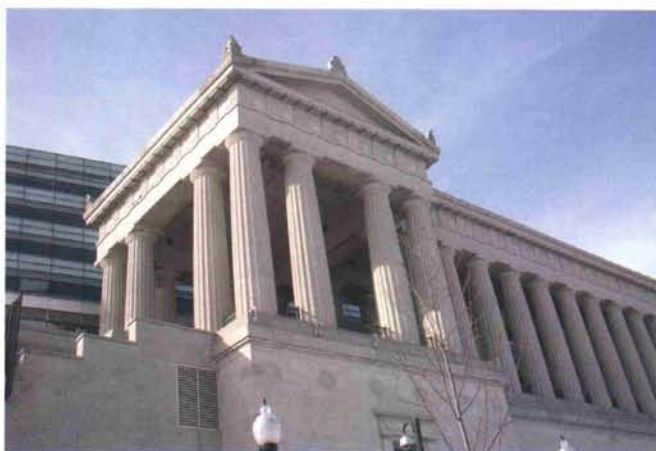
keeping people off the field." John stressed, "This is a game field, not a practice field. It is very important to prevent its overuse."

"Players are bigger, stronger and faster nowadays, and 96% of the players want to play on natural turf," says Ken. "The trick is getting it right for every event."

Ken and John are always on the field during a Bears game day, just to make sure all things are attended to. You might even see Ken or John haul off an injured player with the utility vehicle. No matter what the event is, either John or Ken is right in the middle of all the action.

During our visit, Ken and John also offered up all kinds of great "field factoids." Here are a few things I learned:

- The game field has a liquid heating system that is filled with propylene glycol (anti-freeze). The tubing that lies seven to eight inches below the surface of the field is about 40 MILES LONG!!! The game field comprises 85% sand, 10% Profile



The majestic colonnades are awe-inspiring.



The view from the skyboxes. Says the author: "Let me tell you, it is awesome!"



The Cadillac Room, site for our March meeting.




The Cadillac Room from another vantage point.

porous ceramic material and 5% peat moss. This medium rests on about six inches of pea-gravel. The sod is a thicker cut from mineral soil, with a bluegrass and perennial rye mix.

- The irrigation consists of about 30 heads. John says he can run almost every head at one time.
- The mowing time for the entire game field varies between one to three hours depending on how intricate the mowing pattern is.
- The game field has to be ready to go by March 26th for the first event. The “heat” will be turned on in the field in mid-February, and they will begin to work on the field as the weather allows. The “season” will then stretch through mid-January.
- The in-ground heating system is also used at the Halas Hall practice facility. In fact, much of the “in-house research” that was done to perfect the system took place there. Through trial and error, Ken and John used test plots to determine

the best possible depth and spacing of the tubing. This technology was “uncharted territory.” Ken, John and their staff drew up the plans from scratch and slowly developed the system into what it is today. These heating coils have such an effect on the grass that in 2004, the Halas Hall facility did its final mowing on January 18!

As I walked out on the snow-covered field, I heard the screeching sound of “birds of prey.” They use an automated system that plays these threatening sounds throughout the stadium to ward off pigeons and other nuisance birds.

Whether it is the game field, practice fields or the indoor practice facility, Ken Mrock and John Nolan put countless hours into getting it right for hundreds of players and for millions of fans. Thanks for all your efforts, guys, and we will see you at the March meeting! 



Ken and John admiring the view.



Inside the colonnades.



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Recognizing our state's pioneers, patrons and proponents of the game, past and present

What do industry icons Robert Williams, Ray Gerber and Oscar Miles have in common? In our MAGCS circle, we know them as past winners of the prestigious Charles Bartlett Award. Named after the famed Chicago Tribune sportswriter, this award—chosen by past winners and given on an as-merited basis—honors members who have positively promoted our profession, exhibiting excellence in the area of public speaking, public relations or journalism. But did you know that these giants of our profession share something with the legendary Mr. Bartlett himself? Each owns a spot in the Illinois Golf Hall of Fame (IGHF).



The IGHF dates back to 1989 and was the brainchild of IPGA member Patrick O'Brien, then director of golf at the Golf Club of Illinois. The original concept was to institute a means of recognizing and honoring the numerous accomplishments that Illinois golfers have made to the game. Initially known as the "Illinois PGA Hall of Fame," the name changed in 1997 to the current moniker, Illinois Golf Hall of Fame. This move was to acknowledge the significant role men and women have played in all aspects of the game, from teaching and playing, to course design, construction and management, to administration and inspiration.

The original selection committee comprised PGA professionals, allied association leaders and local media, and they outlined the guidelines for the new endeavor. The first class of inductees included golf legends Chick Evans, Joe Jemsek, architect Charles Blair Macdonald and the aforementioned Charles Bartlett. A new class of Hall of Fame members was selected annually until 1993, when the decision to induct biennially on the odd-numbered years was made.

At this time, the lobby of the Drake Hotel in Oak Brook displayed honoree plaques. The following year, the display moved to the Ruffled Feathers Golf Club in Lemont. In 2001, the Illinois Golf Hall of Fame followed the Illinois PGA's move north to Glenview and has a permanent home inside the clubhouse of The Glen Club.

The Glen Club affords the Hall of Fame with a beautiful and roomy setting to display the honoree plaques, photographs and memorabilia that help to paint each inductee's story. Even without clubs in tow, an afternoon at The

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