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SPORT'S TOUGHEST (AND BEST) TICKET

It's said a Masters ticket is the toughest one in sports – harder to come by than the Super Bowl, World Series, Stanley Cup or the NBA Championship. And yet, this April I had one, free of charge, just like many other golf course superintendents. We were, as in every other year, guests of the Augusta National Golf Club.

I take it as a sign of respect from the Club and recognition of GCSAA and our profession's importance to golf. I tried to find a club official to personally thank; I did drop a note to Billy Payne and I hope he actually reads it.

Waiting in line and looking around left me with a wonderful first impression. Annual flowerbeds are perfectly maintained, mulched beds are clean, all structural surfaces seemed freshly painted and even the concrete and blacktop seemed new. Every detail had been covered.

Once through the gate, a brief walk takes you past the huge pro shop, the food stand and suddenly you see the big scoreboard on your right and the first tee on your left. The setting forces you to stop and soak it all in. Then the big golf course captures you and brings you to reality and the tournament that is underway.

I had hoped to catch the honorary players – Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player – but I missed them by minutes. I spent some time watching the players warm up, enjoyed seeing them up-close trying to figure out the green speed on the practice green.

Walking a golf course backward is the best way to see it during a big event. Although I am interested in the competition, I am more interested in the course. It was early enough for me to watch the staff work. They were still mowing, rolling and grooming and completing preparation for play. Rain on Wednesday had cancelled

completion of the Par 3 Tournament and closed the course, so there was some extra work to do, cleaning up under story area, raking needles, blowing leaves and debris from play areas, whipping dew and clippings and pushing water out of wet areas. Everybody hustled to get the extra work completed so as not to disturb players or patrons.

Along the way I greeted CBS broadcaster Vern Lundquist, who was checking the course after the rain. I cut my backward tour short when I ran across a Toro truckster. Almost immediately a staff member came to

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get it. I was looking for my Wisconsin colleague Scott Schaller and Tenia Workman, a colleague when I was our chapter publications' editor. She is the Georgia GCSA executive director. They have both worked on the golf course crew during the Masters week for a number of years.

When course preparation is complete, Scott and Tenia are stationed in a rough area on the Back 9 on an emergency response vehicle. The truckster is prepared to handle just about any unexpected event, just like the two veterans stationed with it. The previous day Brannon had an interesting assignment – filling divots on the 1st tee of the Par 3 Tournament, giving him a front-row seat.

The early spring left the Masters without its usual profusion of blossoms. But frankly, the course is so beautiful and well-prepared I didn't even notice until someone mentioned it. I did notice there were a number

of fairway mowers painted gray; I thought they were Toro's, but was too far away to know for certain. I also wonder how Brad Owen does it every year regardless of the cards dealt him.

The course was cut short, the fairways are wide and there isn't much rough. It is a big piece of property – I would guess more than 400 acres – that was an abandoned nursery when Bobby Jones and Cliff Roberts bought it for a golf course. That explains the presence of so many flowering ornaments. Today's clubhouse was part of the deal; it was the home of the owner and was built in 1854.

Most have heard about the lunch stands around the course and at the clubhouse area. There aren't any grills cooking hamburgers and brats. Instead you select from a menu that includes egg salad, pimento cheese and other sandwiches.

The ambience of the event leads to pleasant attitudes of fans, too. You can set your chair near a green, go to a restroom – which are immaculate – and find it there when you return. The Masters, to me, embodies so much of what I love about being a golf fan.

In 1969, I was assigned to Fort Gordon, an Army post on Augusta's western edge, for Army military police training. The city of Augusta and the area around the club were far different then; the course was on the edge of town. I had one weekend pass and I took a cab to the guardhouse at the end of Magnolia Lane. I explained I was a turf graduate and wondered if I could see a bit of the course. The guard was very kind, "I'm sorry, son, but I just cannot give you a pass." I remember hoping that someday I would get that chance.

This was my fourth trip to the Masters. My hope is that you get to make the trip yourself some day. It is worth it. **GCI**