



Monroe Miller retired after 36 years as superintendent at Blackhawk CC in Madison, Wis. He is a recipient of the 2004 USGA Green Section Award, the 2009 GCSAA Col. John Morley DSA Award, and is the only superintendent in the Wisconsin Golf Hall of Fame. Reach him at groots@charter.net.

CLOSE CALLS

No one wants to face the consequences when a close call turns to disaster.

Sometimes, when I look back on my 40 years of work in golf course management, little beads of sweat break appear on my forehead. I had a lot of close calls and dodged bullets more times than I care to remember.

It is no wonder, really. I am descended from a long line of miners and farmers, two professions that rank among the most dangerous, and my status as a former farm kid provided me an awareness of just how dangerous work around machinery can be.

During my “invincible” teen years, I got my foot caught in a chain on a hay elevator and I was put out of commission for several weeks. I had ignored my father’s admonition, “Climb the ladder into the hay mow and under NO circumstances ride up the elevator.” He was right. Another time I was on crutches for 14 weeks after too casually walking alongside a milk cow too close the stanchion. She kicked me back 15 feet and broke my leg. It happened on a snow day when school buses couldn’t get through, so my parents got me to the doctor by dragging our car to town with a tractor!

Corn pickers, combines, balers and choppers all claimed victims, taking fingers and arms and sometimes lives. Farm equipment operated from PTO shafts took their toll, often choking victims with their own clothing. Back then, most tractors were “tricycle” types – imagine a triplex greens-mower turned 180 degrees. These tractors were easily tipped over, often killing the operator. Too often, riding on a fender, standing on the hitch or even straddling the hook of a tractor resulted in these passengers falling off and suffering injury or worse.

Our parents lectured us constantly about being careful. The only time I ever heard a cross word between my dad and my grandfather happened

when Gramps administered a severe chewing out to my dad over a safety issue. My dad took his medicine in silence because he knew he deserved a tongue-lashing. The current owner of that farm I grew up on, twice removed, suffered the death of a child this summer when the youngster

tricksters were totaled in accidents at night. I worried about them moving 808 Rain Bird sprinklers during a rain and lightning storm. Too often, they took too long to get off the course. I made many trips back to the course at night to make sure these guys were OK.

“Early on, my primary concern about safety revolved around night water watermen.”

fell from an ATV towing a piece of mowing machinery. The whole town mourned his death.

We were reminded of the dangers of mining because my great uncle was killed in a lead mine not 25 miles from our home. He got caught under a rockslide and didn’t have a chance.

Needless to say, when I became a superintendent, one of the things I worried about most was safety – my own, but especially that of my mostly young employees. I had seen too many farm accidents to feel otherwise.

And when I started, the experience of a freshly minted superintendent loomed large. He had been awarded a superintendent’s job almost immediately after graduation. The course was new, but the equipment wasn’t. The old dump truck box wouldn’t drop until you manually tripped the hydraulic cylinder. A high school age kid, who obviously should not have been operating that truck, tripped the cylinder but didn’t get out of the way fast enough. The box came down hard and killed him. It also killed the superintendent’s career and pretty much ruined his life for decades.

Early on, my primary concern about safety revolved around night watermen. In those early years, a Datsun pickup and two Cushman

I still shudder when thinking about how Michael Lee straddled a PTO shaft on a Royer soil shredder and fell. Fortunately, he wasn’t injured. I had a tractor and sprayer get away from me, just missing trees and features that could have tipped the rig over. No harm was done, but it was an incredibly close call. A weld on an end cap of a filter tube in our pump station broke while my assistant was in the building. He was smart and quick and shut the main breaker on the 440 V service. It was another disaster avoided.

My list of close calls could go on and on, and I suspect my superintendent colleagues could compose similar lists from their own experiences. We all worry about skin cancer, hearing loss, pesticide use, injury from flying golf balls, vehicle rollovers, cuts from reels and blades and scores of other things. Danger actually lurks everywhere on the links, and superintendents know it. The changes in safe equipment and products have been tremendous, and our awareness has increased similarly. We have been aided by OSHA (once you overcome their tendency toward minutia), state agencies, professional organizations like GCSAA and our university extension services. No one wants to face the consequences that can result when a close call turns to disaster. **GCI**