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Meditations on the Wonder of Golf

By LEO J. FESER

YESTERDAY, television was a miracle. Jet planes leave vapor trails across the skies, hardly causing an upward glance by harried and hurried man beneath. Atom bomb news is absorbed with our morning cereal, man continues to act like the devil, taxes and death remain certain and much is required to jar us from our casual attitude toward the miraculous environment surrounding us. We miss a lot of the fun of living when we fail to observe the unusual in that which is common; look at the blossom of the lowly dandelion with an ordinary reading glass and you will agree. Then look at golf.

Shakespeare could well have been considering that subject when he wrote, "Here is a wonder, if you talk of a wonder." We might enlarge a bit and say that here are many wonders, for golf is truly a game commanding descriptive adjectives in abundance. It is a remarkable game. It is surprising, astonishing and incredible. It is enjoyable and painful, invigorating and exhausting, encouraging and frustrating. Borrowing again from the Bard, it is truly a game "wondrous strange."

A ball is driven down a fairway. We need not dwell on the fact that the player struck the ball, but that is oftentimes a wonder in itself when thought is given to the form of some who strike the ball. Let us pass up consideration of the evolution of the modern golf ball which is a chapter of marvels. The ball strikes the turf, perhaps bounces a bit and nestles down, where? Statistics indicate that in a given 100 yards of fairway and the

rough on 30 feet each side of the fairway, the ball could stop in any one of 4,000,000 places. To put it in a different light, one might drive 4,000,000 balls — we say "might" — and have them all nestle in their respective little nooks in the area given without one touching another.

If it is a wonder that the ball was driven from the tee, what about the second shot? Where, oh where, does the little ball lie? On an upslant, downslant or side slant? Beneath sheltering grass in the rough or on velvety turf in center fairway? Possibly it lodges deep in the footprint of the sands where others trod and thoughtlessly failed to close the pits behind them. Or in the divot hole of the equally thoughtless one who failed in the courtesy of replacement. The second shot may be classified as the miracle shot of golf. How many miracles can there be? The shot may vary from a full wood to a short iron. It may require, as General Forrester once said, "elevation of the sights a little lower." Oh! Bless us, we are in the land of miracles!

Miracle of the Green

Then putting. Accurately rolling a wee sphere with a weighted stick over a surface trampled by thousands and thousands of foot-steps daily. Over a surface on which balls with back-spin smack from more than a hundred yards away, braking suddenly on turf cut less than a quarter inch high, barely marring the surface of that turf when conditions are right. And now we are off on the greatest marvel of all: production and maintenance of golf course turf. Let the golfer go on up the course, performing his miracles as he

goes. He may collect a score that vies with atom bombs for news space.

We stop and look at turf.

Turf. Webster tells us, is the upper stratum of earth and vegetable mold filled with the roots of grass and other small plants . . . Hold it, Webster! Don't let the chairman of the green committee catch you filling golf turf with the roots of other small plants! It just isn't being done in the best circles. As a matter of fact, Mr. Webster, keeping out those other small plants is one of the wonders that prompted this story. But we will by-pass that job for a moment and look at the putting green, the acme of turf production.

The surface of a good green is comparable to that of a fine Persian rug. Some dues-paying club members say greens cost as much, but that is seldom true. They just feel that way. There is no mat or spongy surface, the blades of grass are upright, the roots deep enough to carry the grass through hot and windy days without injury and there must be no imperfections which can logically be blamed for missed putts. The grass is dense, so dense that if one can visualize an Iowa corn field in July with the corn plants less than two inches apart, he can create an imaginary magnified putting green. A hundred individual plants to each square inch of putting green surface is not uncommon.

A putting green is a contradiction. Nature provides no comparable phenomenon — tender, living plants must bear the traffic expected of a floor, a path, a roadway. These living plants must not be permitted the natural function of providing food or flower — they are clipped as short as mechanical means make possible — yet they must live and thrive to perform their unnatural function. A host of enemies apply constant pressure to destroy it — insects to eat it, earth worms to cast up excremental heaps to mar its surface and plaster down the tiny leaves, heat to scald it, cold to freeze it, rain to drown it, disease to wither it and humans to trample it with spiked shoes twisted vigorously into its very soul. Withal it must provide the expectant golfer with what he demands: a true putting surface, a surface that will "hold" a pitch.

Webster Missed His Shot

Mr. Webster and his other small plants must now receive attention. Among those other small plants that would appreciate a homesite in the ideal soil and moisture environment afforded by the putting

green are plantain, chickweed, poa annua, shepherd-purse, clover, yarrow and many others, including that Vishinsky of acquisition, crabgrass. Roots of these enemies of fine turf can hardly be found without the attached leaves and stems, so the miracle of a putting green must be placed beyond the Websterian concept of turf.

Back now to the further miracle of golf, let us turn our reading glass over to examine some of the humans who are much a part of the miracle. The player who nonchalantly tosses his burning cigarette onto the tender turf as he leans his weight on his putter and scratches a mark to show when a ball has come to a temporary rest. How very human of him to miss that putt when he follows 20 to 30 foursomes who took the same unkind liberties! How miraculous is his silence and lack of blame to all but himself!

The golf course superintendent whose responsibility it is to maintain the turf is somewhat of a miracle-man himself. Director of a handful of men who are armed with tools of the trade, he combines art and science to produce and protect the turf which is the basis of golf. Occasionally the forces opposed to him get the upper hand; grass dies and golf suffers. Woe unto him who allows golf to suffer! Atom bombs and taxes are forgotten by he who wields the club; miracles become commonplace, wrath more so. The day is ruined; it is obvious that some one simply doesn't know his business!

Aye, Mr. Shakespeare, golf is indeed a game "wondrous strange."

At semi-public courses used clubs taken in on trade sell about as fast as new clubs because so many of the players have sharply limited purchasing capacity for golf and they want to get the most golf money will buy.

If the semi-public course pro shop doesn't meet the price competition the business goes to the stores and the player doesn't get the quality for the money he'd get in a good used set. The semi-public course pro makes a mistake if he looks at the traded-in club sales as a necessary evil. He should consider this business as a very important start in getting a player in the habit of buying the best for the money at his shop and that will put the pro in a strong selling position in all price classes.

—Homer Herpel,
Indian Meadows GC, St. Louis, Mo.