

# 'Smooth as a

**Editor's note:** In this essay, creative writer **Ron Furlong**, first assistant superintendent at Everett Golf & CC in Mukilteo, Wash., examines elements of his profession while playing 18.

**F**or superintendents and assistant superintendents, getting a morning tee-time is a bit of heaven on earth. It's almost unheard of — like a double eagle or taking a sick day the week of the club championship. It just doesn't happen.

The first obstacle to overcome is fighting the guilt. "Why am I here? I'm golfing? In the morning? What's happening at my course?"

You imagine crew members throwing a kegger on the fifth hole and leaving beer stains and cigarette burns on your 1/10-inch greens. You imagine them having a game of bumper golf cars on the 11th fairway. Arrgghh!

You take a deep breath, suddenly realizing everyone is waiting for you on the first tee. You're up, but you're still trying to shake those thoughts of a moment ago. Of course those things aren't happening. The greens are getting mowed, cups

changed, bunkers raked, etc. Life goes on without you, hard as it is to admit.

Yet that image of part-time worker Jimmy (a.k.a. Evel Knievel), fresh from 11th grade, racing down the hill on No. 4 in a burning utility vehicle with a look of total glee on his face won't leave your mind.

"Ah, Ron? Gonna hit the ball today?"

A smile, sort of, then concentration on that little white Ultra at your feet. Seems so small. How the hell can you hit that tiny thing? You invented this game? You reach down and tee it higher. Can't miss it now (the great fear of all golfers on the first tee). Back swing (good thoughts) and then through with the form of Watson. Unfortunately, that's Nick Watson, a 25-handicapper you occasionally play with, not Tom Watson. The ball sails mightily, high into the air, and for a brief moment you're impressed with yourself. But the ball keeps sail-



# Gravy Sandwich'

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ing up, not out. Higher and higher.

Thankfully you're spared the "gonna bring rain" comment. Then gravity kicks in. Would have been a beautiful eight-iron — 110 yards, center of the fairway. You feel (if not exactly hear) the muffled snickers of your playing partners.

"Nice and straight," one of them offers.

"Teed it up too damn high," you suggest, grabbing your bag.

Walking a course other than your own is a particular enjoyment only fellow superintendents and assistants can appreciate. Perhaps it's the long hours you spend on your own 100 or so acres. Or maybe it's the opportunity to compare some other superintendent's conditions and practices with your own.

It's the latter I enjoy. On my short walk to my less-than-impressive drive, I instantly look at the rough's height of cut between tee box and fairway, noting any weeds I see nestled in the thick turf. I smile when I spot a clump of chickweed. I look for the intermediate rough height, then

the fairway itself (which I barely made). I am as critical, perhaps even more so, of this course as I am of my own. Why is this?

The sprinkler head a few feet from my ball mocks me with its lack of yardage. Who would need yardage this far out? I've said it myself: If they can't drive it 180 yards, they don't need yardage. Funny how things come back to bite you.

Second shot. Three wood. This time the concentration comes easily. The club feels good. You poke it about 230 yards, just shy of the approach. Now you feel better.

As you reach your ball, you note the approach is walk-mowed, and you are duly impressed. You're able to bump and run a seven iron cleanly off the *Poa* and have it stop within five feet of a tough pin placement in the back left of the small green.

"Nice shot, Ron."

"Thanks," you answer, holding in a smile. Act cool, big guy.

The green is beautiful — a gorgeous stand of Pacific Northwest *Poa annua* atop a slightly contoured 4,500 square feet that you know was built more than 75 years ago. You watch your three playing partners each drain short par putts. Then calmly, coolly and confidently you walk up and miss your own five footer. Bogey.

You're in a constant battle with a swing of emotions throughout the rest of your round on this immaculate early June morning. On one hand, you struggle with your erratic game. A beautiful 240-yard drive down the middle of the fairway is followed by a seven iron shanked into the firs to the left of the green. On the other hand, you're swept up in the beauty of the day and the gorgeous old course.

The view of the Cascade Mountains to the east is stunning; their snow-topped

peaks are inviting, even in June. The 140-foot Douglas firs tower proudly into the sky, lining the fairways like giant soldiers guiding you home. The maintenance of the course, you reluctantly realize, is first-rate. The fairways are perfect, the ball sitting up nicely on the ryegrass-*Poa* stand. The rough is a perfect 2 inches and thick. The bunkers, with which unfortunately you are too familiar, are freshly trimmed and hand-raked.

I admit, I'm as guilty as the next person in taking some small level of enjoyment whenever I come across something I think to be not up to my standards. We all want to be the best, and it gives us comfort to think that perhaps we are. But as I walk my peer's course, I'm struck at how few things I'd do differently. So I found a weed here and there, a sprinkler head not edged around, a bench sitting a bit too far from the tee markers. Who's perfect?

I think of my course, so perfect in my eyes. But what would I think of it if I were a fellow superintendent or assistant playing it on a Saturday morning? Would I feel the same as I do on this course? I realize the answer is yes. I'd be a little critical, but I'd also be a little proud.

As much as we all hope our own courses are the best in town, deep down we all want our peers to do just as well — even the superintendents who are not on your speed dial or show up to the monthly chapter meetings. Even the superintendent who stole your irrigation technician a few years back.

Why are we more critical of someone else's course than our own? Perhaps because other courses are really our own. It's up to all of us to not only improve our own courses but to improve the entire profession, making everyone better in the

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## Smooth as a Gravy Sandwich

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process. Golfing your own course is essential to being a good superintendent, but golfing other courses is just as important, if not more.

One of my great faults is that because I work on a private club and play mostly other private clubs and upscale public courses, I rarely see smaller operations. This

is a situation that none of us should find ourselves. We can't lose track of the efforts that go into these smaller operations.

If you don't get out there and see what's happening down the road, how can you ever get better? You can post discussions on the Internet, read trade journals and watch tournaments on TV until

your blue in the face, but there is nothing to compare to the actual experience of hitting the ball from someone else's rough, putting someone else's greens, and, in my case, searching through someone else's woods for that damn little white ball.

On the 18th green, I lined up a 45-foot putt — a downhill I knew had to break at least 10 feet from left to right. I needed this putt for a fretful 95, a score I would have been embarrassed with 10 years ago but is more the norm today. I gently brought my arms back and through to the ball, starting it on its eventful journey. The speed looked good, and the break was perfect — a wide 12-foot swing out toward the mountains and then back toward the deep, blue water of the Puget Sound. It landed with that beautiful sound of aluminum ringing true at the bottom of the hole.

"Great putt, Ron."

This time I didn't fight the smile, reaching down for my ball. "You ever doubted it?"

As I walked off the 18th green on that glorious Seattle afternoon, I remembered a match I had in Florida against a hulking Australian chap years before. After draining a 40-footer to beat me on the last hole, he flashed me a toothy grin and said in his down-under drawl, "Smooth as a gravy sandwich, Ronny boy. Smooth as a gravy sandwich."

Though I've never eaten a gravy sandwich, the analogy was too rich in detail to be missed. I realized his cocky comment referred not only to his putt, but also and mainly to the perfect stand of bermudagrass green as well. I have never forgotten that line and the smile that accompanied it.

On this Saturday afternoon, it was not the golfing gods I thanked for my breaking, bending putt that somehow found its way home. Nor was it my high school coach of nearly 20 years before who had constantly drummed "tempo tempo tempo" into my head over and over.

No, it was the superintendent, his assistant and their crew that I thanked. After all, we're in this together. ■

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