

No one would ever accuse Johnny Miller of being politically correct. He tells it like he sees it. His comments about how grain on PGA Tour greens affects putts certainly made him a controversial choice as the keynote speaker for the Opening Session at the Golf Course Superintendents Association Show in Anaheim in February (see page 61 for coverage).

Prior to his face-to-face appearance with a roomful of turf managers, I think we all assumed his comments reflected poorly on us by indicating that the greens just weren't groomed enough, and inherent grain would affect the ball roll. Perhaps in retrospect he could have qualified or defined what he meant by grain. He did manage to utter one sentence in appeasement which did draw applause, "Not every green has grain, by the way."

But he did say southwest-facing greens, especially greens sloping southwest, will have grain. He also told the audience, "I know you guys have taken some shots at me over my position on grain, but I have studied it thoroughly. I know what I'm talking about."

If Michigan State University professor Joe Vargas told us we had dollar spot on our greens, we'd believe him. If Johnny Miller tells us there is "grain" on a green, we laugh and scoff at him. And I think that got to him because he perceives his professionalism to be no less than ours. And that was when the critical commentator's feisty and cocky façade began to crack during his talk.

You could see his eyes well up on the big video screens. Here stood a man who is perhaps one of the all-time best when it comes to executing and diagnosing golf shots. He is a student of the game, the swing and the playing conditions, including how the lie of the ball calls for a specific shot. And here he was defending himself to a group that he truly respected for their ties to the land — a group that basically considered him an ignorant buffoon when it comes to turfgrass.

Miller did tell the group in no uncertain terms that he admires our profession and

Against the Grain? Maybe Not

BY JOEL JACKSON



JOHNNY MILLER
WALKED INTO
THE ROOM WITH
SOMETHING TO
PROVE, AND HE DID

what we do to beautify and sculpt the land under our charge. That's why I think he took it so personally that his expertise was doubted by the profession. Miller's love for the land was magnified even more when he hung up his cleats after a brilliant playing career in the mid 1970s. He took up golf course design work, and he also bought several ranches and restored them to their near-original splendor. He is no stranger to the seat of a bucket loader.

According to Miller and his stats, his game began going sour as he turned 40. His emotions began to erupt again as he detailed how he struggled to balance PGA Tour demands against being a good father to six kids. When his oldest approached graduation and college life, his game disintegrated and he hung up his cleats for good at 41.

Miller also earned several rounds of applause for his comments about family life and how important it was to be a good spouse and parent. He said, "No matter how hard your day has been, it's important when you go home to hit your best shot of the day when you step through that door. Some of the best work you will ever do will be within those four walls."

Before the Opening Session, I wondered how Miller would ever win approval from this crowd, which basically thought he was insulting their expertise on a regular basis. His confident demeanor, bordering on cocky, can be off-putting to the casual observer. But Miller revealed that he was human after all, and the post-session crowd that stayed to shake his hand was one of the largest ever.

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