

Paul Diegnau went ice fishing. That's what golf course superintendents from Minnesota do for fun during the polar winters. But Diegnau, the long-time certified superintendent of Keller Golf Course in St. Paul, didn't go fishing just to land a few lunkers. The quiet time he spent sitting in a shanty on the ice was used more to reflect on his career than to dupe a bass into biting his bait.

That's because the 2005 golfing season, Diegnau's 23rd in the profession, was one of the toughest — make that *the* toughest — of his career. Mother Nature threw Diegnau a collection of curveballs as wicked as Greg Maddux's ruthless deuce. The winter's freeze led to spring turf damage, which led to summer disease, which led to unsightly greens, which led to irate golfers, which led to a pounding pain in Diegnau's noggin.

Diegnau was relieved when the golf season ended. But he couldn't forget the Hades he had just been through. He told himself: "2005 was the toughest golf season I have experienced in 23 years as a superintendent. If 2006 resembles this season, I will consider a career change."

A year ago, while fishing through ice as thick as the rough at the U.S. Open, Diegnau had time to ponder his future. Would the upcoming golf season make or break him? "I was thinking, it's got to get better," the 47-year-old told himself.

The 2005 golf season was freakish as far as turf maintenance challenges go. The Minneapolis-St. Paul area received below-average snowfall, but ice was another story. And the ice cover on the carpet at Keller Golf Course, as well as other area golf courses, proved lethal to plant life.

Old Man Winter left behind a telling amount of dead turf. "Telling" in the fact that Diegnau would have to deal with more than growing new grass; he would also have to deal with dissatisfied golfers. That spring, Diegnau's crew sowed seed on the course's barren areas and waited for it to germinate. The rains came as advertised, but, unfortunately, April showers did not bring May flowers — or lush grass. The spring was so wet and cold that Diegnau and his crew couldn't get any seeds to sprout.

When summer finally arrived, its warmth brought a posse of patches to the golf course's

His Turbulence Turns to Tranquility

BY LARRY AYLWARD



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greens. It was a turf disease that Diegnau had not seen in his previous nine years at Keller. It was diagnosed as take-all patch.

The disease didn't just leave a few spots here and there. It covered about two-thirds of the course's greens. And because the fungus had infected the turf's roots, there was little Diegnau could do to treat it. With its greens dominated with yellow patches and its fairways dotted with dead turf, Keller Golf Course was a sickly sight.

And Keller's golfers, a public bunch as demanding as a country club's hitters, weren't understanding of the matter. They didn't want to hear Diegnau blame Mother Nature for what occurred. They just wanted their green track back.

And as time marched on, Diegnau was able to give it back to them. Thanks to a lot of blood, sweat, tears and sod, the course healed eventually.

But would Diegnau's wounded morale mend?

As the '06 golf season approached, Diegnau dumped his glass-is-half-empty attitude in favor of a half-full one. He pronounced he would be upbeat, even in the face of a pitiless Mother Nature.

But this time a meek Mother Nature greeted Diegnau at winter's end, and she left Keller's turf in a healthy state when the cold subsided. And Diegnau did his part. He made several preventive fungicide applications on the course's greens to thwart off another invasion of take-all patch.

The golf season of '06 proved entirely different from that of '05. For Diegnau, turbulence turned to tranquility. The former fed-up superintendent is *not* searching Monster.com for a new craft.

It just goes to show you that sometimes all you have to do is hunker down and ride out the storm.

By the way, if you're looking for Diegnau, he's gone ice fishing. But this time he's not using his quiet time on the ice to ponder his professional future. Diegnau is all about catching dinner.

So watch out, walleye.