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Ad Index

Advertiser	Page No.	Target Specialty Products	Page No.
Advanced Sensor Technology	13	Tee-2-Green	CV2-1
Andersons	CV4	Turf Merchants	16B, 42
BASF	14-15, 25, 61	Turfco	11
Cleary Chemical	44-45, 47	UAP Professionals	9
DuPont	36-37	Underhill	17A-17P
Elkay Mfg Co.	6		
EP Minerals	19		
Farmsaver	7		
Golf Construction News	48		
Jacobsen	46		
Lebanon Turf	6, 29, 32, CV3		
Milorganite	4		
Oregon Fine Fescue	5		
PBI/Gordon	39		
Par Aide	2		
Phoenix	41		
Rain Bird	27		
SePRO	31		
Smithco	33A-D		
Standard Golf	30		
Syngenta	21		

TURFGRASS TRENDS

Agrium Adv. Tech.	55
Bayer ES	58-59
Floratine	57
John Deere	50-51

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Editorial Index

Company	Page No.	Masters Capital Management	Page No.
American Society of Irrigation Consultants	26	Palmetto Dunes Resort	12
Atlanta Athletic Club	11	Pete Dye	43
BASF	10	Rocky Mountain GCSA	10
Blackhawk Golf Club	11	Ron Whitten	43
Breckenridge Golf Club	11	Shell Point Golf Club	11
Brookside Golf & Country Club	8	Small Business Administration	23
Burrer Brooks Golf Club	11	Southern Hills Country Club	28
Classic Club	11	Surron Bay Golf Club	11
Club Car	24	The Club at Pradera	11
Colbert Hills Golf Club	11	The Harvester Golf Club	11
Colorado CMAA	10	The Ledges Golf Club	11
Colorado Golf Association	10	The Links at Bodega	11
Colorado PGA	10	The Scotts Co.	28
Colorado State University	10	THK Consulting	10
Course Crafters	26	Tournament Club of Iowa	11
Creek Club at Reynolds Plantation	11	Trojan Battery Co.	24
David D. Davis & Associates	26	True North Golf Club	11
E-Z-GO	24	Turf and Ornamental Communicators Association	10
Golf Digest	18, 43	United Nations	24
Indian Wells Golf Resort	11	Washakie Golf & RV Resort	34
John Deere	11		

gone swimming

Maybe it was the sheer lung power required to inflate the multi-sectioned alligator pool on a hot weekend at the start of the summer. Or maybe it was trying to rig a bicycle pump to squeeze even more air inside the little pool. More likely, it was the palpable sense of anticipation and giddiness of Miles and Quinn, two little boys ready to splash in the chilliness of the water. That single moment (well, really, 45 minutes of respiratory tussle) took me back about 30 years to a hot Kansas summer on my grandparents' farm.

My grandparents ran cattle and pigs and cultivated milo, corn and wheat on a quarter section outside of Culver, Kan., with the summer help of yours truly, my brother and two cousins. We did have to work to basically earn our keep, but we also got to play — specifically we got to swim in a cattle water tank — which in other seasons doubled as a water source for cows.

Imagine a round swimming pool made of rigid metal, probably 10 feet across and about 30-inches tall. Then imagine cows salivating all over it. Today, I find the notion rather nauseating, even though I know Grandma Decker made sure

A LAUGHTER ATTACK IS THE ONLY THING TO FEAR IN THESE WATERS

BY MARK LUCE

the thing was washed thoroughly.

But on those summer days, the tank was an oasis on the austere Plains. Seemingly, my adolescent years were peppered with various types of aqua-laden fun, including a hyper-chlorinated monster at a campground not far from my grandparents' place, the sheer enormity of the Salina Municipal pool, running through a tiny sprinkler at my aunt's house and testing out the laws of physics on a neighbor's Slip-n-Slide.

I've water skied with a sunburned uncle, canoed with grumpy parents on an obscure Kansas river and paddled with a feisty girlfriend on the Potomac. I've enjoyed jet skiing in the Ozarks, wrestled a tiny sailboat on a small lake, lounged on a pontoon boat before jumping from dangerous cliffs, sped on a boogie board in the Pacific surf and splashed in the much-warmer Atlantic.

Sitting in our backyard — winded and dizzy — all these memories came flooding back, which started me thinking about what it was about water that held so many fairly formative instances in my life.



The little literary man inside me immediately defaulted to Siddhartha's claim of listening to the river, the notion that life flows, ever changing, and we're better floating with that current instead of fighting it. Water, too, symbolizes renewal — a rebirth as it cleanses and purifies. I mused, too, on the mystery of the ocean to the explorers of yesteryear who, despite myths of giant monsters and precipitous edges, blindly leapt into the vastness.

Deep into this philosophical reverie, I felt the unmistakable sting of arctic-cold water and heard the unmistakable cackle of three- and six-year-old boys. As I jumped up ready to splash back, it all became clear.

We love the water because it's fun — nothing more, nothing less.

Mark Luce lives in Kansas City, Mo., where Darth Vader sprinklers dominate the backyards.

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