



## CATASTROPHES

By Monroe S. Miller

There are a couple of things you have to remember if you are in this business of managing a golf course. One is that almost everything takes a lot of time - more time than you or your players think it should. Nature seems to take care of that. Newly planted trees seem to be small forever. It takes years before you begin to notice them. You cannot topdress greens today and expect them to roll fast and perfect tomorrow. Maybe in a week or even ten days, but not tomorrow. You have to wait, after sowing bentgrass seed in an area, for the seeds to imbibe water, germinate, establish a root system and foliage, before you can even mow for the first time. Wait some more for the area to fill in enough to tolerate the more frequent mowing and traffic. New construction takes time to settle to final grade. Fresh sand in bunkers will precipitate grumbling from players for months and months until it finally firms up. Wait . . . wait . . . wait, for the rains to come. Wait some more for them to stop. It never ends, and you learn early on that a Golf Course Superintendent must have an abundance of patience if he is to survive, prosper and enjoy this business.

The other thing you must recognize and accept is that there is always, and I do mean ALWAYS, something wrong or something broken. We are too often reacting to situations, because of this uncomfortable and undeniable fact. No amount of planning or caution or griping can overcome this. It is the nature of the beast, I guess. I've observed in the past 20 years that never has a season gone by that we don't have to deal with catastrophes. And you must be prepared to suffer catastrophes without losing your courage or your composure.

It is strange, almost perverse, that I remember so many of these catastrophes - the worst of my experiences on a golf course. They've caused so much misery and work and worry that one would think, on the surface, that you'd put them out of your mind. Less wierd, maybe, is the fact that I can recall with clarity stories of

catastrophes that happened at Blackhawk Country Club before I arrived and catastrophes other Golf Course Managers have experienced. I guess there is some truth in the old saw that "misery likes company".

All of these things, thankfully, don't happen in one year. If they did, they would do us all in. When you lump many of these incidents together like I am here, or like you might do in a moment of reflection, they seem almost ludicrous. How in the world could some of them ever happen? Well they did, they still do, and they probably always will.

There was the time, for example, when the old Toro Series IV tractor got away from the driver. Although it happened before my time here, I've heard the story many times, from older employees and from members who were witnesses. Seems it was parked above the 18th tee, running, without the parking brake set. Well, the worst happened - across 18 tee, down the 100% slope, over 17 green and down that steep bank just missing several big oak trees. End of story? Sorry not. Off the golf course, across both lanes of Lake Mendota Drive, barely missing an oncoming car, through a neighbor's yard and . . . CRASH! Right into his living room. Lots of damage to the house and a lot of embarrassment. The good news was that no one was hurt and that the old Toro suffered little damage and is still, to this day, in great working order. I wonder how many other catastrophes that old tractor could tell about.

You'd think one trip into a house would be enough for any golf course, wouldn't you? Well, not here. The other time it happened was way on the west end of the golf course. Same story, only different vehicle, different house (thank God!) and different actor. Fortunately I wasn't here for that one, either.

It isn't that I haven't witnessed my share of accidents in the past 15 years. Far from it. I preach, instruct and demand safety, yet I've experienced the gut-wrenching sight of three different Greenskings lying on their side, rolled

off and over the steep banks of this hilly golf course. I've pulled a Toyota pickup away from the trunk of a 70' American Linden tree, knowing it was a total loss (small loss, at least. I hate Japanese trucks.) On two occasions I've been awakened at night by the phone call of a night waterman, shaken and scared because a Cushman truckster had gotten away from him and found a tree to pile into. One we were able to repair; the other challenged an insurance adjuster who finally declared it "totalled".

The dramatic yet severe grade changes make Blackhawk a beautiful golf course, but the price of this beauty has been very high. I shudder to think of what is next, knowing full well that there will be a next time. When will it come? But I have never had an experience like Bill Eckert had in 1973. Bill was Tom Harrison's predecessor at Maple Bluff and I will never forget his panic call on an early summer morning nearly 15 years ago. They were spraying greens that day and in addition to the fungicide they were putting down, Bill was adding one ounce of  $\text{FeSO}_4/\text{M}$ . He left a list of materials and their quantities for the applicator who had come in early to get ahead of play. Bill had clearly written "add 4#  $\text{FeSO}_4$  to the tank". Well, his employee was apparently still riding the snooze bus through Sleepy Hollow when he was getting ready to go and misread the "4 pounds  $\text{FeSO}_4$ ". He added 40 pounds! It wasn't until he was back in the shop for a refill that he asked Bill, "Why are we adding so much ferrous sulfate this week?" Eckert was dumbfounded. "We aren't," he replied. "Sure we are," was the comeback. "Look at your recipe - it does say '40 pounds  $\text{FeSO}_4$ ', doesn't it?" Bill hadn't misprinted - the employee had misread. I shot over there as quickly as I could. Eckert was chain smoking and Harrison was wild. They finally decided to quickly mow the sprayed greens, hoping most of the  $\text{FeSO}_4$  was on the foliage. They then watered heavily, despite the fact it was a Women's Day. Those greens were as black as coal for a few days, but turned into a vibrant and rich green after that. Bill left the business not many years later. Harrison's hair immediately turned gray.

I still shudder at the close call we had the spring we built our new pump-house. The contractor started in February and made excellent progress,

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such good progress that we were actually ahead of schedule. But it wasn't a normal spring, not even close. We opened early. It was very dry. It didn't rain. Panic set in. Players were screaming that the greens were like airport runways. We were barely able to cut cups. Grass was wilting everywhere, despite the fact it was only early April. We wondered what in the hell we were going to have to do. Well, we did the obvious. We were forced to get permission from the Village Fire Chief to use a fire hydrant for a water source to fill our own sprayer and those borrowed from Nakoma and Maple Bluff. We set up ¾" hose and RainBird 707 sprinklers on roller bases and started watering greens. We hauled water for a week, first doing greens, then tees, then greens again, then the distressed fairway areas. It finally did rain, just about the day we were ready to start pumping water.

As if that wasn't bad enough to insure a similar catastrophe would never happen to me again, it certainly did - a year ago this past spring. This time we were installing a new 12" irrigation main from our new pumphouse (it will always be the "new" pumphouse), across the 16th hole, under Lake Mendota Drive to the pipeline that moves water to the other 17 holes. Again, we started early - the contractor had to plow off nearly 5 feet of snow before he could start digging. Progress was

excellent. But 1986 was another early season with no spring rains. The contractor was happy because things were going well and he was suffering no interruptions due to the weather. I, on the other hand, was frantic. Back to the Fire Chief to borrow a hydrant wrench. We hauled water for days, sweat bullets and prayed for rain. It finally did come, but not until we had suffered to an excess.

Disease infections, irrigation system breaks, hydraulic oil leaks, hot weather, cold weather, employees and a thousand other things that are sometimes out of our control turn our profession into one big gamble. "It makes you

wonder why anyone would want to do this for a career," I once remarked to Pat Zurawski, my Assistant, after a particularly trying catastrophe.

"Damned if I know," Pat said. And despite his youth and all of the exuberance that it brings, he really *didn't* know. He was having difficulty understanding what compelled so many of us to love managing a golf course. It can be so unpredictable, too often unrewarding and, often as not, very frustrating.

"I guess it just gets in your blood," he concluded.

Pat was right.

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