



## THE DROUGHT

By Monroe S. Miller

The flames in the fireplace are gently flickering and there is the slightest hint of hickory wood smoke in the air. I'm home alone and it is a very peaceful time right now. The thought pervasive in my mind at moments like this one in late fall, whether I'm inside or outside on the golf course, is that the drought of 1988 seems so long ago.

I am baffled by the emotion. The summer was easily the most brutal I've struggled through, even worse than 1976. And the autumn months didn't bring a whole lot of relief, especially September. Colleagues, when questioned about this, have expressed similar feelings. They cannot explain them either.

Maybe what we are noticing is the human tendency to quickly put bad experiences behind us. And this summer was at least a tough time, even if it wasn't "bad". Tough and frustrating. Disillusioning. The unauthorized meandering of the jet stream that brought us seemingly endless days and weeks of debilitating heat and lack of rainfall drove most people into an earlier and deeper stupor than most summers do; for us, the price for somnolence was immediate disaster.

The season of 1988 is one we'll not soon forget, even if it seems long removed. I subscribe to the philosophy that says regardless of how bad something is, there is always some good. The good I've taken from this extraordinary six months past is a new reference point. Now most of us will be able to say, hopefully for many years to come, "Yes, this was a tough summer, but it doesn't come close to the one we had back in '88." The best of my short military career was a reference. No matter how bad things get — difficult summers, irrigation leaks at 2:00 a.m., rampant disease, personnel problems, or whatever — they pale in comparison to 15 months in a combat zone where the risk of losing your life is very real, all 24 hours a day.

I learned a lot of other things from the drought of 1988. One of the most

enduring was a reminder of the importance of pacing myself. It became quite clear by mid-June that the year was going to be very long and intense. It was equally apparent that a real effort would be required to keep a healthy pace. Reasonable middle ground between angry reactions with fist shaking and withdrawal into a shell had to be found. That's easier said than done and yet for me it was something important. It would have been impossible to keep a breakneck pace from opening until Thanksgiving with the heat and drought wearing us down. A pace like that is unhealthy and potentially destructive. It can take a mental and psychological toll, also.

Pacing involved simplifying nearly everything, both on the job and at home. It meant accepting the weather that bore down so unmercifully day after day. It meant separating the golf course challenges and dealing with each one as it appeared, one at a time.

If a sense of humor was ever important, this summer past was the time. I was really lucky this year because my assistant, Pat Zurawski, is blessed with a marvelous sense of humor. There were days when the sun would beat down on the golf course with a dead, blistering, relentless malice. Sweat was swelling from every pore in everyone's body. There wouldn't be a breath of air anywhere. I'd ask Pat how things looked across the tracks and he'd reply with something like, "Nice and toasty warm, the grass is browning nicely." I'd have to laugh.

A good laugh can do wonders in dispelling gloom and despair. It can put things back into perspective, and heaven knows that was very important this summer. No part of life can afford to be without humor for long, including life on a golf course during a drought. Laughter this year was a powerful tonic for me and the people on my staff.

In a hot, droughty summer like '88 when wells give out and streams and rivers go dry and golf courses barely make it to survive another day, golf

course superintendents need to reinforce confidence in their abilities, training and experience. This was not a time for faint heartedness. Trust in our own abilities, our own strength and reasoning needs support from science. We got it this summer from those with that charge, and it helped. The faculty from the UW deserve our applause.

Another ingredient is frequently discovered by many in a drought year. When on the verge of being overtaken, despite help from science and despite personal ability, church becomes more important to some. From what I've read, this has been fairly common in drought years among those whose fate is heavily dependent on the weather. People with no past inclination to go to church suddenly attend prayer meetings and visit sanctuaries. They sit before the pulpit, heads bowed in humble respect. Prayer may seem a quaint option to some. But this past summer, even White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater, when asked about the administration's response to the drought, replied, "Pray for rain." In most cases that makes the most sense. And a sign in front of a Wisconsin farm along Highway 18 this summer read: "Read II Chronicles 7:14." Look the passage up sometime this winter and think about it.

There were a lot of interesting side-lights to the drought I won't soon forget. Have you ever seen a time when the weather forecasters were more accurate? Forecasts sounded like a broken record — "Hot and dry all week." I'll never appreciate the joy with which they present this bad news to us. Apparently, to most people this is *good* news. On those few occasions when we did receive a little rain, the rain refreshed the news reports and weathercasts as much as it did golf courses and farm fields.

And speaking of forecasts, 1988 led to a major disappointment of sorts. I've always put a lot of faith into the long range weather outlook in the Old Farm-

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ers Almanac. They predicted that Wisconsin would be under water in 1988 instead of covered with dust. Consider their forecast for southern Wisconsin:

*"... colder than normal temperatures and heavy rains are expected through most of May, with brief mild spells. Sunnier and more seasonable weather is in the offing for the end of May and the latter one-half of June, interrupted by cold and wet periods during early June."*

Gee, that's not what we experienced in Madison!

For northern Wisconsin, their forecast went like this:

*"May and June will have more frequent and prolonged cold periods, with heavy rains slated for the last week of May and the first half of June."*

Someone from up north will have to tell me how accurate that forecast turned out to be.

Generally, I am not a highly superstitious person. But even I flinched

when the UW-Madison Meteorology Department named a new director to the school's Space Science and Engineering Center. He's Francis Bretherton, former director of the National Center for Atmospheric Research. His qualifications are impressive, but the thing that caught my eye was that we hired a man who forecasts a "Dust Bowl" for the central U.S., which includes us. I call that a bad omen!

The downside of such a catastrophic event can get to be depressing. The misery of the farmers in drought areas was overwhelming. It was made worse by watching the millions of dollars made by grubby traders on the futures market, profiting from that farm misery. Who wasn't disgusted by the gouging attempted by supermarkets, placing all the blame for unjustified and unrelated price increases at the feet of the drought? Who wasn't saddened to see so many urban plants, especially city trees, struggle from stress inflicted by the heat and lack of rainfall? Who

among us didn't cheer when suggestions to divert water from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi were laughed at by key officials? Who failed to notice that at times it seemed the only prosperous plants on golf courses were the weeds?

Finally, the whole world gained something valuable from our drought — a more clear understanding of the "greenhouse effect". Although it was first described almost a century ago, the time has really come when we must more carefully consider action/reaction equations. We need to be worried about how drastic this would change life for our children and grandchildren.

Yet, despite the gloom such a summer brings and the frightening harbingers that it conjures up, I'm optimistic. The time has not yet come to abandon our planet. As we say so often in our business of managing golf courses, "Next year will be better."

I sure hope so.

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