



## THE FIRST MOWING

By Monroe S. Miller

It's an annual subject of discussion among outdoor people, including most golf course superintendents. The question this time of year is, of course, when spring begins.

Thoreau once wrote that the human ear isn't keen enough to catch the first footfalls of the returning spring season. That may be. But even if true, that hasn't stopped the conversation about when that moment is.

Some look to the stars. It could be argued that spring begins on the tick of the winter solstice. That is when the sun begins to head north again. Frankly, I cannot believe that anyone really thinks spring begins **before** Christmas! No question — by mid-January there is a noticeable difference in the height of the sun and you feel the days lengthening somewhat. It's also true that the winter solstice marks a turn for the better, both realistically and astronomically. One look at the ground, however, would cancel this notion in the minds of most of us ordinary mortals.

Substantially more people subscribe to the belief that spring starts on the day of the vernal equinox — about the 21st of March. The argument here is certainly more persuasive. I've never personally seen such an equinox when there weren't some real and honest signs of spring, even if we still had a couple of feet of snow on the ground.

My wife is one of a group who seems to think that the sight of a robin marks the true beginning of spring. There's some sense to that. She doesn't mean winter robins, but rather the true migrants who overwinter in the warmer southern climates. It's usually late March or early April when Cheryl sees the first one and makes her declaration that "Spring is here." It is not a bad sign to use; robins tend to travel north with the spring weather. But I've seen some years when they've guessed badly and have had to retreat to escape the "spring" weather and a serious snow storm!

The robin watchers are joined each year by the red-wing blackbird watchers, the geese people and even some

who look for the activity of the bees. Each group declares their sign is the real sign of the return of spring to Wisconsin.

Bird watchers are rivalled in numbers, I've noticed, by plant people. I'm more inclined to side with them in looking for the first sign of spring. The crocuses seem to bloom first and give the hint that the daffodils aren't far behind. Most of us have them around our clubhouses and are joined by members who watch them with interest, too. The daffodils are followed by the hyacinths and they are in turn succeeded by the violets we all have at the woods' edge. Then the tulips! All conjure up the most beautiful visions of springtime.

Season watchers have other clues. In our town, some watch for the ice to leave Lake Mendota. Since our golf course is right on her shores, I give a lot of credibility to the correlation of the Mendota ice breakup and the arrival of spring. Some watch for buds — weeping willow and pussy willow are good indicators.

Others automatically think it is spring when the tip off of the state high school basketball tourney takes place. Easter is the first day of spring for a lot of other people, regardless of where it falls on the calendar.

And in our cozy world of golf, many many players hold tightly to the belief that "if it's opening day, it must be spring!" Not too far from the truth. Baseball fans say the same thing about the Brewers' opening day. They, too, are often fooled by snowstorms.

What really inspires the question in the first place is the variability of the spring season. The first stirrings are subtle, when we know that winter is relaxing but yet the growing days aren't here. And we are impatient, especially when the real love of work is a golf course. Even "ordinary people" are looking for signs of green life. We're all restless after too many months of confinement.

The emotions and frustrations of waiting for spring were very well put by

Robert Frost in his poem, "Two Tramps In Mud Time". Frost had something when he wrote:

*"You know how it is with an April day  
When the sun is out and the wind is  
still,*

*You're one month on in the middle of  
May.*

*But if you so much as dare to speak,  
A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,  
A wind comes off a frozen peak,  
And you're two months back in the  
middle of March."*

What Frost is really saying is that this is the time of year when anything can happen; it seems like June one day and January the next!

All of this wondering and speculation about when spring begins is really kind of silly. If you want to know the answer to the age old question, ask me because I know when spring arrives. Exactly, precisely when. It is at the time of the first mowing. My bet is that a lot of my colleagues feel the same way with the same certainty.

The first mowing of the golf course is an exciting event. It is the reward for spending a couple of months in the shop, readying equipment for another season. If one is able to get that first mowing in before opening day, and we usually try, it makes that a really spectacular day.

The sight of any equipment on the golf course for the first time after the winter months is always something to behold. And that view is made even better because the grass machinery we put out in the spring is clean and polished and sometimes freshly painted. Almost every year we also have a new piece of equipment or two that we have pined to use for a couple of months. Frankly, when it comes to new mowing equipment going out for the first mowing of the year, I like to assign myself as the operator. It's a thrill I hope I never lose. That sight of machines cutting golf course grasses, after such a long absence, is a sure sign that spring has arrived.

The first mowing always has more impact if preceded, even by only a few days, by some rain. The golf course can be dominated by winter brown with only the slightest hint of green. But almost immediately after the first rainfall it is miraculously green. A "green rain" brings on the golf course grasses, and that growth brings forth the call to "get

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the mowers across the tracks.”

After having seen either that dormant brown turf or the white snow cover for so many weeks, the new green makes it look like a real golf course again. Putting mowers on the ground redefines all the playing features — fairways look like fairways; greens and tees really look like greens and tees again. The first mowing works wonders in leveling everything and in cleaning up the playing ground that has received so little attention since early November. Patterns are re-established. Geometry and symmetry and arcs and curves have returned, all neat and clean. Golf courses almost take on the appearance of pieces of public art after the first mowing, catching the eye and attention of nearly everyone passing by.

The smell of the first mowing is also the smell of spring, another pretty good sign of the season. There is a sweet, distinctive fragrance that hovers over the whole golf course after the first mowing. I think it seems so sweet because it has been so long since that fragrance last filled our nostrils. For a guy who was raised on a farm, it con-

tures up wonderful memories of the first crop of hay put up in the barn.

When you really get down to it, the reason that the first mowing signals spring is probably because it signals that the grass is growing again. Few things are more beautiful than a Wisconsin golf course green with the freshness that only comes in spring. When the grass is green enough to mow, it means that now all of spring can come into bloom — all the flowers and all the trees. The old world will be new and pretty again.

Mowing a golf course for the first time is the same as saying, with all the excitement and exuberance you can conjure up, “SPRING IS HERE!”



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