What Would You Have Done?

By Monroe S. Miller

We hosted the WSGA State Match Play Tournament at our Club early in the summer. Our members have always been highly supportive of amateur golf and they were pleased to be able to have some of the state's best golf players here for a few days.

For myself, tournaments like this one are challenging and give opportunities to really manage resources to provide the best product possible.

This wasn't the best time for us. We put in a new irrigation system last fall. Finishing touches were required this spring. We also built a new green, 13 new tees, 10 new bunkers, laid down 4,000 feet of an 8' wide asphalt cart path, dug a new pond, etc., ad nauseum, all after August 1, 1988. We could have used more grow-in and healing time.

We worked our tails off this spring with the tournament in mind. Plans were made around the dates of the event.

During the tournament, which had two 18-hole rounds of golf on three of the four days, my crew worked the daylight until 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. until dark schedule.

Pride, excitement, teamwork, camaraderie, satisfaction and all those similar emotions were what we were feeling. Players were happy with the conditions; so were the WSGA officials and committee people. Although the weather was cool and cloudy, it was comfortable enough for everyone.

I should have been suspicious — things were going almost **too** well. Then it happened.

One of the papers came out with a quote from one of the players. He'd lost his match on the second playoff hole and blamed it on a "maintenance snafu". He claimed he lost because of a lip on the hole, caused of course by one of my employees.

The kid who cut the cup was sick. He was certain it couldn't have happened because we **always** (every day) use a steel plate to level the ground around the hole. That made it essentially impossible to leave a high lip on one side of the hole. He is also an excellent golfer, formerly a collegiate player and now a student in the UW-Madison Turf and Grounds Management program. He was even going to play in the tournament. I mention these things to point out that there wasn't negligence on our part, in my mind, anyway.

I was absolutely furious. Usually, even when conditions are good on the golf course, little is said in the press about the course. That is how it should be. The focus should be on the game and the players. But I resent, with all the emotion I can muster, public whining like that, even **if** something is wrong.

So I confronted this player and gave him holy hell. Phrases like "poor sportsmanship" and "sour grapes from a sore loser" were loosed on him. I expressed my belief that he did not understand the special character about golf — it is a gentleman's game. A gentleman wouldn't complain in the papers and assail the work of a lot of people.

He knew of my disbelief how someone who was a guest at a private club and given the kind of service and attention our crew had given could possibly gripe publicly about anything. "No class," I said.

There was more that doesn't need repeating here. The player felt badly. Of course, his first defense was "I was misquoted." I seriously doubt it. Reporters cannot dream such things up and then print them as news — it is too risky and violates their code of ethical conduct.

The offending player personally apologized to each and every person on my staff. He expressed regrets to me, which I accepted after giving him a verbal lashing. He wrote a note to the young man who had cut the cup. And he left a couple of cases of refreshments in the shop.

I don't mind constructive criticism. In fact, I welcome it if it is legitimate. But even now, as I look back wondering if I should have been so forceful, I still say golf players don't need to make their dissatisfactions public. Come see me in my office.

Overreaction? Howitzer on a gnat? Frankly, I'd do what I did all over again, given similar circumstances. A good boss sometimes has to be a little like a good coach — stand up for your team when one of the players has been wronged.

What would you have done?