
CEDAR CREEK: Birthplace Of A Golf Course

(Part Two)

“THE CHALLENGE”

By Pat Norton

The first half of the Cedar Creek story (*The Grass Roots*, May/June 1989) dealt with the actual planning and construction of this Robert Lohmann layout, located along the Mississippi River in Onalaska, Wisconsin. It covered the story through the seeding of the first nine holes in the fall of 1988, which seems like ancient history as my mind mulls over the last two years.

This half of the story will deal with the challenge of finishing actual construction, ridding ourselves of contractors, and easing our way into the transformation of this 140-acre parcel of bare ground into a lush, playable golf course.

The story continues with a discussion of grow-in while dealing with outside interference (sewer and water lines, residential roads, and endless delays). There were many high points and many low points from spring of 1989 until now.

Looming large was the real possibility that the course wouldn't be opening at all in 1989. A mixed blessing, to be sure, but certainly by spring 1990 we would have a completed clubhouse, road network, and a more beautiful golf course. This became our new goal, one that we had to achieve. How we achieved it and went on to have a very successful first year will finish our story.

The original projection for opening Cedar Creek for play called for completion of all construction in 1988, with the entire course open by July 1, 1989. After suffering numerous delays in spring 1988, a revised construction schedule called for first nine seeded in the fall of 1988 and opened by July 1989. The second nine would be completed in the spring of 1989 for a spring 1990 opening.

“In order to meet this schedule,” we all say, “no more delays, no more surprises, lots of teamwork, no hassles. Right?”

WRONG! Considering all of the delays with sewer, water and roads, hassles between principal partners and archi-

itects, and surprises (as in ‘look at **all** the erosion that storm gave us last night’), I still feel that we did a pretty good job of completing Cedar Creek; although not exactly according to our revised schedule.

The first nine holes, after considerable regrading and reseeding, looked pretty good by end of May 1989. Yet to come, however, was sewer and water line installation, which was delayed until late August. After seeing how extensively damaged the course became, I began to get really angry.

All the planning, coordination, and hard work that went into the first nine made no difference now. After screwing around all spring and summer, the city of Onalaska and our principal developer finally got their act together. We all knew that the route of these lines would cut right through the first nine. Yet nothing was ever expedited, pushed through, or hurried up in this approval process.

In fact, it was just the opposite. There was a damned casual attitude about these delays and the long term effect on the golf course. A three-month project starting in late August allowed almost no leeway for actual sewer installation, and absolutely no leeway for reconstruction of the golf course.

The only people who were really upset about it all were my crew, the sewer contractor, and myself. The sewer contractor knew full well that he'd have a hard time finishing his job before winter. I knew that there was no chance of any reseeding or healing in of these areas of the golf course in fall 1989. In effect, we lost almost the entire construction season because of that damned casual attitude that people sometimes display.

The sad part of it all is that these potential problems were well known very early on and noted in meetings between Lohmann Golf Designs and Cedar Creek. Get into a knowledgeable discussion sometime about the pitfalls and prob-



A rear view of the clubhouse. A new wing may be added onto the right side within two to three years.



Our 13th green. Algae problems here were severe until we began hand mowing exclusively.

lems in golf course/real estate development — the serious delays are usually caused by politics, people, and money.

But what a challenge to persevere through this mess! Driving around the course in the late fall of 1989 proved to be very satisfying, if you could keep away from the sewer construction areas, forget that there were no paved roads yet, and blank out the fact that the clubhouse wouldn't be starting up until about three months before the entire golf course would be due to open for play. What a challenge, but oh, what a mess!

Do not, however, get the wrong impression. Work on the second nine progressed very smoothly during the spring and summer of 1989. Charlie Kisow of Midwest Golf Development pushed himself and his people to the limit in completing this project. There was extensive lake construction and riprapping, grading and top soiling, irrigation installation, and bridge construction to finish before seeding and sodding could commence. John Leibold of Leibold Irrigation had the irrigation system completed by June 17. Midwest Golf finished at Cedar Creek by June 25. A final meeting between Lohmann Golf and Cedar Creek was held on July 6, 1989.

It was very strange to see these contractors, who had been involved at Cedar Creek for so long, finish their work here. Shake hands, say your good-byes and wish good luck to each other because it's on to the next project. Now, brother, it's up to you. You're pretty much on your own to complete the course and get it opened up! The owners will provide the funds, Gary and the crew will provide the muscle and Mother Nature will provide many tricks. You will hopefully provide the leadership and expertise to allow this layout to reach its full potential.

It's interesting to look back in the notes from summer of 1989 and calculate the enormous amount of time devoted to very routine, mundane and tedious tasks that many times had to be repeated. Erosion repair was one such task. Repairs were made using everything from a wheelbarrow to a Cushman to our F350 dump truck to a Terex scraper. Every method of holding soil in place was tried — chopped straw, paper fibermulch, silt fencing, Curlex blankets, and finally, sod. Got a tough erosion situation in swales or other drainageways? Installing sod **with** Terrabond fabric underneath will usually solve the problem. It quickly became standard practice.

During the summer we also realized that neither nine would be opening in 1989. Some areas looked very good, others looked terrible. The late spring seeding on the second nine gave annual grasses and redroot pigweed an ex-

cellent opportunity for infesting these newer holes. We had such a good crop of weeds that people seriously asked us, "When are you opening, now that there's so much grass?"

After mowing down the weeds all summer, cooler fall weather helped us out by stunting back the weeds. This allowed the heretofore invisible bentgrass to fill in very nicely on greens, tees, and fairways. Unirrigated roughs do take quite awhile to thicken up — fall fertilization and overseeding helped a lot — but there is still a definite difference in turf quality between fairways and roughs.

By autumn's end in 1989, there developed a very real challenge for myself and my staff. The course was generally looking pretty good and making great progress. But was it all playable? We had huge scars of bare ground because of sewer lines, a big bare area that would contain the clubhouse, gravel roads, and great 50 mph grass, as Wayne Otto once said. Our grass **did** look great — if you were going by on County SN at 50 mph. How much longer before it'd be playable?

By autumn's end there was a much more personal challenge issued to me by our casual minded residential/clubhouse developer, who was also a 25 percent owner of this project. After our umpteenth discussion of who had more responsibilities to finish off, he made a very gold statement.

"Pat, I'll bet you that I have this all finished before our golf course is ready for play next spring," says he. I mull it over rapidly in my mind. Clubhouse not even started yet, roads need to be regraded and then paved ASAP in spring, huge entrance culvert and creek reshaping scheduled for whenever.

"Not even a chance," says I, "we are definitely further ahead than you and **will** have the golf course ready for play before the clubhouse is finished."

And that, my friends, is exactly what happened. The final countdown to opening day began with the break of spring 1990. Clubhouse construction and landscaping were in full swing by April 15th, the latter having been volunteered to my staff. Without the energy and drive of my assistants, Gary Mracek and Chris Breister, we'd still be up there landscaping. Chris had such a positive experience in his two years here that he's now pursuing formal training at the University of Minnesota-Wauseca.

Our crew also learned a lot during the spring landscaping. They are almost all inexperienced, but eager to learn and very teachable. Unlike some summer jobs, they were constantly doing something new and different. A positive, "can do" teamwork type of attitude was always encouraged.

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Number 14, a short par 3, drops 60 feet from the tees on the upper right. This is easily the most scenic part of the back nine.



The 18th green area is really pretty. Additional trees will be planted to provide backdrop and separation from the main entrance behind it.

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Besides Gary and Chris, I had many other employees with a real interest in the game of golf. They were all hard working and provided many good suggestions throughout our first season. Many of them will continue on at Cedar Creek next year, which most certainly will help to further our progress.

As we counted down the weeks before opening, we realized that the course would in no way be perfect. The clubhouse and landscaping were only 60 percent complete, while the parking lot and roads weren't totally paved until six weeks after opening. Golfers didn't seem to mind at all. In fact, they were most interested to see work in progress.

Play of the golf course built up pretty quickly after our May 24th opening. We expect about 23,000 rounds in 1990, which most certainly meets our expectations. Our problem next year will be one of too much play on the golf course. Already this year we saw signs of too much play of our young, tender course. Our Penncross tees are taking quite a divot beating, young shaded greens have serious algae problems, and the mixed blessing of golf cars are beating down our patchy roughs. Cedar Creek is a young, but very popular track for not only La Crosse area golfers, but also for players from well out into Minnesota and Iowa.

We have settled down into a somewhat normal routine as of this writing. Tree planting, fall aerification and fertilization, and minimal overseeding have fortunately taken the place of sewer construction, road paving, and massive reconstruction of golf course areas.



The 13th green is really tucked into the woods. It is surrounded by No. 6 fairway on the left, and No. 14 green, on the right.

Autumn is indeed beautiful here in "the Coulee Region". Our golf course is also beautiful and fits in nicely with the surrounding hills and bluffs. Best of all, we've all got more time to sit back and enjoy it all.

But, as I told my boss recently, "The challenge here was in building the course and getting it opened up. Are you and the other partners ready to move on and build another one?"

I think not, but it sure would be interesting and challenging to do it again someday.

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