



Autumn is a Time to Reflect

By Rob Schultz

There are few things golfers in Wisconsin dread more than the numbing winds and the frosty mornings of late autumn.

In a few weeks, the clubs will find a snug corner of the basement and serve as a reminder of past enjoyment every time you trudge past them.

My pleasures on the golf course were few and far between in 1991. In past summers, I always found a way to sneak out at least three times a week. But this year, the University of Wisconsin athletic department's decision to cut sports, the Green Bay Packers' miseries and, most important, a new addition to my family named Elizabeth cut my rounds down drastically.

It's not that there weren't highlights on the links. The opening of the University of Wisconsin golf course stands high on my list. It was a highlight because I watched the school grumble over whether to build it for so many years, then I watched the actual construction and, finally, I got a chance to play it.

Funny, but I liked the course more before it was opened. There was something special about walking alone on the quiet, pristine fairways of one of the country's best new layouts before the hackers took mounds of divots out of it.

There were other highlights, too, and they didn't always deal with an exceptional shot. Here are my five most memorable golf moments of 1991:

1) *The big choke.* In mid-June I was playing golf with three buddies at the beautiful new Cedar Creek Country Club in Onalaska when I faced a 100-foot, three-breaker putt. We were playing 36 holes that day and I had been putting miserably. My playing partners were big gamblers and as I set up to putt Larry Gessler gave 200 to 1 odds that I couldn't get down in two. Scott Schwendemann handed him five bucks and the bet was on.

I didn't know about the bet and stroked my first putt to within three feet of the hole. Feeling real good about myself, I strutted up to the ball to knock it in the

hole for par. That's when Schwendemann told me about the bet and said he'd split the profits with me if I made the putt. Hands shaking, the putt rolled past the hole. It took Gessler 10 minutes to stop laughing.

2) *A fun round.* Early in September, good friend Gary Van Sickle drove to Madison to play the UW course. Van Sickle is a former *Milwaukee Journal* writer who is now the PGA Tour writer for *Golf World* magazine. He heard me rave about the UW course and had to find out for himself how good it was.

We played with UW pro Dave Steffan and Pleasant View pro Ted Donker, an old friend from Oshkosh who I replaced 20 years ago as the night water man for the front 9 greens at Lake Shore Municipal Golf Course. That was back when we used to water with hoses.

Anyway, I had a wonderful time as we took turns telling stories, laughing, poking fun at each other and playing some pretty good golf. Donker shot a 68. Steffan, who is perfect for the role of director of golf for the UW course, was in the low 70s. Van Sickle and I struggled in the low 80s. But, with the exception of Donker's score, it didn't matter what we shot. We were having too much fun.

3) *The Odana hacker.* I don't usually like going to the course by myself and not knowing who I'm going to play with. Leave yourself at the mercy of the pro shop guys and you usually end up playing with beginners. It can make for a dreadful day.

On this day at Odana Hills I ended up with a hacker and he was playing horribly. But on the par-5 11th, after he dribbled a drive, dribbled his second shot and dribbled his third, he smoked his fourth shot about 180 yards and it rolled right into the hole for a birdie.

The man's face lit up like the sun. His eyes grew large, he let out a belly laugh and had a fresh bounce to his step the rest of the day. It was pure pleasure to play with him because that shot made him so happy. He'll remember it for the rest of his life. I couldn't help thinking

that that is what golf is supposed to be about.

4) *The dreaded 16th at Oakland Hills.* There are certain holes in the world that stick out in most everybody's memory and the dogleg 16th at Oakland Hills ranks right up there with the 18th at Pebble Beach, the 12th at Augusta and the 17th at the TPC at Sawgrass.

In September, when I was in Detroit to cover the Packers' early-season embarrassing loss to the Lions, Oakland Hills' famed superintendent Ted Woehrle was gracious enough to let Green Bay radio man, Mark Daniels, and me return to play his course that had just hosted the U.S. Senior Open.

I was playing fairly well—I was 2-over on the back nine—and had hit a perfect drive at the 16th when I faced the same shot that had sunk more than a few of the world's greatest golfers. I needed to hit a shot 140 yards, over water, to a green that jutted out into that water. The pin was tucked far to the right side, which was closest to the water. It was the same pin placement that's used for the final rounds of all major tournaments that have been held there for the past jillion years.

My lie was good, but I had a downhill stance and I knew the ball would move to the right. I adjusted for the fade, stood over the ball...and froze. I couldn't swing the club. Sweat poured out of my hands like fibs from a politician. When I finally pulled the trigger, my eight iron felt like a sledge hammer.

The ball headed for the pin but it started to fade. Oh (bleep). It hit the right side of the green and then...splash. Daniels looked at me and asked if I wanted a cherry lifesaver.

But I was OK. When I see the world's greatest players try that shot in future U.S. Opens, I'll know exactly how they feel, especially if they fail.

5) *Two near aces.* OK, for all of you who think I'm one of the biggest choke artists in the history of golf, here's a story that may refute that. I was playing in a Wisconsin Newspaper Association

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outing at Devil's Head and anyone who aced the par-3 7th hole would have received \$10,000.

Now such a deal usually is enough to shake the bejesus out of anybody, but I had a strange feeling when I came to the rather simplistic 140-yard hole. I had played Devil's Head earlier in the year and remembered hitting an eight iron over the green. This time I smoked a nine iron and it had the flag covered. At the very last second a wisp of wind moved the ball and it missed dropping in the hole by six inches.

The golf outing officials standing on the tee behind me checked their underwear after I hit my shot. One second after I tapped in for birdie, my playing partner, Rob Zaleski, said, "Don't even think about it."

Later in the round, at the 200-yard par-3 17th, I hit a three-iron shot that landed even closer to the hole than my shot at No. 7. There was no money involved if I had aced it but it didn't matter. The fact I nearly aced two holes in one round was enough pleasure, and yes, agony, for one day.

Looking back, I realize that all my memorable moments had one common denominator: I was having a good time with good friends.

Golf is not as much about sport as it is friendship. To enjoy the game at its fullest, forget about your grip, your swing and keeping your head down. Just think about your friends and the beauty of the course that surrounds you. Those are the key ingredients to any memorable moment.



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