



# The Uneducated Golfer

By Pat Norton

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** With this piece about the uneducated golfer, Pat Norton begins his career as a columnist for THE GRASSROOTS. His feature, *The Public Golf Course Superintendent*, will clearly focus on the problems peculiar to that ever increasing segment of course management.

The NGF has documented the fact that not only are the majority of America's golfers public players, they also represent the area of greatest growth for golf.

And we have seen that in Wisconsin with the addition of Black Wolf Run, Cedar Creek, University Ridge and literally dozens of others.

With the construction of the new challenging golf courses has come employment opportunities for some of the very best among Wisconsin's golf course superintendents.

This editor can think of no one better qualified to look at public golf course issues than Pat. A graduate of the Turf Management program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he has a wealth of experience. He has been the GCS at South Hills, Cherokee and Cedar Creek. He served as assistant GCS at Blackhawk C.C. and was a construction superintendent for Lohmann Golf Designs for two years.

Pat, Sue, Ryan, Megan and Tom reside in Onalaska. Pat was elected to the WGCSA board of directors last November.

The explosion of golf in Wisconsin has created an uneducated monster. This daily fee monster is armed with the latest and greatest equipment, and subscribes to all of the pertinent golf magazines. He plays just enough golf so that any swing problems are self-correctable, and feels that his knowledge of the game is perfectly adequate!

But, considering the problems that these golf monsters create, it's no wonder that public course operators alternately curse and bless them! They are the lifeblood of public golf, yet there are times when drawing their blood has definitely crossed my mind.

The monster golfer has typically learned the game as an adult and never had exposure to PGA supervised youth group lessons. As a golfing youth he could have learned about that feature unique to golf, namely golf etiquette. He could have learned the importance of playing golf properly with courtesy to all others on the course and a minimal amount of wasted time.

He could also have learned about courtesy to the **golf course**, respect for the land, and respect for those who labor diligently to make conditions pleasant.

Lifelong golfers learn very early on to respect the golf course as well as the game. If this respect was not observed, a young golfer could easily have been banned from playing for a week or so.

There is so much to the game that these monster golfers never did learn, yet here they are. We, the golf course staff, must deal with them. Is there any way that we can correct their bad golf habits? Must we be the policemen for the public links? Where are the answers?

In the 90's we expect to see a continuation of the golf boom, especially in the public sector. Who will fuel this boom? Of course, it'll be the golf monster. More and more people are taking up the sport (it's next in line when softball becomes too demanding).

Can public course operators do anything at all effective about slow play, sloppy clothing and a complete lack of regard for the course? I regularly see golf cars within ten feet of greens, golfers hitting into each other, and so many near misses that hard hats should be issued upon registration in the golf shop!

I see people topping the ball off into the woods and emerging covered with poison ivy. I see others who could easily hit a golf ball farther with a baseball bat. Then there are the people who really get burned up when the suggestion is made that they hurry up.

Uneducated golfers really do not realize how frustrating it is to co-exist with them on the golf course. I often feel that ball mark damage far outweighs anything a lowly fungus could do to my greens. Why doesn't somebody come up with a compound that instantly heals all putting green bruises?

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Seriously, there has to be some better effort made to educate today's golfers. They need to know how to play quickly, courteously and properly. There are all kinds of educational materials available about the golf swing and how to play the different shots. There's precious little information available concerning golf etiquette.

How about some free information for the public golfer concerning etiquette, speed of play and care of the course?

Each public facility needs to formulate a program for their golfers detailing what's expected of them before they are actually on the course. Then as their round progresses, signage (such as the Keep Pace program discussed at last fall's Symposium) would seem a step in the right direction.

At Cedar Creek, too often it's the poor ranger who is charged with keeping the golf novices moving. There's no way one or two people can keep these neophytes in line. Quick speed of play and care of the course are elusive goals that are never mastered by many public golfers.

Telling some of these golf players to speed up is like telling your seven year-

old to back out the van. They may try like hell, but the fact is that they just don't know how to do it! In both cases strong written and verbal instructions are needed.

Golf facilities in the Sunbelt are probably far ahead of our semi-rural courses in the upper Midwest. Cedar Creek's assistant golf professional, Margaret Olsen, works winters in Palm Desert, California.

Margaret relates that golfers there are given plenty of instruction from the starter on proper play, then plenty of boot if they are tee cause of slow play. I have seen her put this philosophy into action, and it is indeed heartwarming. Usually not enough is done to attack the problem. Heaven forbid should we offend the offending golfer.

I hope that other public courses in Wisconsin have handled this complex problem better than we have here at the Creek. We seem to maximize the problem, but trivialize or shy away from strong solutions.

Speaking of trivia, there were more than a few trivial solutions to this problem presented at the Symposium in Milwaukee in October. I was sorely

tempted to get up and shout "Ropes and paint lines won't cut it. It's a matter of educating those monsters out there." Lay some free education on the public golfers and hope that they respond positively.

If they do respond in a positive manner, we may someday see unblemished greens, golf cars on the paths and away from the greens, courteous players who wait that extra few seconds for maintenance staff to clear the area and, most importantly, golfers who keep pace.

I suppose, though, that I should consider myself fortunate. As with most superintendents in these situations, I do have the option of veering off and heading in the other direction on my CarryAll II.

Pity the poor golf professional and his staff. They are in a no-win situation. Diligent enforcement of the rules really annoys the offenders, while lack of enforcement enrages those who do observe good golf etiquette. Almost always the golf shop staff gets caught in the middle.

With them I would not want to trade places.

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