



One Day at Augusta

by Rob Schultz

Some of the first words I heard when I entered Augusta National for the first time a few weeks ago were, "They spray paint the greens and they put dye in the water."

So what?

Let's demean Augusta some more. On the surface, it's not that tough because it has wide, expansive fairways and reachable par-5s. It's also famous for its crotchety directors and a maintenance budget the size of the American deficit.

Once again: So what?

Paint, dye and dollars are not what Augusta National is all about. Augusta National is about ambience and tradition. It's about Bobby Jones and Gene Sarazen and Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus. The footprints from the greatest golfers the world has ever known are nestled in every corner of the place. It's about azaleas and magnolias, Amen Corner and Rae's Creek, Eisenhower's Tree and Jones Cabin.

As a first-timer to Augusta with a one-day pass thanks to a great group of golf course superintendents from Wisconsin, I had nine hours to suck in as much history as I could muster while watching the present day's greatest golfers try to tame a monster. I left Augusta in a daze; I wondered if I saw enough, I etched into my memory banks the smell of a thousand azaleas in full bloom and the sight of those skyscraping pines behind the 10th green as well as the beauty of Amen Corner.

My eyes never stopped dancing as I trudged over Augusta's many hills, which is another aspect of the course that television can't capture. One minute I'd marvel at the perfectly manicured fairways and greens, the next I'd stare at those majestic pines.

Augusta is so expansive that I actually stood alone at times—such as when I walked aside the fifth fairway—and wondered what Bobby Jones was thinking about when he and Alister Mackenzie designed that hole. But I snapped out of my daze when Ray

Floyd knocked a shot within a few feet of the flag at a nearby green and the roar of approval from the huge gallery echoed through the trees. I scurried over toward the noise just in time to watch Floyd drop in a birdie putt at the par-3 6th hole.

Another Augusta roar.

One minute later it was so quiet that the only sounds I could hear were the melodic warblings from some Cardinals peering down from those pines. I walked away from the gallery and, in just a few yards, I was alone again. That is why Augusta is so special to me. Where else in this world of sports do the competitors take a back seat to the site itself?

For a Masters first-timer with any sense of history or love of golf, Augusta National is overwhelming. During the hours and days that followed my trip, I almost regretted promising that I'd write about my experience there because my head was flooded with so many thoughts that I couldn't sift through them all to express how I really felt.

What sticks in my mind so vividly now are those final few minutes before I left. I remember looking at my watch and noticing that I had to leave in 45 minutes. What had I missed? Where else could I go? Time passed too quickly. As Friday's round concluded and most everyone was heading toward their cars, I journeyed to the par-3 course and marveled at the beauty and serenity that surrounded a place that was just a few 100 yards from the big course. I peaked inside the Eisenhower and Jones cabin. Then I walked down the 10th hole, turned the corner of the dogleg and took one last look at the green that seems to serve as an altar for those beautiful pines surrounding it.

Even though I had been walking or standing for more than eight hours, adrenaline made my legs stronger. That seemed strange because one day earlier I had walked 18 holes at my flat, home course and tired by the 12th hole.

As I made my final tour, Augusta was

at its best. The sun had begun to set behind the trees and long shadows enveloped the fairways. A slight breeze cooled the warm spring air and provided one more sniff of the pines and azaleas. Crows squawked anxiously at the thought of having the place all to themselves again.

I rounded Amen Corner and thought of all the history that surrounded golf's greatest three holes. On this day I watched Palmer and Nicklaus play there and as I stood between the 12th and 13th holes I replayed those moments one more time. I remembered how the gallery bellowed its approval when Palmer pulled out his 3-wood after a long wait in the 13th fairway and gunned for the green in two. Standing just a few yards behind Palmer, I watched his ball—framed in the foreground by Palmer in his unique finishing position and in the background by the pines and azaleas—sail toward its final destination on the green. I didn't think I'd ever see a site that could duplicate that, but moments later Nicklaus smoked a 2-iron to the green and made eagle.

Slowly, and totally alone now, I walked up the steps next to the pond guarding the 16th green and headed out of the course. I turned around one last time and gave a mental salute to the grounds I had always dreamed of walking one day. That day had arrived with extremely high expectations and every one of them had been met and then some.

Say what you want about Augusta. Go ahead, rip away about its dyed water and spray-painted greens. It can handle it. It just sits there in all its splendor and chuckles ... if it bothers to listen in the first place. I feel sorry for those who feel they must find some criticism of Augusta. They are missing out on a real treat because if you go there to watch and listen for all its beauty, history and tradition, the course welcomes you with open arms.

The hug I received from Augusta was a feeling I'll cherish forever.