



A BANDWAGON BUSINESS

By Monroe S. Miller

The sun was high in a deep blue sky when I pulled into the shop yard at the Mendota Bay Country Club. A light breeze accompanied the relatively cool temperature, making it a nearly perfect day, for golf turf and for golf course superintendents.

I was very happy. We had aerified our greens the day before and today, already, the flagsticks were back on the greens.

A quick tour before I left the course reaffirmed that this was probably the best job of putting green aerification we'd ever done. And now that the weather was so perfect, I expected the healing process to take only a few more days.

Normally, aerifying aggravates our members like few other jobs we do. They usually are openly hostile, asking one way or another "why do you have to make such a mess of the golf course?"

Today, our players were smiling and waving and generally in happy spirits. This, too, told me the job we'd completed was well done. How could I not be happy?

The only thing that had gone wrong during the entire cultivation process happened fifteen minutes after we started—our 1973 Ryan Greensaire broke down. Rather than waste time trying to repair it—unlikely anyway since we stock very few Greensaire parts—I call Sandy Grant to see if I could borrow one of Mendota Bay's machines.

I bailed Sandy out of the same predicament several months ago; that made it easier to ask for the same favor.

We have an informal agreement in our town NOT to swap machinery. It leads to too many arguments, hard feelings and disputes over who should fix and pay for what.

But emergencies are different. Nobody hesitates to do whatever has to be done to help out in a time of need, usually desperate need.

So I was returning MBCC's aerifier. I hit the brakes hard as I turned the first corner on the road to the shop. Before me was what seemed to be acres of machinery.

It could have been Wisconsin Turf or Reinders or Hanleys or Horst in early spring. Or a farm machinery auction.

Instead, Sandy was just cleaning house. He's a fussy guy. So when he cleans the golf course buildings, the first thing he does is empty them of their contents. Every single piece of equipment that MBCC owns is pushed or driven out the door and parked.

I pulled up short, wiggled my F-150 into a parking spot along the first building, and got out to find Sandy.

That didn't take long. He and Bogey Calhoun were leaning against the box of Sandy's new Ford pickup.

For as long as I've known Sandy, which goes back to his days as a student at the UW-Madison, he's driven a red vehicle.

"Badger pride," he always said.

The last three or four trucks he has driven have been red and white Fords, the special "Badger Editions". Everybody, and I mean everybody, was shocked to see him cruising around in this new black truck. At least it was a Ford.

"What gives?" I asked him as I folded my arms over the tailgate of his truck. "No one will recognize you. What has happened to your Wisconsin loyalty?"

"Nothing's happened to my loyalty," Sandy answered somewhat indignantly. "I can't help it if you cannot recognize Wisconsin's other colors."

I stood there, gaping and trying to figure what he was talking about.

Sandy stood back, extended his arm, and with an open palm gestured toward his truck and said, "so how do you like my Wisconsin special edition Ford-Holstein black trimmed in Colby orange?"

Bogey roared, not only at Sandy's wit but my susceptibility to it.

The three of us turned around and surveyed the shop yard. Bogey and I were a little bit jealous.

"This exercise would make quite a picture, Sandy," Bogey offered as we walked through the maze of Mendota Bay's equipment.

"We did take a picture last year," Sandy replied. "It was neat, too, because it was taken from forty feet in the air. Our tree trimmer hoisted me up in the bucket of a skyworker. The view was tremendous. Before you go, take a look at that picture. It's hanging on the wall of my office."

As we wandered through all that iron, I occasionally stopped to look at a particular piece. Usually it was an old machine, something from the past.

"You know what, Sandy, some of these are museum pieces," I said as I looked at three different spikers. One was an old but nearly mint Ryan walk behind. Another was a very interesting pull behind made by Cushman a quarter of a century ago. And on a pallet sat a set of three spiker units for a Greensking.

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"How long has it been since you've used any spikers, Sandy?" Bogey asked.

"I can't remember when the last time was," Sandy answered. "Maybe ten years ago. When I first got into this business, spiking was 'in'. Everybody was spiking everything but roughs and cart paths. What you don't see here is our Ryan Renovaire—it's parked around the corner. I've still got the spiking blades for that, too."

"I guess, after a few years, nobody saw any great benefit from spiking and it sort of died out as a cultural practice."

"Why did you keep all of these spiking units?" I asked Sandy.

"Why not?" came the curt answer. "I take very good care of our equipment, but the distributors will give me practically nothing in trade, so I keep them. Who knows—maybe spiking will return to vogue."

"Look here," Sandy went on. "These are attachments I don't use much anymore, either—verticuts. At one time you were made to feel inferior if you didn't verticut your greens every week or so. MBCC has a pair of Ryan Renothins, a Ryan Mataway and two—yes, two—sets of verticuts for triplex greensmowers. We use them only occasionally nowadays because the turf groomer is 'in'. Same deal—verticuts aren't worth much so I just hang onto them."

"You guys have seen our Toro dump truck, haven't you?" I asked.

"Yea," they replied. "You should get Arnie Palmer to autograph it with a paint brush sometime when he's in town on business with Ray-O-Vac," Bogey chuckled.

"Thinking about that truck and seeing these old pieces of equipment reminds me of the progress and advances our business has made," I said to Bogey and Sandy.

Sandy mulled my comment for a minute or two and then said, "there's a difference between old spikers and that old Toro truck of yours. Maybe you have missed it."

"The old Toro is an antique that was useful for decades. In fact, it could still perform a useful function on the golf course, say, filling bunkers with sand. Maybe it wouldn't be the best, but we still have to haul things on a golf course and it can do that. Progress has given us better machines to do that."

"But spikers and verticuts, to me anyway, demonstrate what a 'bandwagon business' we are in. Equipment, cultural practices, chemicals, fertilizers and every other thing we work with, are

very subject to popularity peaks that have little to do with improved turf management, only the hope for it. Most have little support from good science and research." Sandy sounded like an editorial writer. "Much of it is the folklore of golf course management."

He was right. Any honest golf course superintendent would have to admit our gullibility to buy into practices and machinery offering unsubstantiated results. Many times salesmen even bristle when asked for evidence to support their pitch.

The bandwagon effect goes way beyond the equipment scene, too. I remember all the *Poa annua* control programs involving tri-cal arsenate, sodium arsenate and lead arsenate. During their times, something was "wrong" with the course superintendent who wasn't dedicated to these programs.

Never mind that they didn't work. Today we have a whole new generation of *Poa* control products—herbicides and plant hormones—that offer questionable results, if you read what investigators say about them. But those in the business of offering them to us promise miracles. Haven't we heard that before? Get on the bandwagon of progress.

Bogey reminded Sandy and me about the low fertility bandwagon of a few years ago.

"There were guys who actually had the courage to claim they were using less than a pound of N/M each year on their greens. Anyone using four or five pounds a season was given the respect usually accorded an idiot. Of course, now they are back to using sensible amounts of nutrition. Not much is read about these irrational fertilizer programs anymore, obviously because they didn't work and are out of vogue."

Sandy surveyed the ocean of equipment under his control. He was obviously proud of it.

"I think you cannot, however, confuse this bandwagon propensity with real progress. I mean, there's a reason we aren't using those old Worthington Airfield Blitzers over there to mow roughs anymore. There is simply better equipment available."

Bogey and I both agreed. It was Bogey who made another good point. "You could review my operation over the past ten years and definitely find signs of the bandwagon syndrome. What I'd have to show you is how many were imposed by players. I am sure the same is true for other superintendents—programs have been foisted on them by well meaning owners, presi-

dents and green committee chairmen.

"They probably were well meaning, too. The drive for improved golf turf at a lower price somehow, sometimes, ends up with either or both goals far from accomplished. More frustrating is the clamor to climb aboard the bandwagon 'because the Club across town is doing it' or because a colleague of a board member from a Club miles away bought a piece of machinery and 'we should have one, too.' In other quarters, that is known as 'keeping up with the Jones'."

Sandy continued talking. "For me, the latest example is the Hydrojet that sits in a corner of our cold storage shed only to find infrequent use. It's bandwagon machinery bought by Shady Dells' green committee three years ago. It has definite use in some areas, but it has not revolutionized putting green aerification, and that's what they had in mind when they made me buy it."

We continued visiting, chuckling about everything from ryegrass overseeding programs—almost all regretted today—to ridiculously high potassium fertility programs. It covered the horizon from weekly sand topdressing to clipping harvest, PGRs to solid tine aerifying and from gypsum use to surfactants. Oh let's not forget green blankets, either.

"Clever engineers and sharp salesmen have made a lot of money from the golf course bandwagon," Sandy observed.

"For me," Bogey offered, "I'll take Milorganite, reel mowers and good ol' Penncross."

Just as Bogey and I reached our trucks, a flatbed owned by one of our distributors pulled into Sandy's shop yard.

"What the heck are they delivering?" Bogey wanted to know.

Sandy looked a little sheepish, kicked some dust up from the yard and quietly answered, "our new greens roller."

"Toot toot. Make way for the bandwagon," Bogey teased.

Sandy smiled at me and said, "back your truck up to the hillside over there and run the aerifier off. I'll put it away later."

On the way home, all I thought about was when I was going to be cornered into buying a roller for our greens.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized if I could hold off only a little while, the chances were good I wouldn't ever have to buy one.

That's the nature of a bandwagon business. 🍷