



NEW EMPLOYEES

By Monroe S. Miller

The rain was coming down in buckets as Oscar Bahl and I pulled into the parking lot of the Red Apple Restaurant.

Obey and I could barely hear one another. The sound of the pounding rain on the uninsulated sheet metal of my pickup roof was almost deafening.

It had rained all night in southern Wisconsin, and the intensity of the storm seemed to be increasing. All of the area golf courses were closed for the day.

In fact, we speculated that if someone from our city really wanted to play golf today, he probably would have to drive a couple of hundred miles. Most of the upper Mississippi River Valley was getting some precipitation.

Everybody was ready for this. It was the first time this season any courses had been closed, and the first time all the guys had gotten together since the WGCSA spring meeting.

Half a dozen familiar pickups told us that we were the last to arrive at the Red Apple. I dropped Obey off at the front door, parked, and dashed inside. I was soaked.

"You wouldn't have gotten as wet if you weren't so old and slow," laughed Jack Morley, the venerable golf course superintendent at the Blue Sky Country Club north of the city.

"I'll take you on in a foot race any day, John," I replied as I wiped the rain from my glasses.

The group around the three tables that had been pulled together shared a good laugh at the thought of such a sight. I couldn't blame them. But I still knew I could whip Jack.

"Hey, Obey," hollered Bogey Calhoun, "have you got a crew out shoveling sand yet?"

Bogey was chuckling about the fact that the Old Orchard Country Club had over 90 sand bunkers, including a ridiculous number of 16 on the fifteenth hole.

"Obey spends more money on sand than the rest of us do on grass," Bogey said, repeating a line we've heard him

use a hundred times when he is talking about Old Orchard.

Actually, Obey usually agrees with him.

"As soon as it stops raining, all of the rookies on my crew will be armed with shovels," he said.

"Rookies, huh?" questioned Tom Morris. "Do you actually punish new employees by making them shovel sand?"

"Well, it isn't really punishment," Obey replied. "But there's no better way for new crew members to learn what hard work and teamwork are than when facing an ugly job. You know, Tom, most of these kids who are new have never worked a job before and were sure they'd spend the summer on their butts on a mower."

It was still raining cats and dogs. That's probably why no one was in a big hurry to order lunch. In fact, it was a rare sight—Scottie Fennimore and Steady Eddie Middleton joining Billie Flagstick, Bogey, Tom, Jack and me for a round of Gartenbrau in the middle of the day. Nobody was going anywhere.

"We're turning beer to water," Bogey said.

It was one of those rare times when we all felt comfortable in closing our courses for the rest of the day. Tom recalled an incident from decades ago when he was an assistant golf course superintendent.

"The man I was working for closed the course for the day at 9:00 a.m. because of rain. He then left town. By noon the sun was shining, the wind was blowing and the proshop was full of players," Tom reminisced.

"It was also a Thursday," Tom added, "and conditions were very clearly improving by the minute. It was a damn poor time for the superintendent to be gone.

"So the green committee chairman and I opened the course. I have never forgotten the incident, and I haven't, in all these years, left town under those kinds of circumstances."

There wasn't any worry about today. And lunch at the Red Apple wasn't exactly the same as leaving town for the day, either.

The gray sky did nothing to dampen the chipper attitude that was reflected on everyone's face.

"I don't know about you guys," Obey said, "but I needed this break. We are still in a training mode and some days my nerves are frayed and frazzled."

"Same here," chipped in Eddie.

"New crew members are both part of the fun and part of the frustration of a golf season," philosophized Scottie. "Some have made me older than my years."

"Almost all the kids we hire are great kids," Billie chimed in, "and do great work for our course. But then there are those who are, well...you know." His voice trailed off.

"I gotta tell you about a kid who came in looking for a job earlier this spring," Tom said, already smiling.

"I interviewed him on a Friday, liked his background, and since I needed help, told him to report to work at 7:00 a.m. on Monday.

"We went over our rules and I **carefully** explained how to dress for work.

"I was a little concerned about dress because he came to the interview dressed in a coat and tie! For a minimum wage job! He seemed to understand, though—work pants, steel toed boots and a durable work shirt. I told him that blue jeans were a good choice of pants.

"Well, sure enough, come Monday morning, he was right there on time. In gabardine pants, a white dress shirt, wing tip shoes and a trench coat!

"With his horn-rimmed glasses, slight build and neatly combed hair, he looked like Wally Cox!"

"What did you do, Tom?" came the chorus.

"Sent him home to get the clothes he was supposed to wear in the first place. He never came back."

Once the waitress had the lunch orders, we continued.

"I had a new employee this spring who decided to experiment with mowing techniques on a Saturday morning. He figured to save some time he would mow a pass, skipping approximately that width and mowing back the other way. His plan was that by mowing in such a circular pattern he would save time," Scott explained.

"When play caught up with him, he went to the next green, leaving the twelfth green with alternating five foot swaths of cut and uncut grass. I heard the howling clear down by the fifth green.

"Needless to say, there's one new employee who will never become a veteran," Scottie concluded.

"Talking about new employees and new techniques, you won't believe this," Obey said. "Fortunately, I caught him before he was too far along in his plan to replace the root zones in all of our greens.

"We trained this new kid to set cups right away. He was a pretty good player and understood the importance of the job. One of the first things he noticed was the 80/20 sandy mix we used to level cups and to topdress them.

"He was curious enough to ask why that material was different from the parent material in the greens.

"I gave him the short version of soil compaction, water infiltration, percolation and USGA greens. He was impressed with the science of it all.

"Nick Blake, my assistant, came up to me a few days after the kid had been cutting cups and told me to look at the places he was cutting the cup on the sixth green for the past week," Obey continued.

"So I took a cart out to the green and quickly could see what Nick had seen. The pattern was clear. He was alternating the pin between two places on the green. Each day's new cup was literally next to the one from two days previous.

"I was hot. He'd ignored the instructions we'd given about cutting cups. I knew damn well at least some of our players had noticed.

"I quickly drove over to the third green; everything was perfect. Same for the fourth and second and fifth.

"Then I started looking for the kid. I found him in minutes," Obey went on.

"What in the hell are you doing on the sixth green?"

"The kid was a little taken aback, not having seen me in the anger mode before," Obey continued.

"I was replacing the rootzone for you, Mr. Bahl," came the shy reply. "When I cut a new cup, I throw the native soil into the woods behind the green. I fill the old cup completely with the 80/20 mix.

"I calculated the area of each cup and the approximate number of times its changed in each year. It isn't inconceivable to completely replace the rootzone of a green in a few short years.

"The secret is to never put it in the same place. So to keep track of where I'd been, I was moving it a cup's width to the right each time. The sixth green was where I was perfecting my methods."

Obey paused, and then added, "the kid is majoring in engineering. Our only hope is he's interested in electrical engineering, not civil. He's dangerous with soil!"

Obey didn't expect that anybody was going to top this new employee experience.

"Speaking of danger," Jack piped in, "two of my new guys damn near got

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killed on Old Elm Drive day before yesterday. A Cushman wouldn't start so they got the bright idea of pull starting it. They'd seen Mike and me start a vehicle that way. "They started out in the shop yard, figured they didn't have enough room and drove out onto Old Elm Drive.

"I was coming home from the Farmer's Co-op and almost had an underwear problem when I got close enough to them to see what was coming down the road at me.

"It was easy to see when the one on the Cushman popped the clutch—tires squealed on the asphalt, the chain snapped and so did the kid's neck.

"The only funny thing was seeing Mike chasing them down the road on foot, screaming at the top of his lungs."

The waitress finally brought our meals. The Red Apple never has been known for fast service. Rainy days seemed to make it worse. Today, though, we didn't really care.

The talk about new crew members kept up.

The chronically good natured Bogey Calhoun was anxious to tell about another "new crew" and vehicles.

"This goofy new guy on our staff last summer, who was immediately enthralled with all the equipment in our shop, was given a chance to drive a tractor on his second day at work.

"He was sent out with a tractor, trailer and some small tools—a couple of shovels and some pry bars. His job was to cleanly excavate around a stump down in the low wet area of our course. It was way too soft to move a stump cutter down there, so we were going to cut the stump below the surface and backfill with soil.

"I drove down there after awhile to check on his progress. The closer I got the more I realized I was hearing a tractor working hard at a high rpm. There was no mistaking that sound for the relative quiet of hand tools.

"When the kid came into sight, I could see him bouncing up and down on the tractor seat. The engine was roaring and the big turf tires on the rear were spinning and throwing black mud absolutely everywhere. But the tractor wasn't moving. I could see there was a log chain wrapped around the stump and hooked to the drawbar.

"I raced up screaming 'what the hell are you doing?'" Bogey was laughing now.

He clutched, idled the engine down and calmly turned the engine off," Bogey continued.

"He seemed a little surprised, but calmly replied 'I'm going to yank this stump out for you, Mr. Calhoun, and save you the hassle of coming down here with a chain saw.'"

"I didn't have the heart to destroy the kid's initiative," Bogey went on, "but he didn't get any vehicle to drive for quite some time."

We were all done eating, and the rain continued. Dark skies gave no clue as to when it would stop raining.

But that was okay. The respite from work and the socializing had a mild healing effect on our psyches.

"I defy anyone to top this," Eddie Middleton offered as the waitress brought the apple pie sidedressed with a big slab of Wisconsin cheddar for dessert.

"Talking about tractors reminds me of a kid on his first day of work a few years ago.

"He was a city slicker through and through. He hadn't even cut his old man's lawn with a lawnmower. But I hired him because another on our crew knew him and said he was 'a great guy,'" Steady said.

"He had a driver's license—a prerequisite for everybody I hire—and I needed some grunt help. He also lived close by, something that is usually a plus. That was the last time I ever used those criteria for hiring, by the way," Steady continued.

"My assistant gave him a lesson on how to operate a Ford 2110 tractor—a simple and straightforward proposition.

Or so I thought. He then sent the kid out with instructions.

"Two minutes later, we heard a godawful racket in the shop yard and ran out to see what it was."

Steady Eddie was chuckling now. "The kid started out with the tractor in first gear. He wound it up, ground it into second gear. He pulled the throttle clear back again and ground into third. We caught him just as he was trying to shift into fourth, and put a stop to his driving reeaaal fast."

Dessert was followed by another round of Gartenbrau. Except for Obey. He insisted on a sloe gin fizz. More stories about rookies on golf courses came out.

Despite the dark skies and the work awaiting us the next day, we were having fun. The talk about funny new guys kept smiles on faces that normally are pretty serious this time of the year.

And we all agreed that new employees on our crews were responsible for gray hair and nervous moments.

But no one argued that on the other hand, these same kids were also responsible for keeping us younger in spirit.

Their enthusiasm and happiness and optimistic outlook rubbed off onto us. We were better for it, despite some tense moments.

For most of them, this innocent time in their life, a summer on one of our courses will be a sweet memory that will last a lifetime. With that, we pushed our chairs from the table, left a tip and tromped off to the home fires. ♣

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