



Low Budget Superintendents

By Monroe S. Miller

It was a concession to Ole Swenson. He'd been begging us for a long time to meet at the Cafe Norway for a little lunch.

Ole's the owner and hands-on operator of The Norse Golf Club. He's a real life example of what hard work and perseverance can do for a person. He bought a little nine hole course in the hills west of town two-plus decades ago, and today it is a popular place for a lot of our city's public golfers.

To me, Ole's one of those guys who always kept his eyes on the prize. After many years of "getting by", he is now enjoying some real prosperity. All the area superintendents are real proud of him.

The best way to describe the Cafe Norway is 'rustic.' Fortunately it is clean and we'd heard the chow is good. Even though a lot of us don't eat at our clubhouses very often, we are around them a lot. Most are elegant and beautiful. Given that, the Cafe Norway raised a few eyebrows as we drove into the parking lot.

But we trusted Ole. He opened the door and literally strutted in, obviously wearing his pride like a blue ribbon.

Ole's taken advantage of the politically correct atmosphere of the capital city, telling us "you guys have a responsibility to support minority businesses like The Norse Golf Club and the Cafe Norway. Norwegians have been kept down too long. We are rising up!"

"The NAPN (National Association for the Promotion of Norwegians) wants to see at least one person of Norwegian blood on each golf course crew from now on," Ole crowed.

"Hey, Ole," hollered Steady Eddie Middleton from across the restaurant. "Are you buying lunch today?"

"Only if you're ordering a big plate of lutefisk," came Ole's immediate reply. "By the way, there's a plate of imported Norwegian goat milk cheese for you guys to enjoy with your Garten Brau," he added.

The collective groan was expected. "Norwegian goat cheese in

America's dairyland? You've got to be kidding us, right Ole?" came the reply from Bogey Calhoun.

He wasn't. No sooner had Bogey asked the question than a waitress brought a plate of smelly brown cheese imported from Norway.

Ole was the only one to help himself.

All the guys ordered a safe meal, not knowing what to expect from some of the entrees on Cafe Norway's menu. But it seemed to most that even a "Norwegian" hamburger would be a safe bet.

I sat back to watch and listen to the goings on. It was very obvious that his colleagues liked Ole a whole lot. At the bottom of that affection was a lot of respect.

Whenever a group of golf course superintendents get together, there is the inevitable "shop talk." Today was no different.

The talk in the Cafe Norway was about budgets. In fact, grumbling might better describe the conversation.

The men who were at the bigger budget clubs seemed to be doing most of the grouching. Even the even-tempered Tom Morris was complaining.

"It seems the more we give our members, the more services we provide, the more they complain," said the long time superintendent of Maple Leaf CC.

"I know what you mean," added Billie Flagstick. "We've been trimming and grooming Pumpkin Hollow for a week and a half, and still I'm getting criticism. The greens are too slow, there clumps of clippings on the fairways and some members called me about some broadleaf weeds in the rough between the third and fourth holes."

"Well, I had the green committee chairman call me about "spots" on several of our fairways," said Jack Morley. "He was wondering what we were going to do about them."

"It sounds like the skies aren't always blue at the Blue Sky Country Club," I responded, thinking it was a cute line.

Jack didn't. The scowl on his face told me he didn't think I was funny.

"Frankly, Ole, I don't know how you guys at smaller budget golf courses do it," lamented Billie, "keeping players happy with a lot less money that I have to manage Pumpkin Hollow Country Club."

I was very aware of what the boys were discussing. Often I think back to a few summers ago when we had a WGCSA meeting at the Kickapoo Valley Golf Club. It was at the height of the golf and grass season and the KVCC looked absolutely super.

Gil Crawford won me as a fan for life. He had that KVCC golf course in prime condition, and had done it with fewer employees and less money than most of us at the courses in and round the larger cities in Wisconsin. I could hardly wait to get to work the next day and start pushing even harder for even better conditions.

Our waitress brought the meals to our tables. Someone—I think it was Oscar Bahl—asked her if we could call her Lena.

"No," came the curt reply. "You can call me Mrs. Peterson."

She had probably heard every Norwegian joke ever told and wasn't in the mood for more of the same from us.

As we passed the dinner rolls we ticked off the courses that came to mind that were lower budget but good quality golf courses—The Old Settlers Club, Snowflake Golf and Ski Club, Grand Coulee Country Club and the Autumn Color Golf Club. Jimmie Brickner, Kevin Green, Arnie Ford and Dave Marker all were worthy of the same respect we were feeling for Ole.

Those courses represented about every conceivable condition you'd find on a Wisconsin golf course—uplands and marsh, public and private, old construction and new, north and south and east and west. Each superintendent seemed to be pulling tricks out of his hat to keep the course he was responsible for in really good playing condition. Each managed the peculiar conditions dealt him with relatively modest money and a whole lot of shrewd management and a lot of work.

"What's your secret, Ole?" Obey asked.

Ole took the question as it was intended, with sincere and serious interest. He contemplated a few moments before answering.

"A long time ago I figured out that money cannot buy you happiness. About the same time I also realized that money doesn't necessarily buy good golf course conditions," Ole replied. "That attitude has driven my decisions on the golf course for over two decades."

Ole's philosophizing held the guys in rapt attention; their food was getting cold, but nobody seemed to care.

"I gotta be honest," Ole went on. "It helps to have the frugal nature of a Norwegian. Or a Scotsman. It's in our nature to be cautious about how we part with a buck."

"Hey Ole, you know you've just confessed to our often repeated charge that you have deep pockets and short arms, don't you?" asked Steady Eddie. The guys howled.

"It was never my intention to have the best golf course around, but I always wanted the Norse Golf Club to be very respectable and fun to play. I think I have done that."

His friends' eyes were fixed on Ole. So were mine. Ole was enjoying his audience's attention.

He went on. "Attitude—your attitude—counts for a lot. I'd be broke and out of business if I worried about 'keeping up with the Joneses.'" My focus is my course, my shop, my equipment. I don't really give a darn about what you guys are doing or buying. I do my own thing and that's it." Ole finally stopped.

I pushed away from the table and tipped my chair back on its two hind legs. "I've got to confess that I get far more satisfaction from providing competitive conditions for less money than I ever would from spending a truckload of money for the same.

"Too many superintendents somehow place emphasis on budget size. It's the same attitude that creeps in with green speed. Somehow you're better, in the minds of some, if your greens are ultrafast or if you have pressed a major budget through the club hierarchy.

"Both are bogus." I gave each of my colleagues a quick glance. Nobody seemed offended although a couple did avoid eye contact.

"You are right on," Ole said. "I've been subjected to that same sense of 'second class' many times, as if it is inferior to be operating a lower budgeted golf course."

I felt inspired to continue.

"It's been my observation that often-times, at clubs with a lot of resources,

money is used to solve everything. Got some trouble? Throw more cash at it and it will go away.

"And it often does. But the cost/benefit ratio is so out of whack that you have to question the sanity of those involved.

"One thing is pretty certain—too often money is the substitute for good management."

I was a little surprised when Tom Morris cleared his throat. He obviously had something to say. I was a little apprehensive since he was running the biggest budget in the city.

"I agree with you, totally. Superintendents at courses with smaller budgets often work harder and smarter to compete with courses like mine. I really respect them. They do the job with fewer employees and less equipment and less material."

"I've noticed they handle the critical, basic tasks as well as we do. They don't have the resources to do the extras, but frequently those extras have little to do with an enjoyable round of golf." Tom's humility and open attitude showed a sincere man.

Bogey Calhoun was next. The Shady Dell Country Club was right up near the top of the budget category.

"I give guys like Ole credit for something else—good communication. Players at their clubs have a lot of pride, despite lower course budgets. They have accepted conditions they can afford, and have not insisted on those they might see elsewhere which they cannot afford. I think the golf course superintendents involved do a wonderful job of communicating priorities."

Billie had been fidgeting in his chair, waiting for a chance to speak his piece.

"One of our colleagues—you all know the pompous ass—once told my assistant before I hired him that his career would advance a lot faster if he took employment at a big club instead of a middle level budget course. He went on to disdain any thought of opting for a position as superintendent at a lower budget course because it wouldn't be a good learning experience. Of course, he is an arrogant idiot for holding such an insecure attitude."

The testimonials continued through lunch.

Only at the Cafe Norway would you have lefse for dessert. Or a piece of rhubarb pie.

Ole was in such a good mood; he bought the lefse. It must've been pretty good—everybody had some. A couple of us had the rhubarb pie our wives never bake.

And they didn't eat it out of deference to Ole. We all love the guy and greatly respect him; his eager professionalism is envied.

But leave it to Bogey to put the final touch on the gathering: "Ole, you do a pretty decent job despite your handicap."

"What handicap?" was Ole's curious reply.

"You're a Norwegian! That's quite a load a carry around!"

"See you all at the Syttende Mai celebration," came the happy reply from Ole.

With a hearty laugh, the guys got up from the tables. We paid our bill, left Mrs. Peterson a tip and walked out of the Cafe Norway together, obviously very much enjoying one another's company.

And then we headed back to work. 🍷



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