



BLAME

By Monroe S. Miller

The Field Day crowd was huge and a lot of us who had been involved for what seemed like forever were ebullient.

Or, as Bogey Calhoun said, "Giddy, you could say, except real men don't get giddy."

The event was everything a Field Day should be and was blessed by as beautiful a day as August could provide. A shower the day before had freshened the setting.

Bogey, Tom Morris, Billie Flagstick, Ed Middleton, Sandy Grant and I ended up together in the shade on the north side of the Noer building. We were all nursing a Garten Brau as we sat down and leaned back against the building.

"If heaven is like this," sighed Steady Eddie, "the Lord can take me now."

"Amen," Billie added in agreement.

The sight was inspiring, to say the least: colorful machinery, a large crowd and more turf research and grass plots than a human could observe and study and absorb in a week, let alone in a day. We were thrilled.

"What a job the faculty and the station staff have done," said Billie. "I hope they realize how significant this event has become."

"I think they do," Sandy mused. "The chairmen of Soil Science, Horticulture, Entomology and Plant Path were here by mid-morning. And they are all still here, hob-nobbing with everyone in sight."

"Can't blame 'em," Bogey said. "This is the place to be today. Nowhere else in the universe can top this. Hey, did you guys notice that the CALS Dean has been here most of the day, too?"

We looked out across the Noer farm and saw Dr. Rossi holding court with a crowd of sod producers in the middle of a variety trial. Professor Kusow was center stage, along with his grad students, on the rootzone amendment plots; the soft green of the bentgrass contrasted sharply (and beautifully)

with the dark green, almost black color of the Kentucky bluegrass surrounds.

"I'm really happy for Wayne and Chuck Koval," Tom offered. "They, for years, literally had no resources to work with. And now they have what has to be one of the best turfgrass facilities in the country. It must be fun for them to come to work out here."

"They deserve a lot of credit, too," Steady added. "We couldn't have done it without them. Honestly, I'm inspired by them."

All the guys agreed.

We were somewhat startled when someone rapped on the window next to us from inside the building. It was Scottie Fennimore.

"Mind if I come out and join you?" he asked.

"Yeah, we mind," said Eddie. "Why don't you go home?"

"Get a Garten Brau and join us," Tom invited.

"Be right there," came the eager reply from the Mt. Hope G & CC superintendent.

Scottie was in the Noer Facility lab with Professor Meyer, looking at a sample he'd brought with him under the microscope. He was getting a disease diagnosis as a Field Day bonus. And he was happy about it.

"Dr. Meyer was a great choice as a successor to Dr. Worf, wouldn't you guys agree?" queried Sandy Grant.

"Couldn't have been better," was

the reply in chorus.

"I didn't think anyone could ever replace Gayle," said Tom. "But she surely has. I still miss him, but not as much as I thought I would. Julie has done a superb job. We are lucky she's here."

There was a serenity to the day, I thought. Late summer in Wisconsin always brings a sense of relief for golf course superintendents. The trend toward maturity was unmistakable; we all felt it. The golf tournaments were nearly over for us. Our school-age employees were now talking about school, and some were even excited about it.

The corn fields north and west of the Noer Facility were ripening. The silk on the end of the fat ears was already brown. The cattails rose sharply out of Morris Pond to our south, and the roadside along the research plots, to the east, was colorful with blooming goldenrod and Queen Anne's Lace and milkweed. The black-eyed Susans were at their peak maturity. And the apples on the old tree along the entry road had an unmistakable reddish blush to them.

I was sitting with my knees drawn close up to my chin. As soon as I stretched my legs out in front of me, everybody did the same.

"Can I get anybody another Garten Brau?" asked Sandy. The guys were fine.

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"Ask in another 10 minutes," Bogey finally replied.

A beautiful monarch butterfly lazily floated past us—another sure sign of late summer.

A cicada's shrill drone also signaled the serene August day. It is one of the drowsiest of all late summer sounds. We heard the crickets from all corners of the research station.

"If we sit here long enough, fellas, we'll be hearing the katydids," sighed Tom. There was an unmistakable sense of weariness in his voice.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked the veteran of almost 30 golf seasons, 25 of them at Maple Leaf CC.

"I was just thinking how peaceful this day is, how quiet and mellow. I feel the best I've felt all year.

"It's probably been the toughest year in what has become a long career," he went on. "And the least fun."

"I'll second that," added Bogey Calhoun. He was uncharacteristically serious.

There was unanimous agreement.

"Up until a month ago, work on our course was pure hell," complained Scottie. "I couldn't take another year like this one. I am just glad we had a nice day for Field Day. The way the season's been, one could have expected the worst weather and the smallest crowd in history."

It had been a brutal year all across Wisconsin, one of the worst in memory.

The seasons, at times, were transposed.

It snowed in late October, disrupting the application of snow mold materials. By Thanksgiving we were in short sleeve shirts.

It had snowed for Christmas, much to everyone's relief—this is Wisconsin, after all. But by New Years the snow was gone and it was replaced by rain from thunderstorms. It is Wisconsin, after all.

It rained for days, on frozen soils, and as it ended the temperatures plummeted, freezing everything. Putting greens and tees were turned into skating rinks, fairways looked like frozen rivers. It was scary.

"Do you guys remember sitting together at the GCSAA conference last winter, wondering what all that ice would bring us?" Sandy asked.

"Yeah, I remember," came the reply from Steady. "And I recall Bogey's smart answer was 'no sweat'."

"If memory serves me right, Tom predicted almost exactly what we saw when April arrived," Scottie reminisced.

Heroic efforts were made all over Wisconsin to remove the thick ice cover.

Naturally, as bad luck would have it, heavy snows fell on top of the ice. The resulting complications were enormous and laid waste to many plans for ice removal.

The job of removing snow from golf greens around the state was almost impossible. Thirty inches of the fluffy white stuff, which would be welcome almost any other time, made getting from green to green a chore. All that snow had to be put somewhere that wouldn't cause even more trouble once spring thaws started.

"The blanket of snow caused another problem," Tom said, coming out of deep contemplation. "It hid the real problem from the players. I don't know how many of them said to me 'Gosh, Tom, you must be happy with all this snow.' The few who would listen to my concerns about ice looked confused when I stopped talking."

"Same thing happened to me at Shady Dell CC," Bogey pitched in. "Literally no one believed me when I tried to discuss the subject of winter kill. The deep snow cover gave our players a real sense of well being."

Pumpkin Hollow CC had suffered maybe the most severe damage, and Billie Flagstick had really been under the gun.

"It seems amazing," Bill began slowly, "that so little research has been done on winter injury to turf. Golf is so popular in the upper Midwest and the Northeast, yet essentially no work has been done on the problem. And it is a problem somewhere in the two regions ever year.

"If I were to write a priority agenda for the Noer Facility, it would be low temperature injury to **all** species of turfgrass first, second, third, fourth and fifth."

"It's a natural," Scottie chimed in.

"Jobs are going to depend on it," opined Steady Eddie.

The subject of "jobs" and winter kill caused some uneasiness among the guys. They shifted their weight; one cleared his throat; another looked around somewhat nervously. It was a touchy subject.

It was Tom Morris who finally spoke. The topic clearly irritated him.

"Kussow and Rossi and the rest of the research team might actually define winter injury and lead the way to developing methods to lessen or avoid it," Tom speculated.

"But no amount of research," he continued, "will solve the problem of politics in golf."

He went on.

"Often times, politics and political considerations outweigh agronomy and good judgment in golf clubs. Some call it the requisite public relations.

"And I have no problem with that. Public relations is a part of what goes into managing the golf course at such facilities. It goes on during all seasons, and the experienced, mature golf course superintendent understands that and handles the attending duties with aplomb.

"But when golfers see their course after a long and wicked winter and injury is present, there is an immediate reflex to 'blame' someone. And invariably that someone is the golf course superintendent."

"I tend to agree with you in most instances, but with some very notable exceptions," I was compelled to say.

"I am one of the lucky ones. Our members as a group and as a rule will listen to explanations, accept them and move to help me with the solutions. But, again, I am one of the fortunate. I have seen, far too often, just what you are talking about, Tom."

"Tom is right," Bogey said, "and sadly the Shady Dell members are quick to ask aloud and often 'what did he do wrong?' or 'what didn't he do?'. When there is winter kill, I am assumed guilty. They blame me."

Steady Eddie was impatient for a chance to talk.

"Count me among the unfortunate. Last summer, when a tornado tore through Breezy Hill Country Club and destroyed nearly a hundred trees, the members were great. The board approved extra funds; members in construction businesses offered men and equipment to help put things right; and players were talking about organizing work days to help us. It was so gratifying to me.

"Then, when they saw the winter kill this spring, the reaction was 'what the hell did that mope do to cause this?' They blamed me, just like Tom said.

"In fact, some wanted to make a change. Can you believe it? It has left a real scar, so much so that I often wonder if I want to work for them any longer."

"It's really tough," ventured Bill, "when you are the only one in an area with winter injury. Then the members insist you erred. No questions about it. Guilty without a trial."

"Proving," Tom said with a smile, "that misery really likes company when it comes to winter kill."

Sandy, who had been quiet until now, wanted a turn. "This business of

blame is so peculiar to golf.

"Who does the commercial grower blame when the winter weather kills acres and acres of strawberries?" he asked.

"Who does the DOT blame when a cruel winter kills roadside crownvetch for miles and miles?"

"No one," he said, answering his own question.

"Who does the nurseryman blame when a ten acre block of autumn purple ash is killed after a severe winter? No one. How about the apple orchard in Gays Mills or the cherry orchard in Door County that suffers in the winter and has no fruit crop—who do they blame? No one.

"Or how about the farmer who loses 90 percent of his alfalfa—who is he supposed to blame? Himself? Of course not. No one is to blame."

"It's the breaks," Sandy said. "It's the weather. It's the way things are. It's the way it goes. It happens—always has and always will. No one should be blamed."

Scottie glanced up and gestured with his left hand at the same time he quietly spoke. "Look over there fellas."

He was looking in the direction of the western edge of the Noer Research Facility.

We looked and smiled almost in unison at the sight of seven whitetail deer ambling on the far property line. They ignored the civilization around them, heading for the depths of University Ridge to continue grazing and fattening up for a tough Wisconsin winter that would be here too soon for all of us.

Their presence sort of brought the guys out of the thoughtful mood they (and I) were all in. We realized how late it had gotten.

The crowd was mostly gone. Exhibitors were loading equipment on semi trailers. Grad students were disassembling displays and removing plot stakes. The mood was melancholy, a perfect fit for the late summer season.

"Well," Tom said. "Since somebody has to take the rap for winter kill, I propose we suggest that, henceforth, all golfers put the blame on God, whoever He (or She) might be for each individual. And leave the golf course superintendent alone to repair the damage as quickly as he can.

"In most calamities, people look to God. They should for this one, when it occurs, too. I mean, when push comes to shove, golf course superintendents are absolutely helpless before nature, and so is everyone else. So don't blame us.

"There are limits to everything in nature and we shouldn't forget it. Winter kill every decade or so is just a little reminder from the Big Guy of that. He's in charge; blame him."

"Or blame Frank Rossi," said Steady Eddie as Dr. Rossi walked by.

"The Garten Brau is all gone. I'm surprised you guys are still here," Frank said.

"We are talking about winter kill and how we always get blamed for it," Bogey answered.

"By next year we expect you'll remake the genetic codes of the golf course grasses in Wisconsin, manipulate them and control winter injury. Our lives and our jobs will be easier," he continued.

"And if it doesn't work and we still get winter kill, we'll be able to blame you."

Frank smiled. I think he sensed our frustration and anticipation of the win-

ter now really only a short time away.

"Great Field Day, Frank. You and Wayne and Chuck and Julie did a super job. Everybody was pleased," said Scottie.

"Hey, Frank," Sandy offered, "since there isn't a holiday worth mentioning in August, we think you ought to make the Field Day an official Wisconsin holiday. It sure is worth celebrating."

Frank was pleased with the back door compliment. He moved on into the building.

We stood up, stretched and gathered up our empty Garten Brau bottles and headed for our trucks. We were a little tired but still somehow renewed by the sharing of emotions as only good friends and colleagues can. It was one of the great things about Field Day.

"Hope that Chevy starts," Sandy hollered to Bogey.

With that we waved to one another and headed on home. 🍷

SYMPOSIUM TO EXAMINE WINTER DAMAGE

By Rod Johnson

The twenty-eighth annual Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium will be held on Tuesday and Wednesday, November 2 and November 3, 1993. As last year, it will be held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, 333 Kilbourn Avenue in Milwaukee. The Symposium committee has chosen WINTER DAMAGE as the topic for this year.

One of the frustrations of golf course management in Wisconsin is the fickle nature of winter injury. Everyone seems to take "their turn" at damage caused by low temperatures, ice or low temperature pathogens. Some golf course superintendents in Wisconsin seem to get more than their fair share.

This year the Symposium will take an in-depth look at the physiology of winter damage. How and why damage occurs and why some turf withstands injury better than others will be examined. Attendees of the event are assured of leaving armed with a better understanding of the problems brought on by winter and therefore will be better able to plan for the winter season. The hope is to increase

the odds for survival.

An impressive lineup of speakers includes Dr. Frank Rossi, Dr. Randy Kane and Dr. John Roberts. Speakers from other research institutions will be announced as they confirm their place on the program.

The USGA will lend its customary expertise. Jim Latham and Bob Vavrek will both be on the program. Tom Charnok, a golf course superintendent from Buffalo, New York, will relay his several years of experience in controlling snow mold without the use of mercurial fungicides.

The popularity of panel discussions will be expanded upon with a panel each day. A panel will be held on Tuesday, providing our visiting experts an opportunity to expand on their prepared presentations. On Wednesday a panel of three Wisconsin golf course superintendents will discuss "The Politics of Winter Damage."

Mark your calendars now for November 2 and 3, and take part in a WGCSA tradition. This promises to be another good one! 🍷