



Saying Goodbye to a Golf Course

By Pat Norton

Saying 'Goodbye' to a golf course? Sounds a bit strange, I must admit! How can a human being even pretend to say goodbye to an inanimate object, such as a golf course? Isn't it weird that people can develop such strong bonds to objects, such as planes, trains, farms, or golf courses? Isn't it weird that men can fall in love with golf courses instead of women?

Isn't it weird that some amateur writer feels the need to write a column about his love for a golf course and the difficulty of saying goodbye to it? It all sounds pretty weird to me.

If it is strange or weird to have these feelings, then golf course superintendents everywhere are indeed a strange breed. Almost all superintendents have gone through this strange goodbye process. It's a process filled with emotion and reflection—of accomplishments, potential, and disappointments. Sometimes it's filled with too much disillusionment, resentment, and anger.

In this business, a guy oftentimes has to 'move on' in order to 'move up'. There's no corporate structure in place that permits a talented person to move into a new position with the accompanying new authority, challenges, and compensation.

The course structure that most all of us work within is well defined—it's a club structure, a municipal structure, a resort structure, or an ownership structure. The structure, or more simply 'the way it's gonna be', is usually determined by somebody else. It's their vision, or lack of it, that determines what type of golf facility will emerge.

It's the very fortunate superintendent who meshes so well within the structure that he/she has an integral voice in determining the future of the golf course. What the BOD or the owners want the course to be is exactly what the management staff foresees, and then twenty years of Nirvana follows.

More often than not, though, a guy

begins to see the score after about three years. The club/park district/county board/owners sees the course operating only at a certain level. The funding is never limitless, so operations must be adjusted accordingly. And, the superintendent only fulfills certain functions, hence the position carries a limited value.

What starts out as a grand and glorious management adventure can develop into a monthly compromise with the budget, with "the powers that be", and with the golf course itself.

The superintendent sometimes compromises his talents and desires, strengths and dreams for the sake of fitting into the structure that's been determined by others. Doesn't it just drive you nuts what some of these people decide on as the best course of action?

What then, short of murdering your boss, would be the logical next step? Obviously, it should be to admit that a change is in order! It's critical to admit to yourself, as many of our WGCSA colleagues have done in my fourteen years of observation, that there's another path to follow. But, which path is the correct one?

Maybe it's a bigger, better club with everything that a guy always drools over...or maybe it's becoming a county golf czar a la Bill Knight...maybe it's escaping forever to 'El Caribe' with that sexy clubhouse waitress—there's tons of courses down there in desperate need of good management, I've heard...or maybe it's getting out of the green industry altogether.

I've heard that there are other, more normal ways to make a living—garbage collection, septic pumpage, insurance sales, or my personal favorite—being an assistant manager at a fast food joint. Wouldn't work for me though—I still remember my teenage designation as 'the slowest busboy in the history of the Monroe Country Club'. What a cloud to have over me for all these years.

After the decision to move on has

been made, it's time to say goodbye to friends, neighbors, fellow employees, professional colleagues. Most of us know the feeling. Amidst the excitement of the new opportunity is the sadness of realizing that most of these people will fade into your past as have others who were once considered great friends.

Saying goodbye to the course itself is more of a mental, silent type of thing. Usually the course itself doesn't talk back to me as I make my rounds over it, muttering and swearing to myself as I go. I should probably ask its forgiveness for my management sins and be thankful that it doesn't speak up and tell my successor about all of my 'screw-ups.'

I'm going to make a special point of saying goodbye to the trees on the course, since Frank Rossi has now established that woody ornamentals do have the ability to communicate with humans.

Seriously though, fellow employees are very tough to say goodbye to on the last day...these are the people who would probably follow you into hell if you asked them to. Saying goodbye to military friends, who face tough situations together, must be alot more difficult.

People have gotta follow their dreams—it's the American Way. I'm guessing that I'll resurface somewhere south of here, in Illinois. Hopefully my family will forgive me my ambitions and follow me to the prairie southwest of Chicago.

We may have to leave my nine year old son Ryan behind in Onalaska—I think he's plotting my murder, disability, or some very serious revenge. I have dreams nightly that he's after me with a kitchen knife or his Cub Scout slingshot.

Better yet, he'd love to have my head on a tee right about now and see if he can win himself a long drive contest. I had better be watching my back until I can sneak out of town. ♣