



## Things Learned on the Golf Course Beat

By Monroe S. Miller

Although it isn't my job, I fancy myself a reporter walking the golf course beat in Wisconsin. That's golf COURSE, not golf. Self-assigned, I know. Unofficial, of course. Fanciful? Yeah, okay, that too.

It's a very interesting job, one that's become easier over the years I've been at it. Maybe there has been some recognition of my unofficial status that directs everything from real and legitimate golf course news to golf course gossip my way. It has been a source of material I pick up on the golf course beat.

The golf course beat is just that, and not the GOLF beat. That field is crowded with lots of professional journalists. My beat is uncrowded—I've pretty much got it all to myself—eyes open, radar turned on always, waiting for even a shred of news about golf courses.

It comes from years of editing *THE GRASS ROOTS*. Each issue is a struggle to fill with quality writing and relevant news. Keen observation, quiet leads, clear opinions and a total lack of hesitation to ask questions has gotten a lot of material for our journal.

The other well of interesting stuff about golf courses comes when I am looking for something else. Usually, it is in the Steenbock Library on campus or the Middleton Public Library or the Miller private library. Sometimes I come across interesting bits while visiting with, well, just about anybody.

I have kept notes on these oddball bits and pieces that have come my way over the years. Now I am going to share them with you, or at least some of them, and clean out my file at the same time.

Despite some efforts to the contrary, areas on golf courses are still measured in square feet and acres.

An acre originally totalled as much land as a yoke of oxen could plow in a day. But in the 13th century, an acre's measurement—still official today—

was set by law at 4840 square yards. The word acre derives from the Latin word **ager**, meaning a cultivated field.

Have you ever heard of the "Egg Drop Test"? I read about it in a summary of a lecture given by Dr. Henry Indyke of Rutgers University.

The egg drop test measures the average distance that half the eggs break when dropped on various surfaces. The worse case is blacktop in which eggs break at a height of only 3 inches. Synthetic turf yields an egg drop break point of 18 inches, while natural turf in good condition can give an egg drop height of 15 feet!

I would love to try the egg drop test on some putting greens I've seen around the state. My guess is the break point would vary from 3 inches to 6 inches!

And it also demonstrates why professional football players like natural grass better than synthetic turf.

One of the most pleasant sounds of the last half of summer is the sound of crickets.

Did you know that you can use crickets to estimate the temperature? The formula is very simple. Count the number of chirps and add 39. The sum is the air temperature at the time.

If we look at the word agronomy, we will find it has a long history going back into the Sanskrit. In Sumeria, **a** was the word used for "water" and **agar** was "a watered field". The word **agar** is still in our language, but it has evolved into acre, as noted earlier.

**Agar** went into the Latin as **ager**, "a fertile field" and into the Greek as **ager**, a "field", as distinguished from **agros**, or "wild land". From **agros** the Latin got **agrestis**, meaning "wild", which has come to us as **agrostis**, first for "wild grasses", then as just "grass". **Agar**, through the word roots

**gra** and **gro** gave us the words "grass", "graze", "grain", and "green".

The second root of agronomy is **nomy** and derives in the sense of "to take care of", or "to husband". So, when we consider the meanings that have gone into the word agronomy, we see our agronomic role is to husband or to take care of watered, fertile acres of green grass.

And that's what piqued my interest in the derivation of agronomy—the word says a lot about what golf course superintendents do for a living!

And some think it is tough to get a tee time here at home; they ought to be Dutch.

To play golf on any of the 56 full-sized golf courses in the Netherlands you need a GOLF ABILITY CARD. You can get one, from what I read, by passing a test in which you must hit five reasonably straight drives of at  
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least 130 yards, and five approach shots to within 4 1/2 yards of the cup, and five putts from 11 yards with three of them no more than 6 feet from the hole!

Did you ever wonder why we have 18 holes on the golf course instead of 10 or a dozen or even 20? Here's one explanation I read.

When the members of the Society of St. Andrews laid down their rules for the game, the course at St. Andrews (known today as the Old Course) had 12 holes. The first eleven holes played straight out to the end of a peninsula. When the members had played out they returned to the clubhouse by playing the first 10 greens backward plus a green by itself by the clubhouse.

Their round was therefore 22 holes. They played "out" until they reached the "end" hole and played "in" the same holes. If a group going in met a group coming out, preference was given to those playing out. The outgoing holes were marked with a small pin sporting a white flag; incoming holes had a red flag.

In 1764 the Royal and Ancient decided that the first four holes should be converted into two. This resulted in a round being reduced from 22 to 18.

And since the R & A pretty much was the authority of golf then, 18 holes soon were accepted as the standard in Scotland and England and eventually throughout the world.

The early kings of England and Scotland banned golf for many years in those countries because it was crowding out archery as a popular sport, and archery practice was considered essential for war training! I've noticed that golf can be pretty dangerous, too.

**Wisconsin** comes from a Chippewa Indian word that means "grassy place". How true, and how appropriate if you happen to be a golf course superintendent.

The largest tree in the world isn't in some tropical rainforest or in a Pacific coast redwood stand. It is actually in a town.

The largest living tree in the world, in terms of weight, is thought by some

horticulturalists to be a 3,500-year-old Montezuma Cypress (*Taxodium mucronatum*) in the village of Tule, near Oaxaca, Mexico. The tree of Santa Maria Del Tule is 38 feet in diameter, 141 feet high, and measures about 150 feet across its crown.

It has its own full-time caretaker and is in good health.

Since most of us love trees, here is some plant physiology you'll find interesting. The chemical process of photosynthesis causes trees to run a daily temperature! And their trunks are larger in diameter in the daytime when they are pumping sap than at night when they aren't.

The worry over global warming in the past while created a lot of interest in climactic numbers. In the past four decades the nights have been getting warmer but average daytime temperatures haven't budged much.

In those 40 years the average maximum nighttime temperatures have increased 1.5 degrees F., but daytime highs haven't changed.

And those nighttime increases may be due to changes in cloud cover, not "greenhouse gases".

There's another story about the origin of 18 holes for a golf course. According to a story sometimes told in

Scotland, 18 became the conventional number of holes for a course because an early Scottish player found that with a "wee dram" of whiskey taken at each hole, 18 was as far as a standard bottle would go!

Autumn is the favorite season of a lot of golf course superintendents, and the days of Indian summer are almost always welcome.

Indian summer is unmarked on the calendar. It comes in its own time and on its own terms. We hardly need a datebook to recognize it, anyway.

It isn't a season, but rather a fleeting moment in which we can relive a little of the experiences of summer.

There is no proof that I could find that Indian summer originated in New England, but it certainly should have. The first recorded use of the term was by Major Ebenezer Denny in 1794. Encamped a few miles from the present city of Erie, Pennsylvania, he wrote in his journal on that October 13th: "Pleasant weather. The Indian Summer here. Frosty nights."

One thing that is agreed on: Indian summer cannot be declared unless those warm days have been preceded by a good hard freeze.

Another common measurement in golf is the yard. Where did that come from, anyway?

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Well, no one is quite sure how it originated. One 12th-century historian said it was the length of Henry the First's outstretched arm as measured from the tip of his nose, a contention that causes modern historians to roll their eyes.

Others think the yard was a double cubit, originally a Roman measure used in surveying. Still others say it was the measurement of a man's waist.

Whatever, the name has no relation to that grassed area around my house that usually needs mowing! Instead, the word comes from the Old English **gierd**, meaning wand or stick.

The full moon closest to the autumnal equinox is the harvest moon. It rises at almost the same time several nights in a row and seems to climb slower and shine redder and brighter than any other moon of the year. In fact, it makes so much light that men have been known to stay in the fields the night through, working by the light of the moon.

The next brightest full moon, in October, is called the hunter's moon. Eric Sloane quotes from an old almanac: "The moon of September shortens the night. The moon of October is hunter's delight."

With that small matter clarified, how straight are you as to what a "blue" moon is?

You have heard the old saw 'once in a blue moon'. What does it mean?

The definition will tell you. A blue moon is the designation given to the second full moon to appear during the same month. It's a phenomenon that occurs about every 32 months.

No one seems to know the origin of the well traveled phrase 'once in a blue moon', although one source I read speculated it harks from the 16th century.

One of the few things Bill Clinton does that meets my approval is play golf. He is another of the 20th century presidents who enjoys the game. Clinton has shown he will play in just about any weather.

In fact more of the presidents since 1900 liked golf better than any other hobby.

William Howard Taft could be found on the golf course so often that he was chided that presidential duties some-

times interfered with his game! He claimed to play to keep his 300 pound weight under control.

Dwight Eisenhower was so avid about the game that he had a green on the White House lawn and a driving range in the basement.

In addition to Clinton, Taft and Eisenhower, golf presidents included Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Jerry Ford and George Bush.

A Wisconsin resident of significant renown during his career had a lot to do with formalizing the use of the word turfgrass.

The word turf is used commonly throughout Europe. It was derived from Sanskrit *darbhus*, a tuft of grass.

Over time there was a mixed use of "turf", "turf grass" and "turf-grass". A perusal of old books and journals show these different forms.

In 1952 Charlie Wilson proposed to the Northern California Turfgrass Council that "turfgrass" be one word. The council agreed. They presented Charlie's proposal to the Turfgrass Committee of the American Society of Agronomy. In 1953 the ASA agreed, and since then the single word use has been in effect. U.S. and English literature use "turf" to describe the growing mowed and maintained sod, and "turfgrass" to describe the grasses used to produce turf.

Thanks, Charlie!

In 1916 the USDA and the USGA agreed to cooperate in grass research, and a limited number of turf plots were established at the Arlington, Virginia Experimental Farm. The farm was operated by the USDA's Bureau of Plant Industry.

That agreement was expanded in 1922, and so were the research plots at the Arlington Turf Gardens.

Today, the Pentagon sits exactly on top of those turf plots. When it was built in 1942, the Pentagon replaced the Turf Gardens and they were moved to Beltsville, Maryland.

Snow is a major part of life in Wisconsin and impacts significantly on our golf courses. Most of us are happy to see snow most of the time.

But not always. No one needs the misery brought on by major snow storms. And we've had some major

snowfalls in our state. Here are the records:

1. Most snow in a season—241.4 inches at Gurney in Iron County in 1974/1975.
2. Most snow in a calendar month—honor (or sympathy, depending on your point of view) again goes to Gurney for 80.5 inches during December of 1968.
3. Most snow in 24 hours—26.0 inches fell on December 27, 1904 in Neilsville in Clark County.
4. Most snow from a single storm—30.0 inches in Racine on February 19 and 20, 1898.

These totals are impressive, but when put up against national records, they are dwarfed.

1. Most snow in a season—1,122.0 inches at the Paradise Ranger Station on Mt. Rainier, Washington in 1971-1972.
2. Most snow in a calendar month—390.0 inches in January, 1911 in Tamarack, California.
3. Most snow in 24 hours—75.8 inches at Silver Lake in Boulder, Colorado on April 14 and 15, 1921.
4. Most snow from a single storm—189.0 inches at Mt. Shasta Ski Bowl in California on February 13-19, 1959.

This isn't purely a golf course story, but I thought you'd enjoy it since we see so many players in action—all kinds of action. Like throwing clubs, for example.

I love former tour player Tommy Bolt's story about how he taught Arnold Palmer to throw a club.

"I always thought Arnold was the worst club thrower I ever saw. He would hit a bad shot and throw the club backward. Finally, I had to take him aside and tell him that if he was going to throw clubs he should throw them in front of him. That way you can pick them up on the way to the green."

I thought about the story last year while I was getting a club out of a tree for one of our members. I asked him that if next time he wouldn't please throw it down the fairway!

Here's a short and quick way to estimate your bunker sand requirements.

1. Sand weighs about 96 pounds per cubic foot.
2. One ton of sand equals 22 cubic feet.

3. One ton of sand will cover 66 square feet of depth of 4 inches or 44 square feet at a depth of 6 inches.
4. An "average" sand bunker will use 5 to 8 tons of trap sand at a depth of 4 to 6 inches depth.
5. Formula to determine amount of trap sand required: length X width X depth X 96 divided by 2000 = tons of sand needed.

I once read how, in the early days of golf in America, players used a little pile of wet sand to tee up their ball on the tee ground when they started the play of a hole. I was contemplating whether the sand going between sharp reels and bedknives would be a bigger problem than the thousands of little pieces of colored wood we see on teeing ground at the end of each work day these days.

That led to a little investigative work on the wooden tee. A gentleman named Dr. William Lowell is credited with inventing the wooden tee. He was a dentist from South Orange, New Jersey who took up golf when he was 60. He disliked the grit and mess of teeing the golf ball on the pyramid of wet sand.

He used dental tools to whittle a golf tee as a substitute for sand. His playing partners referred to his wooden tees as "suppositories for wild-cats"! His sons, however, saw the commercial potential in the tee and in 1924 Dr. Lowell received a patent for his invention.

It was named the "Reddy Tee" and came packed in boxes of 18 and sold for a quarter a box.

Lowell imagined golfers would leave them behind and use a box per round. He even planned on a biodegradable version until he realized golfers were hanging onto the wooden ones.

The wooden tee got a big boost when Walter Hagen tracked Dr. Lowell down in his dental office to get some of the wooden tees. Hagen was the U.S. Open champ at the time.

Advertised as the "Tee of Champions", 70 million Reddy Tees sold worldwide in 1929. By then everyone was catching up to Lowell, and his Reddy Tee Company office was closed in 1933.

But the wooden tee is still with us. 🌳

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