



The Miracle of Good Hope Road

By Rob Schultz

Gene Milota sat at a table inside the Brown Deer Golf Course clubhouse and wore that terrible look of exhaustion that has overcome so many golf course superintendents during a rebuilding year.

His eyes looked weary, his steps were slow. Milota looked like he hadn't had a good night's sleep in months. He hadn't.

Milota's expression changed when he talked about his crew and the outstanding job it had done to prepare, in just a few short months, what many thought was an unpreparable golf course for the Greater Milwaukee Open.

"I can't wait to give them a day off. They deserve it," said Milota as he rubbed his eyes a few days before the start of the GMO and looked out over the expansive course he could claim as his masterpiece.

If there was an award for Superintendent of the Year, Milota deserves it. If there was an award for Comeback Course of the Year, Brown Deer deserves it.

What happened at that gem of a course located on Milwaukee's North Side from the time the snow melted last spring until the moment when the last putt dropped with the final group of the final round Sept. 4 was nothing short of a miracle.

Walk around the state right now and ask somebody who won the GMO this fall? Don't know, do you? Now walk around the state and ask somebody what kind of shape Brown Deer was in for the GMO and if it received positive feedback from the PGA Tour pros. Most everyone will tell you Brown Deer was in wonderful shape and the pros enjoyed playing there.

Who won the GMO? Milota, his crew and Brown Deer. That's who.

Last April, I was told that Brown Deer's chances of making a positive first impression on the GMO field were slim and none. The 9th and 18th greens were dead, the rest of the course hadn't wintered too well and GMO officials admittedly were scrambling to find somebody to work a miracle.

One of the applicants from the job came back from an interview with the Milwaukee County and GMO people and shook his head. "They don't want a superintendent," he told me. "They want God."

No, they needed somebody with the knowledge, work ethic and wherewithal to get the job done... quickly. For a golf course in a world of hurt, God and a quality superintendent have similar resumes.

Milota has experience working in the competitive Chicago market as well as preparing a course for LPGA events in Virginia. He has seen it all. He has done it all. He then saw it all and did it all in a few short months in Milwaukee.

Two greens were unplayable when he got there. They were playable a little more than two months later. Not good enough, some felt. Critics said the fragile greens shouldn't be opened to the public. They were... and they held up remarkably well. The other new greens were babied, too.

The public was then allowed to trample them and they held up as strong as ever.

Slowly and surely, the entire course began to take shape. Then, sometime in late July or early August, something went poof. The sun rose one beautiful, crisp morning and Brown Deer announced to the world it was ready for all comers.

There were still cries of foul from the playing public. The rough was too long and thick. The greens were too slow. The trees were too tall. There wasn't enough water in the ball washers. Stuff like that. Stupid stuff like that. Stupid stuff that produced a chuckle from Milota. If that's all they're complaining about...

Brown Deer was more beautiful, more majestic than Tuckaway Country Club ever was when it hosted the GMO. Its fairways were every bit as lush and perfect. Its venues for the spectators better.

The 9th and 18th greens weren't perfect, but they were more than adequate considering the time Milota had to prepare them. Also, the inconsistent sand in the bunkers drew many scowls from the Tour players who had the audacity to hit an errant shot into one of them. Those problems are fixable and will be easily taken care of by next August.

The only question left to ponder about the GMO's move to Brown Deer is whether the Tour players will accept the short course that takes their driver out the bag for most of the holes and requires pin-point accuracy to small greens. It's doubtful, for instance, that John Daly will ever play there. Or anybody who makes a living scorching the tops of their tees with the bottom of their metal Berthas.

But when the Tour players who played there last September are asked about the conditions of the course, they'll see a huge thumbs-up. Next summer, expect more big names to show up.

Brown Deer Golf Course borders Good Hope Road. That's perfect. Milota, his crew, as well as Tom Strong and the rest of the GMO hierarchy have provided just that for their tournament and course. 🍷

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