



LOYALTY

By Monroe S. Miller

For all practical purposes, the golf season in Wisconsin was over. The worry-filled, stressful days of a hot, humid and difficult summer were past. It had been a miserable season, one most of us were anxious to forget.

That is why golf course superintendents were coming out of the woodwork (and the woods) and starting to touch base with one another. The conversations would last until springtime.

On this day, when several of us met to ride together to a WGCSA meeting, it was Indian summer all across Wisconsin. The leaves had flamed and fallen, and the sky was cloudless for days at a time. There was a faint haze, so typical of autumn in our state, on the far horizon. Despite our relief from arriving at the season's close, days like this were a little melancholy.

It was a perfect day for travel. We all arrived at the appointed time; nobody was late. Anytime from mid-March until now, there was a good chance at least one of us would be delayed. And no one would be surprised by a no-show.

They were all there, grown men pushing and shoving as they clambered into Scottie Fennimore's four-door Ford Explorer—Tom Morris, Steady Eddie Middleton, Bogey Calhoun, Sandy Grant, Billie Flagstick and me.

"You have obviously been behaving yourself, Scottie," Bogey said as he muscled himself into the front seat, "or Denise would not have let you drive her vehicle."

"You're right," Scottie confessed, adding, "I've been asking and reminding her for six weeks. Make damn sure none of you guys spills anything. I'll pay with my life."

We pulled out of the parking lot and onto the highway. We were headed for the St. Ives Golf Club in southwestern Wisconsin, my favorite part of the state.

The very first thing an outsider would notice was how everybody was

dressed. The meeting notice said "appropriate attire", indicating to most a coat and tie weren't required. And since we weren't playing golf, none were dressed in those sometimes goofy clothes.

Tom Morris always wore a necktie, and today was no exception. Bogey always dressed for comfort, and he definitely was comfortable today. He was decked out in L.L. Bean chino pants and a tan chamois cloth shirt.

"You have NO taste when it comes to knowing what to wear," Scottie chided him. You'd look okay if we were headed for the woods to hunt squirrels."

Bogey didn't care, telling Scott "when you're as good looking as I am, clothes don't matter much."

Obligatory jeers ensued, setting the stage for a fun trip for a group of old friends and business colleagues.

"Hey," Bogey said, "we should have invited Dr. Rossi along and gotten him into a discussion about politics. That would have made the time and the fur fly! We could have kept the radio tuned into Russ Limbaugh!"

The guys all laughed at what was really a compliment for Frank.

The upbeat spirits among us were typical for this time of year. We had all reached the point in time when we were already working on next year and the next golf season. That time comes variously; for some it's the harvest moon that usually arrives in late September. For others it is the very last golf event of the season. A friend of mine knows it is over when he sees signs of the abdication of chlorophyll—autumn leaf color to most of us.

I tend to refocus soon after the first hard killing frost, the one that turns my garden tomatoes and squash and pumpkin vines a black color. That is the time, for me, to look ahead and begin work on a new year and new goals.

Fall on a golf course is not a season for defiance. Not in Wisconsin. What's done is done; hopefully we've all done our very best and it showed. That notwithstanding, always—ALWAYS—we have the fervent hope that next year will be even better.

Probably that is why all seven of us were happy. There was plenty of shop talk—what worked and what didn't, from mowing machinery to fungicides. There was grouching about lumpy fertilizer, too much rain, too little rain, irrigation problems, hot days and early morning golfers.

But there was praise, too. Distributors had served us well this past year, we all agreed. Parts departments, especially, seemed to have moved up a notch. There was gratitude for cooperative golf pros, helpful clubhouse managers and faithful green committee chairs. And somebody added thanks to loyal employees.

Funny how sometimes a single word, for whatever reason, triggers a reaction. The word "loyal" did it for Tom Morris.

"Too bad loyalty didn't help Jim Cushman," Tom lamented, obviously

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feeling deeply for a former employee and assistant who had just lost his job. Jim worked for Tom years and years ago. He left Tom and Maple Leaf CC for the Excaliber CC. He and Tom had stayed pretty close.

"How long was Jim at Excaliber?" I asked Tom.

"A dozen years," Tom said curtly. "He did wonders for that course. Some kind of thank you. It goes to show you how little value some put on a loyal employee." Tom was mad, and I wasn't certain there was a chance for a rational conversation. But I decided to try.

"Did he have a bad year, Tom?" I asked since I really didn't know any details of Jim's situation.

"Well, it wasn't the best," Tom replied honestly, adding, "but a lot of golf courses in Wisconsin suffered this summer. Jim had company."

"It just seems to me to be shabby treatment of a man who'd been so loyal so long."

There was a long pause. No one spoke. Finally, after clearing his throat, Scottie asked Tom "what's loyalty got to do with it?"

You could see him set his jaw, grit his teeth and try to ignore Scott. After all, Tom was feeling for a guy who had suffered a terrible fate. Few things are more devastating to a family than the main bread winner losing his job. I regretted that Scottie had asked the question.

But then, of all people, Bogey Calhoun picked up the conversation. "Tom, we all feel sorry for Jim. But I didn't sign any kind of loyalty oath when I started to work for Shady Dell CC. And they surely didn't pledge any loyalty to me. Loyalty doesn't have anything to do with Jim losing his job."

Scottie agreed. "Tom, I think you are confusing terms. Compassion and honesty and integrity are noble attributes that we all have every right to expect from our employers. But they don't constitute loyalty. To me, anyway."

I looked over at Tom, with some hesitation. I expected to see his anger rising. Instead he seemed to be thinking about what we were saying.

"As far as I'm concerned, when each of us goes to work each day we are expected to put forth our best

effort, and use our talent and education and experience to their fullest," Steady Eddie suggested. "Maybe we are even expected to give service above and beyond the call of duty during the height of the golf season, even above and beyond what we are being paid for at that time. In return we expect to be paid, in full and on time. For me, that's where loyalty begins and ends—I provide a service for an agreed upon wage by the club." Ed seemed resolute in his tough business-like attitude.

I watched the Wisconsin landscape pass by on this wonderful autumn day. We were in an area of the state settled by people from Cornwall in England. The evidence was everywhere—limestone rock buildings that resembled those in the west of England yet today. It was an interesting variety of architectural styles built by an eclectic mix of immigrants over 150 years ago. The scenery gave hint that St. Ives GC wasn't too many miles away.

"I understand what you guys are saying," Tom said in a quiet voice. "But I also know of scores of times when Jim worked alone until dark on a

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piece of machinery, getting it ready for the next day's work, or came in at 4:00 a.m. to spray for disease rather than paying an employee to do it. I hate to think of how many times he went over in the middle of the night for irrigation problems because the club was too cheap to replace the system."

"All part of the job, Tom," Bill said to him matter-of-factly. "None of it has a thing to do with loyalty, either way. If anything, those extra efforts we all make are acts of loyalty to ourselves, the ones making the sacrifice."

"How so?" Tom wondered.

"Well," Bill continued, "I believe most golf course superintendents work extra hard and extend themselves because we expect something in return—personal satisfaction, a bonus, a pay raise, peace of mind or eventually a step up the ladder of success. Professional people know what they have to do and they do it for that reason, not because of loyalty to an employer."

There was a quiet time for a mile or two. It seemed as if the guys were digesting the conversation and sorting out their thoughts.

Sandy Grant broke the silence. "I agree. The way I have it figured is that I would be disloyal to myself if I didn't do the best I could, all of the time. It wouldn't have anything to do with disloyalty to Mendota Bay CC. On the other hand, it would be humiliating if MBCC kept me around out of loyalty when I was doing a mediocre job."

"That's pretty confident talk, Sandy, but hard to argue with," Tom observed.

"You know what, Tom," I contemplated out loud, "loyalty is something we all relate to and respect. It is very important; isn't that what patriotism is? Isn't love and dedication to your family a high form of loyalty? I sure think it is. And maybe the most obvious loyalty shown by you and me has been the endless trips to Camp Randall and Lambeau Field over the last twenty-five years to watch lousy football teams play? You couldn't do that if you weren't loyal to the Badgers and the Packers!"

"And the appeal of linking loyalty and your job is powerful. But it may also be just too sentimental."

"I don't know," Tom sighed. "It just seems there should be more to long term employment with a club than just

a paycheck. Maybe I am being foolish. I simply don't know."

"Look at it this way, Tom," Bogey offered. "Would Jim have been disloyal to Excaliber if he left for a better job? Would you be criticizing him for that? I'll bet not. You and I and the rest stay where we are because we like the players, the course, the town and a hundred other things. And I don't think loyalty is one of those hundred things."

Scott wanted the last word as we got close to the entrance to St. Ives GC. "Regardless of your feeling about loyalty, I'll bet all of you would agree that long term service should be recognized and maybe even protected like it is in some places. But that should be part of club policy and practice and we should all be versed on it."

Everybody agree. Sandy consoled Tom with the fact that Jim would be at another private course soon, real soon. He is a qualified man and that will be quickly recognized. "Who knows, Tom, maybe he'll end up with

an even better position."

"I hope so," Tom sighed. You had to greatly respect the compassion Tom felt for his friend.

"Hey," Steady blurted out, "there's the Bluebird Cafe. I ate there once—blue checked tablecloths and napkins, blue plates and the best pasty and figgyhobbin anywhere in Wisconsin. We've got to stop there after the meeting."

"Figgy what?" Tom said somewhat incredulously. His mood seemed brighter, now that the serious talk was over.

"Figgyhobbin," Ed replied. "It's a great dessert, pastry rolled up with raisins and covered with Neapolitan ice cream. With strong black coffee, it can't be beat. Promise you'll stop, Scottie."

"Depends on what the guys want. But if we do stop, we have to talk about something a little less serious."

Somehow I knew both would happen. ♣

