



THE NATIONAL

By Monroe S. Miller

Wouldn't you know it. The first really ugly, brutal winter weather of the year came the night before and the morning of our departure for the annual GCSAA conference and show.

Bogey Calhoun, Tom Morris and Ed Middleton stood at the window rail in the airport, looking out at the blizzard that raged all across Wisconsin and closed the airport for the immediate few hours. I was with them, and my state of mind was as glum as theirs.

"Let's go to the restaurant and get some black coffee," Tom suggested. "If we hurry we might be able to get a table by the window and watch all the planes that AREN'T taking off!"

"Real funny, Tom," said the normally chipper Bogey. "Here we are, stranded in an airport on one of the most exciting days of the year, and you're making a joke about it."

Tom was a little taken aback by Bogey's bitterness. But almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth, Bogey apologized.

"Sorry, guys," he said, "but I can't help myself. I'm so damned disappointed I could cry."

We all understood. The four of us, grown men all, had been going to the National for years. This one was my 23rd consecutive. Tom had been to a similar number, and both Steady and Bogey hadn't missed the chance to attend in their less long careers.

The waitress brought our coffees, along with a carafe of refills. I knew it wouldn't go to waste. The snow swirled outside the window by our table, showing little sign of relenting.

"Winter weather has raised havoc with travel to and from the National any number of times," I told the guys. "I'm almost to the point of expecting it."

"Not that experience makes it more tolerable," I added. "I'm just not surprised anymore."

"In fact, a delay because of a winter storm a number of years ago gave Kick Logan and me one of the most interesting experiences either of us will have at these meetings anywhere."

"Keep going, tell about it," Bogey said, with a little less aggravation than a couple of minutes before.

"Well, the plane left here four hours late because of — you guessed it — a snow storm. We were diverted to another airline with a hub WEST of here. But we were going to Washington, D.C.! We arrived at our next stop farther from D.C. than when we left. That stop was two hours long and we were finally boarded on a flight that would take us halfway to the coast. We waited a couple of hours before we finally boarded a plane for Washington.

"No surprise that when we got close to the D.C. airport we were put into a holding pattern, circling around the city, over the ocean and back. Our turn to land came up and by some miracle our luggage was there, too. That was a genuine shock.

"Kick and I hustled a taxi to the hotel and were happy to see a subway station across the street. We figured, despite the late hour and the total darkness, we could get downtown and still see some of the historic sights. I checked in and Kickapoo tracked down details on how to use the subway.

"Washington probably has the best subway system in the country — clean and safe and efficient. It's probably the ONLY efficient thing in Washington! We boarded the nearly empty train and got off at the station closest to the Capitol building. There wasn't a soul on the street when we got out of the stop."

"You two are lucky to be alive," Bogey said. His mind was now more on my tale than on the snow outside.

"Well, remember, this was quite a while ago and D.C. hadn't yet wrestled the Murder City USA title from Detroit."

"Kick and I hustled up to the Capitol, rattled the doors until a cop asked what we were doing. He was no kinder after we told him 'tourists looking for an open door to our Capitol!'"

"Come back tomorrow," he told us.

"We could see nothing was open and that before long safety could be a concern. The Supreme Court building was closed, too, so we walked back toward the Capitol on the way to the subway station.

"Along the sidewalk we saw a cameraman setting up lights at the same time a man in a coat and tie and overcoat was patting his hair in place. We stopped to watch and it was pretty obvious we had stumbled onto a national TV report from "the Hill". The reporter was Brit Hume, reporting live for ABC-TV News.

"Every year Kick and I talk about how close we were to live national TV."

"Well," Tom said, "it was at that same National that I shook former president Jerry Ford's hand. He was at the annual banquet to receive an award from GCSAA. I was in a back hall behind the hotel ballroom where the banquet was being held, and there he was."

"What did you do?" queried Bogey.

"Well, I said 'good evening, Mr. President.' He was very cordial and interested when I said I was from Wisconsin. Since he was from Michigan, we talked a bit about the Badgers and the Wolverines. He signed my program and I still have it."

We were impressed. Ed started recounting the famous people he'd met at the National.

"In my time, I have discovered that the National attracts lots of people because of its importance to golf. The meeting is fertile ground for rubber-necks like me," the steady one observed.

"Like all of us," Bogey offered.

The conversation started me thinking about the times I'd met Arnold Palmer, once getting him to sign a Palmer ryegrass ad and another time a can of Pennzoil. When he received our highest award, I got him to sign the program.

We visited about all the great players we'd met at conference. Among us we'd seen Lee Trevino, Byron Nelson, Jack Nicklaus and Ben Crenshaw. Somebody mentioned Johnny Miller, and then remembered Chi Chi Rodriguez. There was Gene Sarazan and Patty Berg. We knew we were forgetting some players; the point that really set in was that each of us, to varying degrees, had been close to those at the core of golf's history and tradition. Because of the National.

"Let's remember the other sports names who have appeared at the National, as keynoters or speakers or as company representatives," Tom advised. "Bart Starr was on stage when Dr. Jim Love received the distinguished service award. Terry Bradshaw and Johnny Bench have been there in recent years. And once I had dinner with retired San Francisco 49er quarterback John Brodie, who also is an outstanding golfer."

I chipped in with the story about my early morning visit with Pat Summeral. It was back during the period when the opening session was right away in the morning. I was to be on stage to get an award for our chapter publication. All of us were to meet ahead of time in a room behind the auditorium. As is typical with me, I was early, by a lot. First one there, but not by much. Pat Summeral wandered in, curious if he was in the right place. We visited for 10 or 15 minutes before anybody else showed up. It was great fun. I got him to talking about Vince Lombardi, who was an assistant coach for the New York Giants when Pat was a defensive back for them.

It looked like the snow was letting up a little. We could see the lights of the snowplows on the runways. Bogey motioned to our waitress for some more black coffee. We kept talking.

"The National has given members a great chance to learn from world famous designers — Cornish and Jones, for example — and to get advice from the world's best grass scientists," Bogey said. "They are all at the National one time or another, and every one of us can approach them if so inclined. It is a neat deal."

"I'll say," Bogey replied. "I spent almost an hour once talking with Jim Beard. Where else would you get that chance?"

On and on the conversation went, all about what a great week for golf course superintendents the National was.

Tom and I have been around long enough that we can remember when the National was held 'up north'. In fact, one of those northern meetings was an omen for me, a clue that I was really going to like my new employer. It was 1973; I had been on the job three or four days and I left for Boston where my first National was held. I'll never forget it. While everybody else was griping and complaining, I thought I was in heaven. I spent free hours checking out Beacon Hill, the Park Street Cemetery where John Hancock

and Paul Revere were buried, the Old North Church and a dozen other historical places. It was a meeting I could never forget. The room I had was even special — it overlooked the Boston Common. Only those with thin blood complained about the cold, and it was cold; I didn't even notice.

"How about the week in Minneapolis?" Tom asked me.

"I liked it. Did you?"

"Sure," came Tom's reply. "But lots of others didn't. The attendance wasn't that great and GCSAA hasn't been back to snow country since."

Bogey had been quiet all this time, disappointed more than the rest of us that we weren't halfway to California by now. He finally spoke up.

"The National trips have taught me a lot. Seminars, lectures and all that are the meat and potatoes of the week. The huge show, which I still can barely comprehend, is dessert. But the experience of getting there and back, the new friends made and all the rest that goes on are important, too."

"I've heard you tell about the year you drove down with Scott Fennimore and Bill Flagstick," Ed said, hoping to bring Bogey out of his blue funk.

Bogey smiled. "That trip had every misadventure imaginable, from flat tires to going to the wrong course for the annual tournament to the night Scottie and Billie slept together."

"Whoa," Tom interrupted. "Details, please."

"We drove hard the first day, hoping to get reasonably close to the tournament golf course so the second day had more golf than driving. But we were making less progress than we'd hoped — bad weather, flat tire, detours, you name it. All three of us were in a bad mood and tired."

"We pulled into a motel, late, and registered for a double room with two beds. We figured we'd draw straws to see who got the couch."

Bogey was grinning.

"We unlocked the door. No couch. We looked at one another and Bill blurted out — 'I'll sleep in the car before I'll sleep with either of you guys.' Scott and I said in unison 'nobody's sharing a bed.' "

We leaned into the table, wondering where Bogey's story was going. He continued.

"There was a large chair in the room. We drew straws and Scott lost. He got the chair."

"We found a restaurant, ate supper and unpacked the car. It was decided

to move the chair to the edge of one bed for Scott. He got a blanket from each bed and assured us he'd be fine.

"Since we were all tired, it didn't take long to shower and hit the hay. I was in one bed, Bill in the other and we had Scott set up so he could put his feet under the covers of Bill's bed. It seemed fair and there was no complaining."

"I was really tired and sound asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow."

"I don't know how much time had passed, but in an instant I shot straight up in bed like a bolt of lightning; going from deep sleep to wide-eyed awake is enough to cause a heart attack. A blood curdling scream had pierced by ears; it was Billie."

"He was screaming and swearing at Scott." Bogey was enjoying the memory.

"Scott was half asleep and didn't have a clue as to what the commotion was all about. Neither did I," Bogey continued. "I was in a panic and asked Bill 'what's the matter?'"

"That s.o.b put his arm around me. And that's not all.' Bill was pale as a ghost."

Bogey was laughing now. "Scott was sound asleep but still slid out of the chair and onto the bed where Bill was sleeping. Quite normally he eventually rolled over and tried to cuddle up with Bill, just like he would have done at home. Only it wasn't home nor was it his wife. Poor Bill. He still hasn't recovered! The would have made a good scene in a movie."

The weather was improving. Announcements about reschedules

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were being given continuously. We would make it out today and most likely find ourselves in California by nightfall.

It was good for us to sit together for awhile, four friends — good friends — who were also colleagues in the same business. Once every now and then we all need to stop and share experiences and recognize how important some events are over time. We were all grateful to clubs for sending us to the National and really should thank those who have planned the meeting carefully for so long. Each one was full of memories and somehow those memories hadn't faded with time.

The National had gotten us to many of America's great cities. It had put us in the classroom with our best

educators, given us time with the game's best players. We'd seen all the equipment in one place, talked to architects and consultants like we couldn't have otherwise. We had come to know those who had a big hand in making the profession what it is today — Tom Mascaro, Eb Steiniger and Tuck Tate were three I was proud to have met and gotten to know.

We have been entertained by everyone from Anna Maria Albergetti to the Beach Boys and that's been lots of fun. And where else can you go to get those Jacobsen hats for your collection?

We all agreed. Despite the snow, this year's National would probably be the best one ever. Until next year. 🌿



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