



# THE HUNDRED DAYS OF SUMMER

By Monroe S. Miller

The voice on the other end of the phone sounded worried. "I think maybe you should drive over here and see Larry. He needs some kind of help, and we don't know what to do."

The concerned voice that was pleading for a visit was John Kettel's. Johnny had worked at our shop for the first five years after high school and moved to Sweet Clover Country Club with Larry Strike when Larry got the superintendent's position.

They were a good team. Larry had been a cum laude graduate of the Madison campus turf program and spent time on both Bogey Calhoun's and Steady Eddie Middleton's crew before I hired him as my assistant. That is how John and Larry became such good friends.

It seemed a somewhat unlikely pair, given the difference in their educational background. But John was smart, and he had both a mechanical aptitude and a green thumb. His calling in life was golf course work.

Larry had the obvious nickname — Lucky. He should have been born in the 50s — the nickname would have been a scream then. After listening to the older guys for years, he finally got the license plates LS-MFT. In my youth it meant "Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco". It was one of America's most common and recognized ad lines. To Larry it stood for "Larry Strike Means Fine Turf". We laughed about it often.

That is something the kid always did easily — laugh. He was mild mannered, good natured and very happy to be in the world of golf turf. Bogey, Steady and I all knew he was a sure bet, especially with John at his side.

"What do you mean, John?" I asked, without a clue.

"I don't know, exactly, but he is a nervous wreck. He has become withdrawn, even with me. He's jumpy, worried all the time and just is not himself. Karen even called me about it. She is concerned like we are.

Maybe he just needs to talk to somebody."

"Don't worry, John," I assured him. "I'll call Calhoun and Middleton and see if there might be a time when we can get over there to visit with him."

"I think it's nerves," John added as an afterthought. "We are both a little inexperienced, and the heat and humidity of this summer are twice as bad as last year."

What golf course superintendent isn't nervous this time of year? For generations in Wisconsin, it has been called the "hundred days of summer." It has always been the same: from the end of May until the end of the first week of September, this work, our profession, can be a living hell. It is the time when nothing works, everything breaks and a loneliness sets in. I felt it in my mid-20s and I feel it now in my late 40s.

The mix is enough to challenge the most sane among us — fussy players, disease pressure, budget deficits, irrigation problems, a weak chairman or an unreasonable chairman, bugs, equipment troubles, heat, humidity, no rain when we need it and too much when we don't, and on and on and on. It is a wonder every golf course superintendent in Wisconsin doesn't have an ulcer the size of a quarter in his stomach. No sleep, no relaxation. Only the endless and unrelenting summer.

But you've got to handle it — in your own way, for sure. The reality is that the player hitting a nine-iron shot from a bad fairway lie doesn't care about your problems. He only cares about one thing: from the time he first tees it up until the final putt drops, the course better be good. Really good. Period. That's what he paid his money for and that is what he expects.

Bogey wasn't in his office, but Steady was. He said "I'll be right over" when I asked about driving up so see Lucky.

My shop was out of the way for Ed, but we thought it best to ride together and see if one of us had any theories on Larry. "Maybe John is just exaggerating," I offered.

"No, I don't think so." Eddie had a certainty in his voice.

"Last week I saw the LS-MFT plates and Larry's truck on the service road on the far end of our course. I was a little surprised to see it parked there, and really worried when I saw Larry slumped on the steering wheel. I rapped on the window and he nearly went through the roof. The kid was tightly wound. Honestly, when I was walking up to the truck, I thought maybe he was dead."

"What did he say? Why was he there?" I asked, half irritated Steady hadn't told me before now.

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"Well, once he got his color back, I asked him that and he just said he had to get away from everything and everybody for a little while. All my employees know that road and since he spent a summer on our crew, he know it was secluded and private.

"He said he needed to think a bit and needed a quiet place. He assured me that's all there was to it, started his truck and left. I guess I took him at his word."

It only took a few more minutes to get to the Sweet Clover shop. As soon as we parked, John was there. His face had a weary look, one that matched the concern in his voice earlier in the morning.

"I'm glad you guys came over; just don't tell Larry I called, OK?"

"Sure, sure John," I answered quickly, adding "but we aren't perfectly clear on what we are here for or what is wrong."

"Neither do I, but things aren't right with Larry. I can't get through to him. He hardly talks to any of us. He doesn't eat lunch. We seem to have lost direction and are always reacting to problems rather than trying to head them off. It is totally unlike him. But this morning I saw him stop his cart along the fifth hole near the woods. He walked about three steps and started vomiting. I am certain he didn't think anyone had seen him because he was surprised when I drove up and asked if he was sick."

John paused and then continued. "I pleaded with him to go see a doctor if he was sick. All he said was 'No, no, I'll be fine. Just nerves.'

"He has been drinking malox like soda pop. Karen stopped the other day and said he was withdrawn at home, too, wasn't sleeping and seemed pretty much miserable most of the time."

Ed and I took a Columbia utility vehicle and headed onto the SCCC course. John said to look for him on the 14th hole; he was fixing a satellite controller.

It had been a terrible month. The weather was miserable and fungicide budgets from LaCrosse to Sheboygan and a hundred miles on either side of that line were out the window. If Larry was having some sleepless nights, he wasn't the only one. But the Sweet Clover course looked to be in fine condition.

We found him where John said we would. He looked up briefly as we approached and quickly went back to

whatever he was doing, likely changing a fuse.

"How's it going, Lucky?" I offered with a smile as we stopped next to the satellite.

"What are you two doing here?" There was an irritated sound to his voice.

"I don't know about him," Eddie started, "but I want to know what the hell is wrong with you, anyway. Your wife is worried, your assistant is worried, and I still want to know why you

were hiding on my property last week. You have some tall explaining to do, so you might as well start. I have to get back to work."

Larry leaned back from the satellite. He was sitting on the ground and supported his weight with his arms behind him, palms flat in the grass.

"What if I said it was none of your business, Ed?"

"You better believe it's my business," Eddie shot back. "Fair weather friendship doesn't cut it with me. How

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many times have you called me with questions or asking for advice? Hundreds. How many times have I loaned you equipment? You know damn well that guy over there won't loan it to you, so you ask me. So when I ask you a question, a simple question, I expect an answer. Now."

I was surprised. My inclination was toward sympathy for the kid. He was young, somewhat inexperienced and probably having a difficult time psychologically with his work world. Ed obviously felt differently. He wasn't irritated; he was flat out mad.

Larry sat upright, startled by the tough talk, like I was. He looked Ed straight in the eye.

"I'm having a very hard time with the golf course," he said. "Not everybody has a big budget like Breezy Hill CC, and that makes it tough. I'm working 14 or 15 hours a day, the players are complaining all the time, and my wife is nagging me about not being home enough. Plus, the weather has been so bad that we just can't get on top.

"This season is unrelenting, and in two weeks we are hosting the Governor's Cup. I don't know how we will ever make it."

You could tell that Ed was mad. His face was burning red and he clenched his fist.

"Get up off the ground, Larry," he demanded. Larry complied, slowly, not exactly sure what had set off his old boss.

Ed walked over to him, stopping when his nose was about six inches from Larry's. Larry edged back, but Steady stepped forward so they stayed face to face. They could smell each others' mid-day bad breath.

"You sorry, selfish, whiny little jerk," Ed said with anger in his voice. "You're making everybody around you, including your family, miserable. Grow up and face the world with a little backbone.

"What the hell — do you think you are the only golf course superintendent with weather problems? Or a big tournament on the calendar? Or irrigation system trouble at the worst possible time? Let me tell you something, buddy boy. You don't have any problems here you cannot handle. That's what you get paid for, not to mope around looking for sympathy.

"Your nickname is a good one — you are lucky. Lucky to have a job, one that you were trained for. You are lucky to have a great family, an outstanding

assistant, good friends. What in the bloody hell is the matter with you? You're acting like a childish crybaby."

Before Larry could say anything, Ed answered his own question. "The problem with too many of your generation is you have no reference point. You have always had it good, and when circumstances get a little tough, you don't get tougher. You wilt, just like that Poa over there. You are pathetic.

"Here's my reference point," Ed went on. He used his right hand to unbutton the sleeve on his left arm.

"Here, see that? That's worth worrying about." Ed was furious. His left arm was in Larry's face. On the palm side of his arm, from his wrist to his elbow, was what looked like a big, bold red zipper. I knew immediately what it was — a scar from a serious injury of some kind. The center seam was half an inch across, and the cross scars — about a half inch apart, were somewhat smaller.

Larry's eyes were wide open and his skin was ashen.

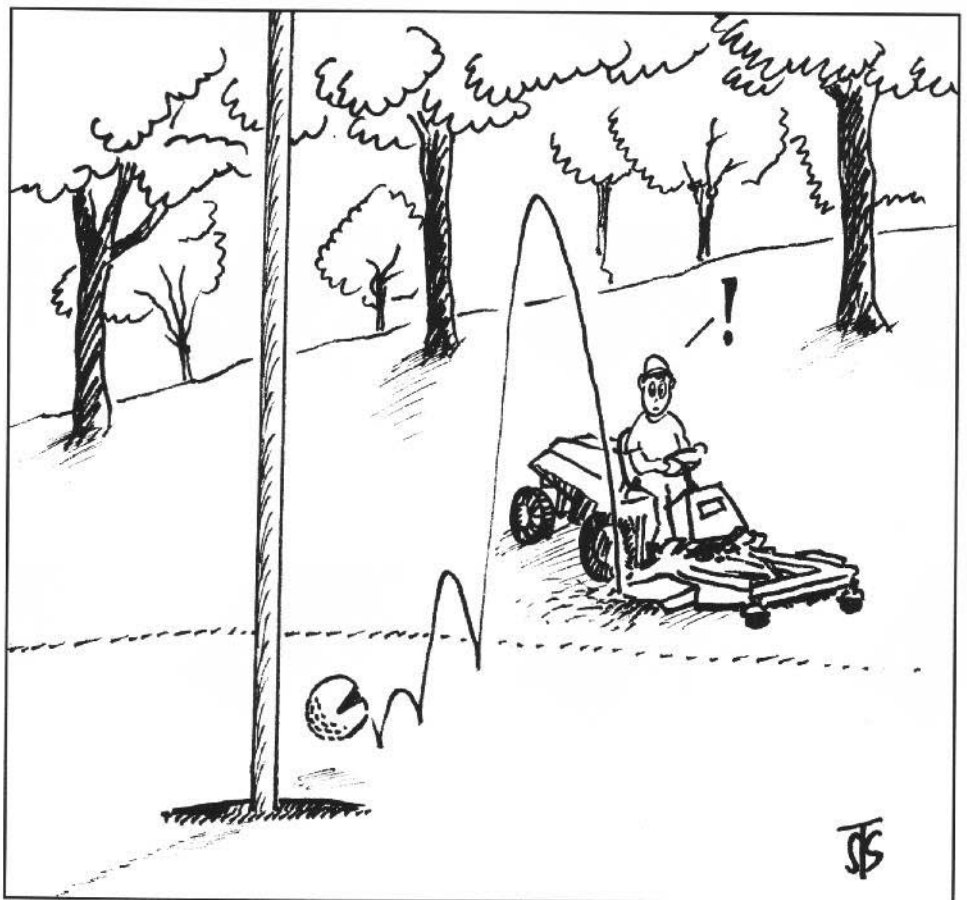
"Do you know how I got that, kid? I'll tell you how. I got stitched by a Chinese Communist AK-47 rifle somewhere between Phu Bai and Hue in 1969. I was walking point for my 101st

Airborne Division squad, in triple canopy jungle in the middle of the summer monsoon, and a North Vietnamese Army regular opened fire on me as I was reaching up to push my steel pot back from my forehead.

"He saw me first, but I saw him best. My face was the last thing that young soldier saw on this earth — he couldn't have been over 16.

"Every second of every minute of every hour of every day that I was in that war zone I was scared sheetless. For 12 months. I was homesick, dirty and tired all the time. My injury got me a medivac to Long Binh, surgery in Japan and in less than a month I was back with my unit, among the snakes and bugs and mud and stark fear of a combat zone. And my arm hurts me constantly. Always. It is a reminder, in no small way, not of how unlucky I was, but of how lucky I am to be alive today. Many of my Army buddies have their names on the black granite of the Vietnam War Veterans Memorial in Washington. I thank God every night before I sleep for giving me so much to be thankful for.

"You're worried? What about? Everything you worry about can be dealt with, if it even happens. Hell, you





worry about things that likely won't occur.

"You need to grow up." Ed turned and walked away, rolling his shirt sleeve back down and buttoning it.

I was startled and didn't know what to say. Larry hung his head.

Some of us had wondered why Steady always wore a long sleeve shirt, at work or away. We had noticed he held his left arm differently. He used it, but there was something about it. We just never asked.

I had tried several times to ask him about Nam, where he was and what he did and when he was there. After all, it was an experience we shared. But he wouldn't talk. So I just dropped it, figuring it was too painful for him.

A lot of things fell into place. When the GCSAA meeting was in D.C., Ed

and I went to the Vietnam War Memorial together. It was moving to me, but the tears rolled down his face. He wasn't crying and he didn't say a word.

Another time we were at a Packer game together, and a clown in front of us didn't take his hat off when the national anthem was played. Ed reached down, put his palm on the guy's head, crushed the hat and took it off his head for him. The guy turned around and started to object. "Shut your mouth and show some respect," was all Eddie had to say.

I knew now why, after these past couple of years, Ed has such a disgust for Bill Clinton. Clearly, Clinton's unwillingness to serve in the military was unsettling to Ed.

Ed had turned and started walking toward the shop. Larry said to me

"I'm really sorry" and started to run after Ed.

I sat there, wondering if what Ed had done was the right thing. Not that it mattered much now. I suppose maybe we all are a little too sensitive sometimes. Head problems — psychology to the sophisticated — are tricky and people suffering can go off the deep end.

I sat on the cart. Larry and Ed were walking together, and for a moment Eddie had put his arm around the young superintendent. I sighed the sound of relief, pretty sure Larry would have a whole new outlook, one that likely last for years to come.

I left them alone and drove back to the shop, taking a long route. This was a day the three of us wouldn't soon forget about. ♣

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