



# The Roller Coaster

By Pat Norton

Although it's been many years since I have actually been on a real live roller coaster, the emotional roller coaster that was the 1995 golf season was a great substitute. Right about now I feel sort of wobbly and dizzy...as if I've just exited a ride that I have been on for months. Time to get off the ride, control the sick sensation, take a deep breath and relax.

As with all of you in the Badger state, Illinois golf course superintendents experienced a very long, very wicked ride in 1995. It is now October 10, which means that the ride is finally coasting to a stop. If a guy was able to jump off the 'course improvement ride' just a bit early, he'd soon realize just how beautiful the weather has been this fall. He'd also take some time off, play a bit of golf, attend a few superintendent meetings, and enjoy life.

As things are, though, it seems that there is never time for the fun stuff. I've golfed only three times this season—all on this home course—which means they were unenjoyable because the trained eye is always looking for flaws and seeking perfection.

The coaster ride down here southwest of Chicagoland began on March 17...and we've been going pretty much nonstop ever since. It has been a very intense season...tilled with projects, more projects...new employees... more new employees...terrible weather...and seemingly no end to that terrible weather!!

Finally the weather broke just after Labor Day. From then on, things got so much easier. Usually down here dollar spot is a real September concern. I am trying to wean myself and the course off the fungicide habit and save the money. This September was just great...no need to apply any fungicide...great weather...and a bentgrass golf course that largely escaped unscathed as compared to the horror stories of July and August.

As I said, we opened the course on March 17, which seems early...but not

really since everybody is so eager to get out onto the course. At that point everybody is anticipating the enjoyment of the ride, just like your children as they beg you to take them on the real thing.

Our early projects included wildflower area design and establishment, completed May 2nd, followed by '20 questions' by our ownership group until finally we saw color and flowers.

For the next eight weeks we had great wildflower color and a great show for the golfers. I was riding high as 'the wildflower king of Grundy County'! I actually had lots of questions and a few phone calls from the golfing public concerning our success with the flowers and their lack of the same.

Things were great until the annuals, including the old reliable black-eyed susans, all decided to let the foxtail dominate for the remainder of the year. Next year we'll overseed and figure out which grass herbicide is really, really safe to use with wildflowers.

Prairiegrass establishment is quite another story. Suffice to say that I am

definitely not considered 'the king of the prairiegrasses'...more like the 'course jester'. My friends at Pheasants Forever and the Illinois Department of Conservation all counsel lots of patience, lots of patience.

I am not sure just how Pheasants Forever operates in Wisconsin, but down here they've been willing to donate seed, use of equipment, labor and lots of good advice in our quest to establish twenty-plus acres of these grasses to complement our open, links-style golf course. What a helpful organization!

Steve Swartz, our contact with that organization, says that Wisconsin is a big state for Pheasants Forever membership and fundraising. Check it out, guys...

Anyway, those early months of the ride were very fun and enjoyable. I could clearly see what was happening, and it was all positive.

Until the projects began...projects originally planned and budgeted for completion over a two-year time span got compressed into one season.



Bunker renovation, drainage installation, on and on it continued. The ride was starting to move too fast...and there were a few days when I really did feel like heaving over the side of the golf cart!

As the summer progressed, the bulk of the projects were completed, but the beginning of August found us getting really dizzy from the ride. Caucasian employees jumping the full speed ride in order to get back to college or to football practice...and the heat and humidity really cranking up. Just about every day found us all getting dizzy and sick from this damn ride ...STOP...we all really wanted to get off!!

I guess that our collective salvation was that our course was surviving pretty well. The rumors and stories of course damage, ultraextensive fungicide use, and good superintendents in some really bad situations made us feel fortunate. It is sort of like the mentality of hearing about a tornado nearby, or some other disaster.

Pythium did strike at us during the middle of August...trying to not use a

few extra gallons of Subdue on fairways proved a mistake, but nowhere near the damage that others on tree-lined, Poa courses were sustaining. Didn't everybody blow their annual chemical budget by about August 15th? We underbudgeted in this account to begin with, so our actual expenditures look really, really high...

The last half of August seemed to go by at a slow blur...the ride was moving so slowly..."let's just get this over with," I kept saying to myself.

To top it all off, the most pleasant of our ownership group showed me his true colors again by corking off about his perception of the golf course...by Labor Day weekend I certainly had every right to buckle, strap, tie and bolt this guy permanently to the worst roller coaster ride that I could ever imagine...set the switch on 'permanent extra fast' and leave him spinning there, forever!!! What a wicked thought...

The autumn, on the other hand, has been a really enjoyable ride. This course is cruising through the fall, golf

income is way up over budget, and the course looks really good.

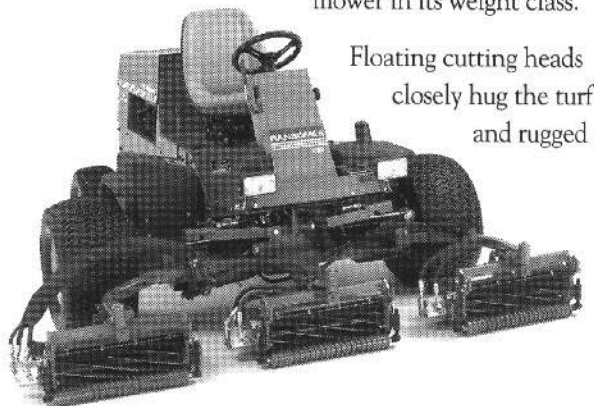
In late September we received some good recognition from Chicago-Land Golf, which is the most widely read golf publication in the area. They conducted their first annual 'Readers Choice Awards' by having their readers respond to an extensive survey of favorite courses in multiple categories. Little old Nettle Creek, way out here in corn country, nailed down the No. 10 spot in the "best conditioned golf course" category. The rankings in that category were as follows: 1 - Pine Meadow, 2 - Seven Bridges, 3 - Cog Hill No. 4, 4 - Woodbine, 5 - Prairie Landing, 6 - Kemper Lakes, 7 - Orchard Valley, 8 - Cantigny, 9 - Golf Club of Illinois, and 10 - NETTLE CREEK.

Say, what? "There are many, many high quality public courses in Chicagoland that didn't make the list...so what's happening here?" I ask myself. It really doesn't mean anything at all, except for the fact that some recognition makes riding the roller coaster worthwhile. 🍀

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