



YELLOW FLAGS FLUTTERING — *The REAL Start of Spring*

By Monroe S. Miller

It seems almost everybody I know has a very specific, very individual sign of spring.

Cheryl Miller has a traditional one—the first robin to arrive in Middleton. That is an exciting event, for sure, but it is too often premature. Spring doesn't really get here in early March, but sometimes a lonely robin does.

A lot of golf course superintendents call opening day the first day of spring. There is powerful sentiment in me that understands that logic.

Others use the calendar—it says March 21 is the start of spring, so it must be so. In our town, Badger football practice at the UW-Madison escorts in springtime. The NCAA championship basketball game does it for some people. Aldo Leopold ignored all signs of the seasonal switch until he saw a skein of geese flying north. He knew that event to be the surest sign.

For me, I know spring has really arrived when the Masters begins. The CBS-TV ads (announcement is a more accurate word than ad, I suppose) for the tournament started in the third week of March, tantalizing even non-golf fans. These visual pieces show green grass and the white austere antebellum clubhouse, pink azaleas and white dogwood. The images and the peaceful music are very inviting.

I have had the incredible good fortune to have attended the tournament twice. Really, when I think back, I can hardly believe it. When you talk about highlights of one's life, in my life those Masters trips rank near the top.

Wisconsin is lucky to have Gene Haas and the Wisconsin State Golf Association. The annual trip he plans gives a plane load of Wisconsin golf fans a chance they likely wouldn't have otherwise. A ticket to the Masters is tougher than a Super Bowl ticket, a World Series ticket, a Final Four ticket or even a pass to the Kentucky Derby. A Masters ticket is a lot like Green Bay Packer season tick-

ets—they are willed down the family tree. It has gotten so it is even difficult to buy a pass to see a practice round, so popular and singular has this event become.

This year was made even more interesting by the release of two new books, each about Bob Jones' life. Jones and his career and his memoirs are intimately tied to the Augusta National Golf Club and the Masters. The books were inspired by the fact that this year's Masters was the 25th since Jones died in 1971. Sid Mathew wrote one of them—*The Life and Times of Bobby Jones*—and he was at our Orlando conference to sign copies of his book for golf course superintendents. The book made the Masters even more relevant to me.

So what is it about the Masters that makes it so special? There are much older tournaments with traditions decades and decades longer than the Masters. Among the four majors of a grand slam, the Masters didn't even begin until almost 75 years after the start of the British Open, 40 years after the US Open and 20 years after the PGA. Regardless, the Masters seems to have a sense of tradition and history the others do not. It could be because the tournament is played on the same course every year.

Could it be the players? No. You can seem those players at the US Open in Detroit or Chicago or Minneapolis—all close to us—and some even play in the GMO.

So, it is clearly the golf course that appeals to me and almost every other golf fan. The WSGA tour enters a gate near the fifth green. The first sight a winter weary Wisconsinite sees is that green. The surrounds are to a scale we seldom see here. The green is big, with big rolls. All of the grass you see is cut short. And my first sight of that green and its surrounds had Jack Nicklaus in it! Who could ever forget?

The golf course is awesome. It isn't long. I am not positive, but I doubt even stretched to the back of the back tees and pins tucked away it isn't over, or much over, 7,000 yards. I was startled by the total lack of rough. There isn't any. It has fairway turf from tree line to tree line, a formidable width on most holes. The greens aren't as big as they look on TV, but they are big. It is a golf course that is lightly bunkered.

Obviously, it isn't an easy golf course, but you aren't struck by features that would seem to make it overwhelmingly difficult.

What the golf course is, is overwhelmingly beautiful. It occupies the land of a former nursery—about 370 acres worth of nursery. The gentle hills and valleys and the sparkling streams are framed and accented by plants from that nursery—magnolias,

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azalea, red bud, holly, peach, juniper and fir and more. In fact, each hole is named after a plant that dominates its terrain.

Everything is green, from the turf itself to the shop when it was located below the fifth fairway. The bleachers, the rest stations, the trash containers, crowd control states and ropes—everything!—is green. The yellow sticks and yellow flags make the targets even better because of this.

Bob Jones had some help in designing Augusta National, a man we are more familiar with of late—a Scottish golf course architect named Alister McKenzie. Jones once wrote their purpose “was to provide a golf course of considerable natural beauty, enjoyable for the average golfer and at the same time testing for the expert player...We want to make the bogeys easy, if frankly sought, pars readily obtainable by standard good play, and birdies, except on par-fives, dearly bought ...”

And then, “...with a course as wide open as is needed to accommodate the average golfer we can only tighten it up by increasing the difficulty of play around the hole. This we attempt to do

...by placing flags in more difficult and exacting positions and by increasing the speed of the greens. Additionally we try to maintain our greens at such firmness that they will not hold a mis-played shot. Generally speaking, the greens at Augusta are quite large and rolling, with carefully contrived undulations, the effect of which is magnified as the speed of the surface is increased.”

There are lots of other things that make the Masters the singular tournament that it is. The food stands, for example, have only cold sandwiches—egg salad, pimento loaf and bologna—and no hot food. They do not want the blue haze from charcoal confusing the gallery with Lambeau Field or Milwaukee County Stadium. No disturbing cameras are allowed. Nor is autograph seeking.

The tradition is more than Jones and McKenzie and Magnolia Lane. It is the membership of the club, which included Ike Eisenhower and Cliff Roberts and Hord Hardin. Tradition is the par 3 nine-hole tourney early in the week. It is the group of tidy white cabins east of the 10th tee and fairway, for visiting members and their families.

It is Raes Creek and Amen Corner. It is the permanent Masters Trophy.

It seems everything about Augusta National and the Masters is perfect. In fact, on my second trip Cheryl was with me and even though we were all by ourselves on the eighth hole, we were whispering to each other! That's respect.

When I was 22 years old, I spent ten weeks at Fort Gordon, Georgia, the US Army's Military Police School outside of Augusta. Despite a lack of money, on a weekend when I had a pass I took a cab from downtown Augusta to the golf course. I spoke to the guard in the guard house at the end of Magnolia Lane, asking for permission to walk in and see the golf course. I explained my circumstances, but he replied, “I'm sorry, son, but I cannot let you in.” That was in 1970. Never would I have guessed that a little over twenty years later I would have the chance to walk every corner of the course.

So it happened again this year. Spring officially began in my world when the first player hit the first ball of the Masters to the yellow flag fluttering on the first green. Hallelujah, spring! 🍀

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