



Society, not golf, is all screwed up

By Rob Schultz

A few weeks ago outside the Odana Hills clubhouse, a vulgar old cuss with the personality of a shriveled piece of parsnip spit out sentence after sentence of profanity-laced racial epithets at a Korean woman who was standing quietly near the door.

I was cleaning my golf shoes just a few feet away at the time and the nasty tirade almost startled me out of my Softspikes. Sandy Benson, the wife of Odana pro Tom Benson and the manager of concessions, heard it too, and chased after the man to scold him.

"That infuriates me," said Sandy, her face reddened with anger.

Unfortunately, it happens all the time, especially at a place like Odana where each year a record number of people gather with different personalities, races, religions and sexual orientation, and play golf together every day. When you mix all the elements together — including the fact that golf in itself can be an expensive source of great anger and frustration — you get a recipe for disaster.

"Nonsense happens all the time," said Tom Benson, who was working recently when two senior golfers — one of who has a heart condition — got into a fist fight while playing together on the course.

"It's usually over petty crap," Benson said. "People get out there and lose their minds and sensibilities."

It reached its pinnacle Saturday, October 19, not at Odana but at another municipal golf course in New Berlin. Authorities there are saying that a 51-year-old man golfing with his young son died after he was kicked in the chest during an altercation with another golfer at the 18th hole at New Berlin Hills golf course.

It's a shocking story. Yet it's not so shocking to people like the Bensons,

who have seen, time after time, the ills of a messed up society spilling out onto the serene setting of a golf course.

"It's amazing," Tom Benson said, "that this doesn't happen more often."

Just like titanium has replaced wood as the club of choice in golf, shouting has replaced whispers, and fists and kicking have replaced looking the other way when a code of somebody's idea of etiquette is broken.

The problem has even reached the pro ranks. Just this summer Senior PGA Tour sourpuss Tom Weiskopf took the game in the wrong direction when he consciously and publicly lambasted a club pro who was playing in his group during a Senior Tour major tournament. Weiskopf was upset because he didn't feel he should "lower" himself to play with somebody who wasn't a regular Tour pro. His main complaint during the round: The club pro used a quarter to mark his ball instead of a dime.

Right or, in this case, wrong, the public tends to condone such actions by a well-known sports figure and it just makes the munis' work that much more difficult. That's especially true at busy municipal courses like Odana, which regularly match single golfers with threesomes or twosomes to keep the flow going.

"I hear it all," said Benson. "I hear about it from people who don't want to play with Catholics, or Jews, or Italians, or women, or Koreans, or Korean women. You name it, I hear complaints about them all. I just make sure we all treat everybody the same."

A few years ago Benson said a twosome showed up without a reservation and waited several minutes to tee off. Finally, they were paired with a twosome of Koreans. They refused to play with them and put their names back on the waiting list. Several more

minutes passed before they were paired with a twosome of blacks. Once again they refused.

"They came to me and said my starter was harassing them," said Benson. "They left in a huff."

Tempers seem to flare more in the autumn months when so many courses offer discount rates to lure golfers out in the colder air. Problems crop up because most of the courses are short-staffed and don't have rangers patrolling the place.

"Some golfers think they can get away with more this time of year," Benson said.

Nevertheless, Benson is quick to point out, quite correctly, that it's just a tiny percentage of golfers who are creating the furor on the course. I can attest to that, since I have played muni courses for 30 years and been paired with hundreds of strangers. I can count on one hand the times when that experience wasn't pleasant. In fact, I've met some of my closest friends on the golf course.

So, Odana or New Berlin Hills or Yahara or Glenway or most any golf course are still safe places to take the wife or children. Golf is a wonderful sport for everyone to learn and play. But, just like everything else in life, golf suddenly has some new dangers that all should be aware of.

"This is not about golf, it's about society," said Benson, who has been at Odana for 12 years and loves going to work there every day. "I'd rather have us focus on Tiger Woods, who is so uplifting for golf right now. He is promoting a new challenge that everybody should be focusing on. That's why I think golf is coming on an exciting time. I can't say the same for society, though. It's a mess."

A young boy in New Berlin who lost his father on a golf course Saturday couldn't agree more. 🌱