



WISCONSIN WINTERS

By Monroe S. Miller

I knew on November 9th last fall that winter had arrived. Cheryl and I had been to the first Badger basketball game the night before, and on the next afternoon we sat all bundled up in red to cheer the Wisconsin football team to a victory over Minnesota. But those were only meager clues of the season to come. The giveaway was the snow that fell that afternoon. The next morning, as we drove by the golf course on the way to church, the putting greens were white with snow. Winter.

The winter season in this part of the country is both welcomed and dreaded by golf course superintendents like me. On the one hand, there is relief that the golf season has finally, for the most part, come to an end. We are all tired and need "normal" work weeks. Some need to reconnect with their families. Others welcome the chance to see colleagues again. We look forward to Christmas, the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association EXPO, the GCSAA conference and any number of other opportunities to sharpen up for next year. Some (most?) have to use this time of the year to vacation.

On the other hand, winter is harsh. There isn't a golf course superintendent in the state who doesn't fret over and fear winter injury and winter kill. So much of our fate is, out of our control in the winter time. Way up north, the worry about snow molds takes an edge off the relief they normally feel. As one northern Wisconsin superintendent told me recently, "EVERY year is a snow mold year for me." Although the season should be a peaceful one, the worries are always there.

Some of the northern variety of golfers never want to give up, and they make for occasional unsettled days for some of us. Winter golf becomes a big thing for them, forcing decisions from us in early winter over course closing, play on greens, frost,

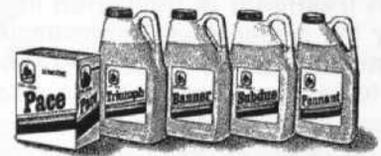
frozen ground, leaf removal and all that. Some courses slam the door closed — those guys are lucky. They don't have to worry about opening or closing options. Others reverse play, with a flag and a stick on tees for the diehards. There are those who put flagstick and flag in a cupliner cut into the fairway for the hardy souls who want to play but cannot access greens because of snow fence or top-dressing. There are a lot of us who wish winter golfers would go down south to play in the cold months. Or take up curling or bowling.

It was by chance that I discovered who may well have "invented" winter golf. I was reading some biographical material about one of literature's best known authors—Rudyard Kipling. He was born in India and spent time in London before coming to America to honeymoon and settle in 1892. His wife Caroline was from Vermont and they built a home near one of my favorite Vermont towns—Brattleboro. He loved the winters, despite not having experienced it prior to his move to southeast Vermont. He exulted in the deep snow and keen, sharp cold.

Kipling also loved golf, and the account of how he combined his love of the game and winter weather is fun reading for northern golf course superintendents. In her history of Brattleboro (1922), Mary Cabot quotes Kipling's winter golf partner, Reverend C.O. Day (pastor of the Congregational church while Kipling was in the town). It goes like this:

"We played golf over snow two feet deep, upon the crust, cutting holes into the soft snow, and naturally losing the balls until it occurred to him (Kipling) to ink them red. The first day we experimented with them, we dyed the plain like some football gridiron or Hohenlinden; then we had them dyed. The trouble with golfing on the crust was that as the meadow was upon a side hill with gradual slopes, a ball went on forever when once started unless headed off by some kindly stone wall. It was an easy matter to make drives of two miles. As spring came, little putting greens emerged like little oases in the snow, and then we had holes made of vegetable cans sunk in the moist soil, round which we would maneuver in rubber boots."

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The genius writer Kipling sounds like some of the players at our club! (I wonder if the guys in his group called him "Rudy" or "Kip"?) The world remembers him for his words; I now remember him for his winter golf escapades.

As I look about our town and the golf course shops, most are new within the past twenty years or so, and I think all of them are pretty nice work places. They need to be — we spend a good bit of our winters in them. Although ours is definitely a shop and not a palace, we do keep it clean, bright and freshly painted. I really like it and greatly enjoy being in it. I have a feeling about it similar to that I had about our dairy barn on the farm I grew up on.

Barns are great places to spent winter hours, too. On weekend afternoons, especially Saturdays or on Christmas vacation afternoons, I loved currying and brushing the cattle, keeping the bedding loose, feeding and milking the herd. The ambience was amplified by the great radio of the 1950s and 1960s — Badger games, The Jack Benny Program, Gunsmoke, radio dramas and music from stations far away. That feeling of pleasantness carries over to what I feel about our shop in the winter months. And a shop is more lively; there is solitude in a winter dairy barn. A golf course shop has more people, and if you enjoy each other's

company, that adds to the pleasure of being in the building.

Because of my agrarian background, I've always loved rural literature, farm stories and writing by farmer poets. Farmers, like golf course superintendents, are busy in the winter, too, but appreciate the compensations of the season. One of my favorite pieces was written in the 1930s by Mark Whalon, a New England farmer. Even non-farm people can appreciate the coziness his words bring:

"Did you ever go out to the cattle barn

On a stormy winter day

When it blowed and snowed and drifted so

You scarce could find your way?

You reached the door and you yanked the bar

As the storm around you swirled,

You stumbled in and found yourself

In the midst of another world!

Just the click and creak of the stanchions

And the sound of the munching hay;

What a harbor of peace and quiet content

In the midst of a stormy day."

Wisconsin winters are marked by most people by cold temperatures and by snow. I was thinking statistically the other day about how much snow we get, and those thoughts led

to a call to the state climatologist's office here in Madison. I requested and received the snowfall for every month since records were started here in Madison in 1905. From 1905 through the 1995/1996 winter season, our town has received 3,696.8 total inches of snow! That comes to 380.1 feet in those 90 years. It averages out to 40.62 inches of snow each year. Interestingly, the year of the least snow occurred in my lifetime — 12.7 inches of snow in the 1967/1968 season — and so did the year of the heaviest snow — 76.1 inches in 1978/1979.

Depth (or height!) is one way of looking at snow. Another way is weight. If you take the weight of a cubic foot of snow as six pounds, then a one foot blanket of snow over the entire area of Wisconsin would weight 9,392,902,041,600 pounds! I used the simple arithmetic equation of 6 pounds per cubic foot times 43, 560 square feet per acre times 640 acres per square mile times 56,154 square miles for the area of Wisconsin times 1 foot deep. Terms cancel, leaving only pounds and the enormous number above.

Both the depth and weight number give new meaning to the phrase "buried in snow"!

To a lot of Wisconsin golf course superintendents, winter is ice fishing and hunting. Some love skiing, both downhill and cross country. This year winter meant playoff football with our great Green Bay Packers and a bowl game for the Wisconsin Badgers. The season is a good time to get caught up on your reading. There is nothing like a good book, a winter apple and a crackling fire in the fireplace. And winter will always mean Christmas. For me, I always like winter up through the national conference. Once the conference is over, I wish winter would end. It seems lately we've had too many winter seasons that approach six months. It becomes a little too much when they are that long.

Wisconsin winter, in the final analysis, is like most things in life — it is what you make of it. Golf course management, even in the winterlude, has its compensation. To those of us seemingly born to it, it is the counterbalance to the too busy summer months. It is a respite we need, we earned and we deserve. It was also meant, for the most part, to be enjoyed. ♣

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