



Summer Nights On A Golf Course

By Monroe S. Miller

A couple of years ago, at the GCSAA conference, a speaker shared his program of night time maintenance of a golf course. Most of us in the audience wondered why in the world such a topic was selected for the program. It was an idea none of us wanted to hemorrhage to our golf course.

Night time on golf courses is pretty much associated with problems, misery and hassle. Long days are one thing; working at night is something else.

When the phone in my house rings late at night, it means one thing — irrigation system trouble. With the sound of the phone at 2:00 a.m. I jolt straight up in bed, eyes wide open. The sound of the synthetic voice is sickening: "There is a low pressure problem at the Lake Mendota pump station." It means getting dressed quickly, brushing my teeth just as fast, driving the four miles to work and then trying to figure out what's wrong and fixing it. No fun. And I don't get to sleep in the next morning to catch up on sleep, either.

For golf course superintendents my age and older, night time on a golf course was a part of the job not too many years ago; manual irrigation systems required it. Most of us, when we were young summer golf course employees, held the job at one time or another. Training our own young employees as years went by was part of running a well trained staff, as well. Spring and fall, and in emergencies, we were the backups, too.

In those youthful years, spending nights on a golf course was, by and large, a pleasant experience. Summer nights are cooler than summer days, and evening work can almost be refreshing. Night watering also offered a person solitude, something all of us need every once in a while. It also offered a certain degree of independence. You knew the work that had to be done and there was some flexibility in doing that. In youth, those kinds of chances are significant, especially when the job is as critical as irrigation.

But those nights were worrisome when I had young people working at the course. How many times — hun-

dreds, probably — did I drive over to the shop during stormy weather in the middle of the night to be absolutely certain the night waterman was off the golf course? One night I remember particularly well, Mike Lee shortened my life by at least a year. A violent storm was throwing pitchforks of lightning all across the night sky. Thunder boomed. The wind was blowing. And by the time I arrived at the course it was raining buckets. I quickly unlocked the shop. No Mick. No Jim, who was training him. I tore onto the course with my truck to find them, fearing the worst because I was scared myself.

I found them immediately, pulling the last RB808 sprinkler from a quick coupler valve in the sixth fairway. Despite my relief (and over the pounding of my heart) we established a clear understanding of the dangers of lightning, steel underground water pipes filled with water, and brass sprinklers. Those too numerous experiences tend to amplify the negatives of night on a golf course!

Anyone who has worked nights on a golf course learned the lay of the land in a way that is impossible during light hours. In fact, the measure of an experienced night worker was the ability to maneuver around without vehicle headlights or a flashlight. The ability to use "night vision"

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and find quick coupler valves was an acquired one, if the attitude was there.

Independence and solitude and moderate temperatures aside, sometimes nights were, well, spooky. "Are those kids lurking in the woods near the fifteenth? Will that mongrel dog give chase to my Cushman again when I swing around by the seventh green? What was that weird noise I heard in the shop between sets? Gee, I'm kind of lonesome out here."

Every night waterman has experienced these emotions, and many more besides. In fact, we used to install farm tractor radios on Cushman trucksters used to water at night, just to keep the waterman company.

The night waterman has passed, mostly, into golf course management history, an indication of the times. And another sign of the times we live in is demonstrated by a policy that when night work is required now — most of it as emergency — two of us report. Safety issues are real, especially on a golf course like ours in the middle of town. Even if it is the safest town of its size in America, like ours is. That's kind of sad.

Although night work in recent years takes on an air of emergency, there are still times out there on the course at night that are intriguing and interesting and fun to experience after dark. The best are from the world of nature, not man.

Evenings and nights are filled with familiar insect sounds that come alive after dark — crickets and katydids and cicadas. Lightning bugs and moths are seen almost exclusively after dark, in my experience. And mosquitoes, which are bad enough in light, are deadly after sunset.

Some birds are most noticeable at night in the middle of a golf course. The insects that abound after dark are food

for bats. I have always been amazed at how many bats are flying around whenever I have been at the course at night. They kind of give me the willys, but we now recognize how valuable they are. Many courses build bat houses to encourage them to take up residence there. Whippoorwills are, to me anyway, a nocturnal bird. Their plaintive song sounds like their name and is a clear sign that darkness is either near or it has arrived. For a number of years a big owl lived in a silver maple tree near the eighteenth green at our course. He was most active at night, hunting small wildlife that came out after dark.

In the last few years, a serious topic among golfers and, therefore, among golf course superintendents has been earthworms. Fairways, when many of us arrive at work early in the morning, have a few worms on the surface. But what we mostly see are the casts. You have no clue as to the magnitude of the population of earthworms living beneath the surface UNTIL you are on those fairways in the dark. They are literally teeming with earthworms, alive with them. It seems as if the entire fairway is moving when you look at it in the absence of light. You cannot walk across a fairway turf area and take one step without stepping on scores of them every time. A guy wonders how many you could harvest if you cut those fairways at night with baskets on the mowers! It's a sight you won't see in the daylight when the earthworms are in their burrows. Seeing is required for believing, and that will only happen at night.

A lot of animals can be seen on a golf course at night, even a course in the city. Rabbits are out feeding, raccoons are searching the perimeter of the pond or on a march to the clubhouse dumpster area where the pickings are easy. More than a few times a village animal control officer has

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come to rescue one that has fallen into a dumpster and cannot climb out. Mother possums with babies on their backs, a female fox and her kits, and all kinds of woodchucks can be found roaming around under the cover of darkness on our course.

These nights, a quiet moment in the middle of the course really is quiet. Gear driven sprinklers don't make much sound, unless it is the stream of water hitting the trunk of a tree in the rough occasionally. I will always enjoy the sound of the large aluminum impact arm of a Rainbird 808 sprinkler smacking into the stream of water from the brass nozzle. The rhythm of that sprinkler was reassuring. The quiet tonight may be broken by the sound of a train whistle — a track follows along our seventh hole and behind the sixth and the third — or the siren from an ambulance or squad car. Most likely, at home, you'd never notice. Even jets leaving the Dane County airport make their presence known in a way I never notice away from the course at night.

Because it is so dark on a golf course — no street lights, no businesses lit up, no car lights — the moon

looks like it does nowhere else. From bright yellow to milk white to pink, its color is accented by the dark blue/black sky. The pin prick light of stars is brighter, too. Heat lighting is something else to watch when your surrounds are completely dark.

Water, at night, is intriguing. On cool nights a mist rises from our pond that was warmed all day by the sun. And only at night have I ever listened for any time at all to the sound of waves from Lake Mendota lap the shore at our pump station.

Heat and humidity are marks of a Wisconsin summer, and they wear heavily on a golf course superintendent at times. The days are longest and the nights are shortest this time of year. But if you have a reason to be on the course at night it will give you a little needed relief. The evening hours are cool and refreshing and offer your senses that your course will make it through the next summer day.

Nights are good for golf turf and golf course superintendents alike. Darkness is never more welcome than it is in the summer. 🌿



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