



Wisconsin's Smartest Golf Course Superintendent

By Monroe S. Miller

Bogey Calhoun was shouting orders out to his assistant even as we pulled out of his shop yard in Steady Eddie Middleton's new Ford F-250 extended cab pickup. Middleton, Tom Morris, Calhoun and I were riding together to attend the monthly WGCSA meeting at the new Wisconsin Hill and Valley Golf Club in west central Wisconsin.

"You're obviously well organized and prepared to leave for the day, Calhoun," Tom Morris chided as we headed onto Bohemian Road on our way to Highway 14 west.

"You planned well for this, didn't you?" Tom said.

"I'm a busy man, Morris, and I am not stationed at a sedate old club that gets all of 8,000 rounds of golf a year. Things are happening at my place," came the retort from Bogey.

Tom let it go, knowing that in a battle of hot air, Bogey Calhoun will win almost every time.

"This should be an interesting time, men," I offered. "There will be a lot of people at this meeting, anxious to see what kind of golf course Wisconsin's smartest golf course superintendent has built."

That superintendent was Taddy Withington. Dr. Taddy Withington. Professor Taddy Withington, faculty

emeritus at the University of Wisconsin - Grand Coulee. No one among the WGCSA members would argue with the newly bestowed title used to describe Taddy. He, however, cringed whenever he heard it uttered. "I might have the most formal education among you guys," he'd say, "but I am not the smartest. Far from it. And I am woefully lacking in the field smarts most of you have acquired. And at my age, I'll never catch up."

Taddy spent his entire academic career at the Grand Coulee campus, one of the UW Centers. It's a two year school, like the other UW
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Centers, and many of the students continued their education after two years at one of the four year campuses. Dr. Withington was an instructor in the urban agriculture area, teaching the basic courses in horticulture, soil science and botany. Although Grand Coulee didn't have a turf program — the only one is on the Madison campus — Taddy had a long standing interest in golf turf and sent quite a number of his students on to enroll in Wayne Kussow's program.

When the UW System offered some tempting retirement opportunities, Taddy qualified because of his 30 years at UW-Grand Coulee. He retired at the ripe old age of 59.

"I didn't actually retire," he told some of us at the Symposium two years ago. "I just started my second career."

And that career was as the golf course superintendent at his own golf course. That is why we were anxious to see it.

The ride to the Wisconsin Hill and Valley Golf Club took us through some of the state's prettiest country, land that had escaped the glacial scouring that leveled hills and filled in valleys in other areas of Wisconsin. "This is great country to exercise your eyes," said the normal wisecracking Calhoun. The cab was quiet as we all soaked in the pastoral hillsides that flank the valleys. They were dotted with white birch and Holstein cows.

Many small but swift streams have been flowing over the surface for centuries and cut deep valleys between the ridges. There is little level land here, only a few towns with a population over 10,000, and lots of farmsteads with cherry red barns and bright white houses.

The roads followed ridges, dipped down into valleys and coulees and hollows, and wound through woodlands. For a while we traveled on one of Wisconsin's designated "rustic roads" and met local Amish in horse drawn buggies. In that part of our state, they represent the bucolic truth of rural Wisconsin. "We should stop at one of the Amish farms and buy a couple of rhubarb pies," I suggested to no one in particular. "Maybe on the way home," came the reply from Steady Eddie.

I didn't argue. He was driving and it was his truck; an objection
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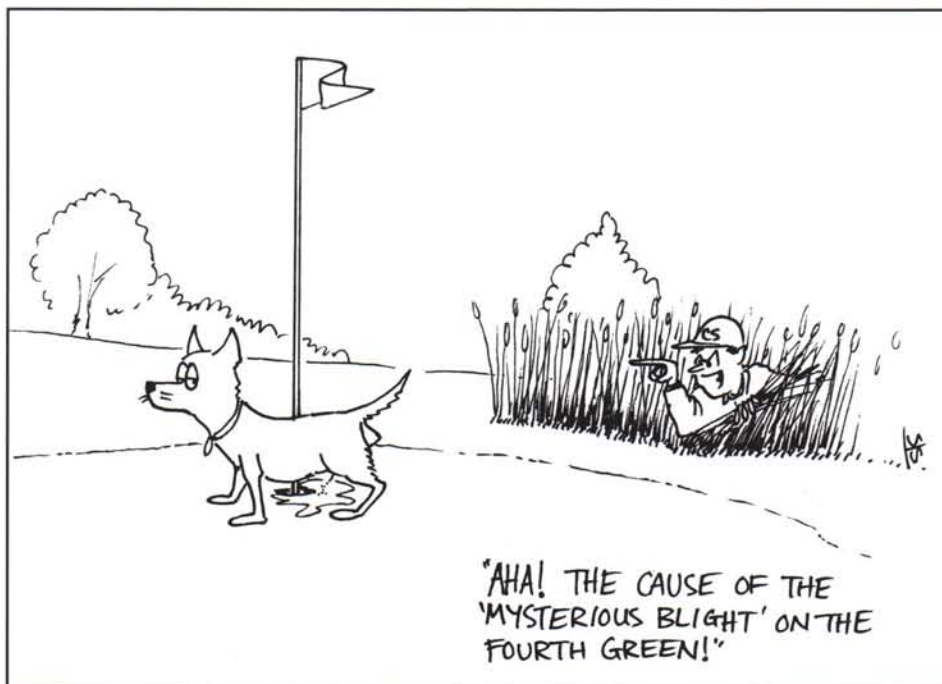
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would designate me pilot for the next meeting.

We drove through the Wildcat Mountain State Park, stopped at a roadside rest near Mt. Pisgah to enjoy the views, crossed the Kickapoo River and pushed on toward the meeting.

If you hadn't known Taddy Withington spent his career as a professor, you would have made that fact a credible guess upon receiving the meeting notice in the mail. It had all the usual information — time, place, cost, attire, game event, map — but Taddy included an information essay on the golf course project he had now executed. It was six pages long, front and back of the three page attachment.

Taddy hadn't collected a dime of green fees prior to the meeting. He was celebrating his opening day with a meeting and outing for his superintendent colleagues and friends. Paying customers were welcome tomorrow; today was for us.

We were flattered.

As we drew within twenty miles of the golf course, we saw the first sign advertising the Wisconsin Hill and Valley Golf Club. More appeared as we got closer to the course, all evidence that Taddy was clearly making the transition from faculty member to businessman!

The entrance to the WHVGC was anything but ostentatious, but it was well marked and neat. The driveway was wide and paved; the parking lot was not. As Taddy explained in his notes with the meeting notice, there was a small quarry on one of the farms he bought to build the course. So he had a local company come in with a crusher and prepare thousands and thousands of tons of 3/4 inch crushed limestone gravel for use in the parking lot and for cart paths. "It only makes sense to use all of the resources we have here on the property," he wrote.

The golf course was built on parts and pieces of three farms. The land was tough for farming, especially

nowadays with big equipment. That was less true thirty and more years ago when it was a prosperous agri-

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culture region. In recent times, the buildings had been abandoned on these three farms, neighbors had rented out the crop land and, to be honest, abused it with continuous cropping. Pastures had become overgrown, fences had fallen into disrepair and the prosperity had slowly left. It made people like me both sad and a little angry.

A project like Dr. Withington's could be a real shot in the arm for a depressed area like this one. Jobs, renewed land stewardship, and development of tourism all added a touch of that withered prosperity to the people living there.

Withington was totally dedicated to a responsible land ethic, frequently quoting Aldo Leopold and John Muir. He felt there was no conflict between a golf course and serious land stewardship; quite the contrary, "a golf course can often be the best use of individual parcels," Taddy had written any number of times.

His golf course was so unique, as we found out. He spent a lot of time researching the work of any number of golf course architects. He chose Geoffrey Cornish of Amherst, Massachusetts. "Geoff has designed hundreds and hundreds of golf courses, many of them in New England on sites rougher than this one. Many of his courses were built with limited resources, a circumstance I am in. And he is able to build a notable golf course without moving hundred of thousands of cubic yards of soil. He was an obvious choice for me."

Many of us knew Geoff from one of a number of ways - through his book, enrollment in his GCSAA seminar, in the audience of one of his lectures at the Symposium or other educational venues or from playing one of his golf courses. He has worked in Wisconsin, too, as a master planner for clubs.

Cornish, as he has done many times, walked the land and found the holes provided by nature. Up and back coulees and hollows, around the foot of hills and across the valleys, the course he designed for Taddy was interesting and big with no parallel holes. Large unmaintained natural areas divided the holes, giving players a sense of solitude.

Great care was taken with the putting greens. All were in sunny sites, mostly open with good air drainage and with an appealing

backdrop provided by careful site selection. And as few would have the nerve to do, Taddy Withington built push-up greens, like those of two generations past.

"We found areas on the property that had received A horizon soils from ridges and slopes as a result of soil erosion. Kussow was a big help here. We carefully removed it, looking for the discontinuity that identified the

natural horizons of the bottom land. That overburden was used to build our greens and tees and their surrounds," Taddy explained to us.

"Then, using sand from a pit on our land, we modified the rootzones on site, giving us greens like those that have been modified from years of aerification, core removal and sand topdressing."

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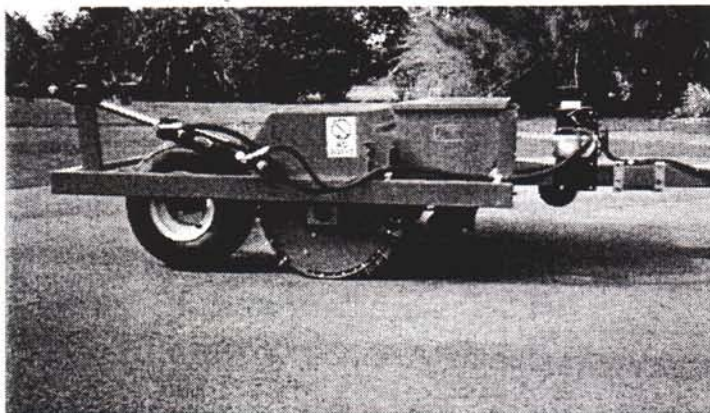
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Fairways were seeded to a blue-grass mixture carefully developed by Withington. "Growth habit, color and disease resistance were key components to the equation," he told us.

Rough play areas were seeded with an entirely different group of varieties, considering color/contrast requirements, culture and maintenance. He planted areas of blue-grasses, fine fescues and tall fescues. The result was "cool" as Bogey Calhoun observed.

Dr. Withington, leading the course tour in one of the electric golf cars in their new car fleet, was riding with Dr. Kussow. We could only guess what these two practical pros were talking about. Most likely, Taddy was picking Wayne's brain on scores of issues.

The tour included all kinds of stops and starts, questions and questions and questions, and a lot of nosing around by us. Tad was pleased with that.

One stop was off the track of the golf holes. He took us to the maintenance area. It was what had been the farmstead of one of the farms. It was quaint, tidy and had been beauti-

fully refurbished by Dr. Withington. "The house will be used as a dormitory for our summer employees," Taddy told us. "The surrounding communities are small and there are not any decent rental properties. I thought this might be a draw to some students. I hope to have several from both Madison and from my old program at Grand Coulee."

The dooryard already had been expanded and a tennis court built. "Golf, tennis, fishing in area streams, and swimming should keep them busy after work," Taddy said. "Each employee will have a room, there is a large shower room/ locker room, the kitchen is equipped so they can all prepare their meals, and a large downstairs room has a big screen TV and a pool table. I'd honestly like to stay here myself!" Taddy exclaimed.

One shed provided employee parking, and the big red dairy barn had been transformed into a shop. It was one hundred feet long and about sixty feet wide. It was built on a slope so that it could be entered from two levels —such buildings were known as basement barns. The cement foundation was in new condition,

Taddy had replaced the cupola on the green roof, and all the windows had double pane glass. The old milk house was modified into a pesticide storage area, and the small silo was used as bulk storage for Milorganite. The gentle whirl of the windmill in the dooryard was soothing.

After another question and answer period in this peaceful setting under a shade tree near the barn, Dr. Withington said, "we'd better get the golf game underway or you guys will be here until dark."

We went back to the modest clubhouse and enjoyed a brat and beer lunch. Players then loaded equipment onto cars and headed onto the golf course. Taddy started the simuttee by ringing a massive cast bell from a nearby one-room school that he had found in a local antique store. The crystal clear sound traveled up and down the coulees of the Wisconsin Hill and Valley Golf Club. And by day's end, Taddy Withington's dream golf course confirmed why, among his colleagues, he was known as our smartest golf course superintendent. ♣



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