

Disneyland for Adults

By Tom Schwab, O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research and Education Facility, University of Wisconsin-Madison

The Masters Tournament is a dream come true for any turf and landscape manager. The natural terrain, condition of the flora, course design, and impeccable maintenance were beyond expectation. Monroe Miller and the WSGA send one of the Grass Root's regular contributors to the venue each year with a charter group from the Wisconsin State Golf Association. My day at the 1999 Masters was one that I won't forget.

We entered the course from behind the fifth green. That green was more undulating than any green I've ever seen. I've heard the stories about Augusta's rolling greens and fairway elevations that the television cameras can not capture. Those stories were all true, as were the stories about how breathtakingly beautiful the whole course was. The cameras also don't capture the abundant number of naturally rolling mounds present throughout the course that are covered in a blanket of thick green.

I anticipated the tournament like a child anticipates visiting Disneyland. In fact the first player I saw looked kind of Daffy-like, that being the Swedish chap, Jesper Parnevik, who wears the beak of his cap pointed up. In that same group were Greg Norman and Phil Mickelson. That is when it hit me that I was really at the fabled Masters Tournament. Then hole after hole, golf's most celebrated personalities came into sight. It was amazing to see these stars of the golf world at such close range.

Some of the action that I'll remember about Friday's play includes the following: Tom Watson, Ray Floyd, Ben Crenshaw, Fuzzy Zoeller and many of the other middle-aged competitors still hit the ball extremely far and well. Tiger seemed to have the largest number of fans following him around the course. I watched him land a 230-yard iron shot, out of the woods and over water guarding the front of #13 green to birdie the hole. Arnold Palmer likewise has a large contingent that follows him around the course, and he is still sinking some long ones. Gary Player was another legend still playing with the best of them. David Duval, the early tournament favorite, looked too serious when he went past me. He then three putted the next green. John Daly hit a drive so far past his group so to not disappoint the spectators. I could go on and on about the other players. They were all there, except for Jack. And my prediction for Sunday is that Steve Stricker will come from behind to snatch the green jacket.



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Here are some more snippets about the course. I was searching for the rumored "Tiger proof" rough, that had been raised to a 1 1/2 inch height-of-cut from the previous years' 3/4 inch. The height was changed to tame some of the advances in golf equipment used today. All I found was a dense stand of perennial ryegrass rough that had been largely trampled down by the tens of thousands of spectators roaming the course. The height of the roughs made little difference anyway because these guys rarely missed the wide fairways. I found the fairways were comprised of perennial ryegrass also. They were cropped extremely short and were in premium condition in part due to ropes keeping spectators off them. I was expecting to see bentgrass or bermudagrass fairways. A local person told me that the bermuda does not come out of dormancy until early May. I couldn't find any remnants of warm season grass anywhere. There was a little *Poa annua* around, but not any broadleaf weeds.

Another feature that the cameras don't capture is how stark white the sand in the traps is in comparison to the turf. Traps all had perfectly cut lips, including the fairway traps, to match the rest of the manicured look throughout the course. Television very well captures the flowering shrubs in bloom but it was still

impressive to see this brilliance of color in person.

Your memories will be endless if you can ever make the pilgrimage to the Masters. Your GCSAA card will grant you free access to one of the hardest tickets to come by in sports. I ran into an old employee, now in Texas, who was using his card to attend his third Masters. I know I'd like to attend another.

I was well advised to bring binoculars. The course was so well marked informing you about what players were on each hole and who was leading, yet it was more momentous to magnify the action with field glasses. I was also advised to bring suntan lotion. However the weather was warm, breezy and perfectly overcast for Friday's play. It was perfect spectator weather and the lotion stayed in the bag.

There were a few things that I would have done differently if time allowed. I would have watched the players warming up on the practice range. It would be excellent to walk the course early in the day and observe the course preparation. Lastly, I would have visited the GCSAA tent to talk with peers about turf management. The tournament was still an event of a lifetime that I'm so thankful I was able to make. I would recommend it to anyone. ♣

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