

Down Memory Lane on an Old Toro Tractor



By **Monroe S. Miller**, Golf Course Superintendent, Blackhawk Country Club

Each year, at one of our early green committee meetings, I like to take a picture of the committee. They have always humored me. Mostly, the photos are for me, but sometimes one will find its way into The Divot, our club newsletter.

Usually I like to compose the photo with something unmistakably related to the golf course - a scene inside the shop with the new floor hoist or a shot on the course itself - as the background. This year Dave rolled our old Toro tractor outside the shop and the group gathered around for the annual committee portrait.

I have a soft spot in my heart for those old Toro tractors. It was the first piece of equipment I operated on my first day of work at a golf course, when I was still a teenager, working for Pete Miller at the Nakoma Golf Club in Madison. I thought it was cool beyond

words, and remember calling home to my folks on our farm to report on this unique piece of machinery.

Farm kids are surrounded by equipment, and as I reflect back I suspect that had something to do with the appeal that particular tractor had to me.

Pete was the most creative course superintendent I have known. He went on to great things at the Firestone CC, evidence others respected his abilities like I did (and still do). Pete had modified Nakmoa's Toro tractor with huge (and I do mean HUGE) flotation tires. I seem to recall they were airplane tires. Anyway, because the lower end of Nakoma is nearly a swamp with wet peat/muck soil, getting stuck was a daily occurrence with some equipment. But not so with that old Toro; it scooted right along the surface on those big balloon tires.

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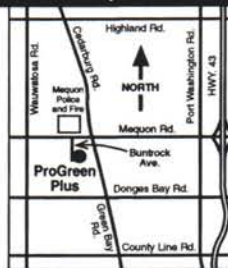
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We relied on the Toro tractor for lots of things - hauling sand to bunkers, transportation around the course when cutting cups, towing a stone boat with small equipment on board, moving the sectioned wood from a diseased American elm cut down near the 12th hole back to the shop yard. There was, in those days in the mid-1960s, no job too large or too small for the Toro tractor.

And there was frequently competition to see who got to use it for work. The walking greensmower route farthest from the shop was favored because there was a chance you would get the Toro. It pulled a Jake 321 on a stone boat and the clippings were dumped in the box of the tractor. I wasn't the only one who enjoyed driving it.

Augie Miller enjoyed driving it, maybe more than I did. There were three Millers on the golf course staff for a couple of years - Pete, Augie and me - and we weren't related. That was especially good with regard to Augie. He was in high school and a tad on the wild side. One Saturday, Augie figured the best way to be a hit at an afternoon party in Vilas Park - it was on the other side of the Arboretum - was to unlock the shop, borrow the old Toro tractor, and drive it to the party. I wasn't there, but the story was he had the dump box filled with ice and buried a half barrel on top in the



Our Toro tractor fresh out of the paint booth in 1974.

middle of the dump box. No wonder he was popular! The old Toro made it back to the shop, Pete was livid, but Augie survived and worked there as long as I did. Amazingly, he went on to become a lawyer; he must have grown up!

That Toro tractor was involved in races on Arboretum Drive - I witnessed that one - and pulling contests in the shop yard against an IH 240 tractor. I didn't see any, but heard about them and the ruts in the gravel made by the tires of the two old tractors more or less confirmed it. If that old machine could have talked, who knows what stories it could have told!

In the sparse equipment inventory I inherited when I was hired as course superintendent at Blackhawk CC in January of 1973 were two old Toro tractors. Actually, there was one old Toro tractor and one really old Toro tractor. The older of the two didn't run and was in very poor condition. We traded it on some new pieces and I am almost sure it found its way to a bone yard. The other was in quite excellent shape and we used it for many years, most recently for the green committee picture.

One of the first things we did for it was clean it, prep the surfaces and give it a good paint primer and a finish coat. That first winter we painted the Toro tractor, a Jacobsen G-10 tractor and an IH 240 loader tractor. I figured they should at least look good, and they did. Back in that time, lots of golf course shops were painting equipment; now hardly anyone does, including me. It has gotten too complicated, and the manufacturers are putting better paint on equipment these days. But the red paint we laid down on the Toro tractor looked pretty good; even now, 25 years later, it is very acceptable.

We used our Toro like Pete did; there were few things it wasn't up to. And there were days it had a set of rough mowers behind it, after it had been used to set the pins for the day. It was darn hard to steer, and by day's end the operator's arms were ready to fall off.

We hauled gravel and hot mix for cart paths, soil for



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The 1999 Blackhawk CC green committee portrait in front of our Toro Tractor 25 years after it was painted.

new tees, sand for the bunkers and Milorganite for the Lely spreader. Of course, there was no hydraulic dump for it, only "Armstrong power". It was a constant struggle to get it started over center to unload it.

Ours was (and is) a smooth running rig. It has a Ford Model JF 223 industrial six-cylinder engine with overhead valves - quiet power. And it is powerful with 99 horsepower at 2800 rpm. The transmission is a little coarse - no synchronization, obviously. In fact, once I thought I was going to lose my life on it. I was coming down the hill on the Toro tractor near the tenth, shifting from 1st to 2nd. If you hit it hard and fast, you could make the shift. If you missed, well, you had to coast to a stop and nudge it back into gear. I missed, and I was headed downhill, fast. Players were on the hole, and I never doubted there was an audience in the clubhouse, watching with disbelief. There were no decisions to make. Momentum was against me. So was the somewhat moist grass, making a stop with brakes nearly impossible. All I could do was aim for the center of the fairway and steer around players.

Of course, there was no suspension system, and the springs in the seat were small and worn. I was airborne literally every time I would hit a rough spot. I was hanging on for life.

It turned out OK; the players were humorless about it, looking at me with disgusted looks as if I'd ridden the get-away on purpose. I got it stopped past the bunker, slipped it into second gear and got lost, fast. I was very embarrassed, but felt fortunate I had not messed my underwear. Oddly, no one ever said a word to me about the incident. I still shiver when I think of what could have happened.

There wasn't much that could go wrong with those older machines. Regular oil changes, new plugs, the right gap on the points and mostly they would run and run and run. If the six volt battery was low, a couple of guys could push the Toro tractor for ten or twenty feet, pop the clutch and it would be off and running.

As the years passed, we used it less and less. When we built our new maintenance building fifteen years ago, we secured it in one corner. It's been used a few times, usu-

ally to haul sand to bunkers, but mostly we save it because Dave and I like it and it served us well. Years ago I would offer it as a trade-in, but the value offered was pathetically small.


There is a sentimental attachment between me and the old Toro, make no mistake. It represents a bridge between simpler times on a golf course and today, a point in time when golf course management is more complicated and frustrating and a lot less enjoyable. And these days at the end of the century are not necessarily better; I don't think players are having any more fun on today's golf courses than those playing the game 30 or more years ago.

It seems clear that the old Toro tractor serves as a reminder to me of the wonderful discovery in my youth that this business we are in would be a perfect one for me. Such a period is momentous in anyone's life, especially if it led to a satisfying, productive career like I feel mine has been.

So, even though it is not useful so much to us anymore, it will stay in our shop, cozy in its own corner and safe from some heartless scrap dealer. And on rainy days I can sit for awhile with some student and explain how I became interested in my life's work and how important that old Toro tractor was in pointing me this way.

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