

The *ALMOST* A GOLF CLUB - A Cigar Box Golf Course



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

The sound coming from Tom Morris' shop was a sound not normally heard in May. Rather, it was a noise familiar in winter months, the 'stone on steel' sound of a grinder sharpening a cutting reel. "It can't be," I thought to myself as I opened the walk-in door to Tom's maintenance facility.

But I was right. Even more surprising than sharpening mowers in May was the fact that Tom himself was doing the grinding. And it was Saturday!

Tom had picked up a box of irrigation parts for me, and I drove over after Saturday morning chores at my course to get them, hoping he'd still be around. Obviously he was.

"We try to get our equipment rehab done during the

cold months, Tom," I chided him, "so that we can work on the golf course during the golf season."

He looked at me, smiled and said, "I'm doing charity work right now. Some of us are concerned about doing our part for the good of golf and for its future. You should dedicate some of your abundant free time to the good of the game."

I ignored his wisecrack. Tom was sparking the stone out, clearly done with the old Worthington Airfield Blitzer gang mower unit that hung in his grinder.

I had to ask: "Who in the world is still using this antique, Tom? I haven't seen blitzer mowers in action for years. Whose are they - a sod farmer's?"

"No, they belong to Sylvan Bachman. I have sharp-

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ened his mowers for the past three years now.

"Take your hands out of your pocket and steady the cutting unit for me. I'm going to loosen the bracket and take it out of the grinder. It's sharp."

I did as I was instructed, holding the WWII vintage mower away from the grinder while Tom lowered it to the shop floor.

"This is the last one," Tom said. "All I have to do is bolt on the bed bar and knife and it is ready to go back to Syl's golf course. In fact, I could use a hand in getting the units loaded into my truck. You don't look too busy; give me some help."

He backed his Ford F-250 4X4 into the work bay of the shop, pushed a floor hoist into position, and we started to load the five blitzer units. As the last one was set down on the bed, Tom asked if I wanted to go with him to Syl Bachman's. "That way you could help unload them. And I'd have someone to visit with on the way up and back."

I was intrigued. I had cut my lawn at home, Cheryl was downtown at the Farmers Market on the Capitol Square, and it was a beautiful spring day for a ride. Plus, I wouldn't have to drive.

"Let me call home and leave a message, Tom," I replied. "How long will we be gone?"

"It is about an hour up and an hour back," Tom said. "I don't know how long we will be there, but I do know Syl will want to take us to lunch at Dolly's Restaurant in Middlebury."

Tom washed up while I called home and reported in. We were headed out of the shop yard in less than ten minutes.

Middlebury, Wisconsin is located in a small area that had been settled heavily by British immigrants in the 1830 - 1850 period - English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish, mainly. The village had many beautiful homes from that period, and they were well maintained. The area around Middlebury was an area of significant vegetable production, and a couple of canning operations called Middlebury home. It contributed importantly to Wisconsin's ranking as one of the top canning states in the U.S.

"OK, Tom," I finally said, "how in the world do I not know Sylvan Bachman? I mean, I've never even heard of him or the course."

"Well," Tom said after a long pause, "Syl Bachman is the owner and operator of the Almosta Golf Club on the north edge of Middlebury. Almosta isn't exactly a major golf course in Wisconsin, and Syl keeps a pretty low profile. I would guess few people who live more than a couple of dozen miles from Middlebury have heard of him."

"So how do you know him?" I naturally wondered.

"It's a long story," Tom began, "but I'll condense it down. I attended a combined farm auction near

Middlebury because of a Ford 600 5-speed tractor that was listed on a sale bill I saw in the Dinner Pail Restaurant. You know how I love those older model Fords and I'd like to restore a 600 to go with my 8N. I went to the sale, the tractor came up and the bidding quickly moved between myself and another man. I eventually got the tractor. I had to bid more than I had wanted, but it was in better condition than I had expected.

"The guy I was bidding against was Syl Bachman. Shortly after the auctioneer banged his gavel and said "SOLD!", he came over and congratulated me. 'You bought a good tractor,' he said.

"He went on to tell me he knew the farmer who had purchased the tractor new and had, in fact, been its only owner. It had been well maintained for the forty years he had owned and used it on his small dairy farm. Then he asked me what plans I had for the tractor."

Tom paused, took a sip of Coke, and then continued. "I told him I had planned to restore it to mint condition over the next couple of years. Then I asked him what he had intended to do with it. 'I was going to use it on a little golf course I have been building. It has a pretty good cover of grass so I figured it was time to upgrade my towing tractor.'



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"As soon as I heard the guy had a small golf course, needless to say I perked up," Tom went on. "Turns out Syl needed something to keep himself busy with after he retired. He wanted to be outdoors in the summer, he didn't want any pressure, and he did not want to work for anybody. It seemed to him, after reading about golf's popularity, that a nine-hole golf course might be a good use of his piece of land - 40 acres - and a productive use of his time in the summer. So Syl did some more reading, ponied up a few green fees at courses around the county to see some other golf courses, and went to work with a plan he scratched out on a sheet of yellow legal paper.

"And he named it the Almosta Golf Club!"

Tom took another drink of Coke, and then I asked him, "so you helped him with his project?"

"Not really," Tom replied. The first thing I did was sell Syl the Ford 600 I had bought. He surely needed it more than I did. I practically begged him to take it for what I had bid. When he offered to show me his project, I couldn't resist.

"On our way over I told him I was a golf course superintendent; big mistake! Syl had a hundred questions, which I answered for him. We struck an acquaintance and we keep in touch every few months. I offered to sharpen his mowers for him each winter - he only has these Worthington Blitzers, an 84-inch National and a greensmower. He was thrilled and grateful."

Tell me about the course, Tom."

Tom chuckled. "Well, there isn't much to tell. He routed nine holes on the 40 acres, and he was pretty creative about it. There are a few sand bunkers and a small pond that he built by damming up the creek that meanders through the property.

"He has the minimalist approach to maintenance - greens are cut two or three times a week at about a quarter inch, the fairways and roughs are all the same height and cut with the blitzers, and the old National mower mows what the gang mowers cannot get. There are no collars, the few bunkers are raked by players, and Syl changes cups when he can.

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"The parking lot is small, but players can park on the side streets south of the course. Mostly, on the summer days I have been there, kids were playing. They travel by bike, so parking isn't a problem.

"Is there any kind of clubhouse?" I asked.

Tom laughed out loud. "Well, not exactly. Syl is the only employee he has, so the small building - it looks like a portable roadside vegetable stand - has a door hinged at the top. He hooks it at each corner to eye bolts in the roof rafters. The open door reveals a small counter. Syl has a small cardboard sign that says: *Green fee - \$3, used golf balls - 50 cents. Pay the cigar box.* And next to the sign is a cigar box. The whole thing is on the honor system; really, in this day and age, it is unbelievable. You pay the cigar box!

"Syl claims he uses this system because it keeps his labor cost down - to zero! He trusts all the townspeople who play the Almosta Golf Club and doesn't think he is ever cheated.

"Oh, and the sign identifying the course is painted

on a 1" X 8" board about four feet long. It is bolted to a pair of steel fence posts near the entrance. All it says is *The Almosta Golf Club*, which is underlined by an arrow pointing in the only direction you can go anyway. Very unpretentious!"

We talked some more about Syl Bachman and concluded that Wisconsin, even the whole country, could use more facilities like the Almosta Golf Club. It is a place where a kid can learn to play golf even if he cannot afford much. As Tom said, "somebody is going to have to pay our wages in another 15 years. It has to be new golfers."

Almosta Golf Club is a course where kids can keep busy in the summer. It is easy to get to - Tom said a drive through Middlebury during the golf season will nearly always show you a kid on a bike with a bag of clubs across his back. Nowadays, due to Syl and his little course, the Middlebury High School has both a boys and a girls golf team. And they do surprisingly well in competition; they are used to less than perfect conditions and play really well when they are on well conditioned golf courses.

"The whole town of Middlebury appreciates Sylvan Bachman and what he has done for them." Tom said. "And those of us who work in golf should appreciate the Syl Bachmans of the world for what they are contributing to the future of golf.

"We could use even more of them and places like the Almosta Golf Club." ♣

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