



An Ironic Season

By **Pat Norton**, Golf Course Superintendent, Nettle Creek Country Club

The golf season just completed has been... as usual... full of successes, failures, tragedies and miracles. We have seen colleagues and parents pass on into another form of life... some of which is difficult to comprehend. We are all awakened to the fact of our basic good fortune in this life... especially when tragedy befalls someone else.

I can't help but look at it all... the death of loved ones or people that we all know... and contrast that with the basic joy of life that we should all be experiencing. Life is sometimes full of irony.

The summer of 1999 was the summer when my own father died... and it's ironic that I felt closer to him at the funeral mass than when I said good-bye at the hospital. The emotion of the music at the Mass got everybody started with the tears... and I must admit that I was leading that parade. Ironically, this for a father that I didn't really know... as well as did my older brother and sisters.

So then my mother asks me to read my good bye letter to Dad... written to him two days before he died... I confidently said "No problem, Mom... that'll be my reading at the funeral." Which was all OK... up until the point in the Mass when the music got sort of overwhelming... then my younger sister spoke... followed by myself.

If anybody out there tries to avoid public speaking... imagine yourself in a situation of having to get up in front of the congregation at you hometown church... after already bawling your eyes out for about five minutes... and looking out over the audience and seeing your aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, sisters, brother, mother, plus wife Susan and rapidly maturing trio of one's own children... all looking back at you with somber,

teary eyes.

To then speak to your dead father... with those same words read to him in his last days in the hospital... was a very tough public speaking bit!

Fortunately... everybody in our family, including my mother, can look back on it all with a sense of 'a well lived life' ... because my dad was 76 years old.

I cannot imagine the grief that families must experience with the sudden loss of a loved one... taken away in the prime of their life. One young family here... with four children about the same as ours... lost their father in the summer of '98 in a solo traffic accident... this guy was only 38 years old!

How ironic is it that some people live to a ripe old age while others die prematurely... how ironic is it to depart a Catholic Funeral Mass... into bright sunshine... with family and relatives almost all still there... to take special notice of your children and your wife... happy and healthy.

How ironic to helplessly watch this other young family try to cope and adjust to their new life without their father... and reflect in one's own good fortune in having a great, whole family.

In thinking back over my life so far... it is really ironic that John

Norton was able to have such influence of Pat Norton... people tend to think of themselves as self-molded, I think...

Parents are certainly not perfect... but their imperfections can be used as life lessons for the next generation... which seems to be the intelligent thing to do.

My dad influenced me in many positive ways... as I'm sure is true for every man or woman reading this. Sometimes parents influence children negatively... which was also the case with my father.

I have tried to be the father to my children that I always felt my dad could not be for me... a little bit more approachable, a little bit more loving, and a little bit easier to talk to...

It's ironic that I couldn't express these things to my own father... but he did very well for all of us in many other ways... that's for sure!

The other great irony of 1999 is this darn golf course! I am so damn mad right now... that I really need to vent my frustrations someplace... how about right here in The Grass Roots?

Why do people almost automatically assume that superintendents are only grass growers?? Why do course owners... almost always look 'inside' for managerial talent to solve the woes of a public golf club?

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Do they only consider superintendent types as a last resort... after all other options have failed? Do they really prefer to let the incompetent, fluffy, charming b.s. types represent the club in all kinds of important ways? It certainly seems so...

Last spring my uncle decided to buy up the ownership stock here at Nettle Creek... which was great for all those owning stock... myself included. There was only a bit of talk about me... the simple grass grower... retaining any ownership interest. It was mutually agreed that it would be better for both parties... the new owners and Sue/Pat for us to simply cash out... invest in something else... and simply continue with my position as course superintendent.

We expected to hire a PGA professional... who declined to become involved... which led to operating the season with a very nice, very charming, very inexperienced non-PGA pro... who was allowed to appoint

himself 'Director of Golf'... We also hired a very nice, very charming, very inexperienced general manager... These two fellows, it should be mentioned, have a relationship that has steadily worsened as the season winds down.

Six months later... this public course operation has suffered through a serious decline in morale, enthusiasm, credibility, and member involvement... which has naturally fed upon itself to the point where a serious management shakeup is in order!

The huge irony of it all is that the golf course itself experienced a fantastic year! Our new ownership... who just happen to be my paternal aunt and uncle... gave me tons of freedom to operate the golf course as I saw fit! Micromanagement is a definite thing of the past for me here... but a problem for the inexperienced guys up on the hill. But having the course in great shape... with cool

landscaping and other course improvements happening all season long... just wasn't enough to carry us to success in 1999!

There has to be strength throughout the management team of any business organization... and golf courses are no exception.

I have always wondered... if strong internal management were to be coupled with weak course management... would the same situation arise? I do believe so... except that it would be a long-term sort of thing... showing up after a period of years of poor course management!

By the way... our income fell off sharply this year also... making it somewhat illogical to expect any sort of a raise, bonus, or IRA contribution... leading to just a little bit of frustration and anger!

It's a little tough to watch this place decline so rapidly... knowing that the golfers all really appreciate our efforts on the course... and shar-



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ing common frustration with them as they suffer through events, leagues, programs, and general operations that are a shell of the good old days! It's also a little tough in knowing that there might be too little future here to keep a guy interested in long-term employment!

After being a part of this season's follies, I chuckle ironically as I start to pick up vibes from our ownership that maybe the grass grower is the one to lead us back to the promised land!

"After all... he's the most stable, experienced manager that we've got... he's been on a golf course practically all of his life."

"Ah, but remember back in March when we wanted the grass grower to report to the rookie GM... he refused and steadily told us he'd rather resign! The nerve of that guy!"

"And remember in June the casual comments made by us... that the charming self-appointed, son-in-law, Director of Golf was to be the heir apparent?"

"Gee, we sure hope that you never leave us... we really need you around here!"

Believe me, relatives, I too appreciate everything you've done for me here... but I will not stay around to watch this place decline further... under the misdirection of two rookies... neither of which have much in the way of golf experience or leadership talent.

Our young family has too bright a future... and too much realizable potential... to stagnate here in Illinois. It is basically the responsibility of Susan and myself to make sure that everything possible is done to insure that our potential becomes reality.

The irony of it all is that now... after six up and down seasons here... it's entirely possible that the position of general manager may be offered to me. But now... I do not want it! I realize all too well that buying back in here would not be a good investment at all... and that for the balance of my career I'd like to be working for myself!!

I, like all of you, do not want to be burned out and used up in this business by the age of fifty! I have a strong fear of being obligated to someone else for my livelihood... and an equally strong dislike of having someone else determine the limitations of my talents, my determination, my intelligence, and my future.

These are some of the things that my father, now deceased, taught me. He taught me lots of things... about

stubbornness, intestinal fortitude, and a sense of timing.

My parents... and all of their contemporaries in our extended family... have been pretty successful. Parents are usually better teachers than even they realize.

It's somewhat ironic that it took the death of my father to bring into sharp focus what it is that I should be doing with the rest of my life. Thanks, Dad. ♡

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