



# In Pursuit of a Golf Course

By Patrick J. Norton, Golf Course Superintendent, Nettle Creek Country Club

Ah, the dream of buying and owning your own golf course! It all sounds so grand, so romantic, and so interesting! There are tons of good reasons for any superintendent or golf professional to consider owning a golf property... not the least of which is the fact that superintendents and golf professionals are the management experts that any golf course needs to thrive.

We're also the ones who are out there daily... forsaking our families and our futures for the sake of the old golf course! We're also the ones who are seemingly underappreciated, underpaid, and way overlooked, aren't we?? After years of working my life away on a golf course... with the idea of acquiring a golf property constantly gnawing at me... it seemed as if the dream of a lifetime was upon me.

A good friend... who just happened to be the golf professional at Morris CC... had been having these dreams/nightmares also! One discussion led to another... and pretty soon we were unofficially... partners!

In fact, wouldn't the team of a superintendent and a golf professional as equal partners... purchasing a golf property... work out just fine? Wouldn't there be just an incredible synergy between both types?

We certainly thought so as we began the process of pursuing a golf course in the late summer of 1999.

We thought that we had this thing figured out from all possible angles! And for many weeks and months of the pursuit process we continued to believe in our vision. It wasn't until almost too late in the game that we were forced to realize that it all boiled down to money... up front money... capital improvement money... working capital money... as my partner said after I dropped out, "Cash is king!"

Let me just say that pursuing and purchasing a golf course... no matter how good the price... no matter how good the property... no matter how good the income potential... boils down mainly to a matter of having the bucks to consummate the marriage.

It boils down to being a businessman. It boils down to being a successful businessman... with a solid track record... of having strong business analytical abilities, an aggressive attitude... which over time result in cash and assets that are further invested in other projects. It is called capitalism! Banks will not seriously discuss commercial real estate projects with 'business rookies' without many factors being in place... primarily capital, but also a serious business history and banking relationship with your proposed lender.

We embarked on our quest in July of 1999. We found out that we both shared the same vision... were both about the same age... with spouses who were really good friends and could definitely work together! We checked into a local course that was reportedly for sale... at a mere \$4,500,000... and realized quickly that professional consulting help was needed.

Our consultant found us an excellent property almost immediately... at a really great price! We were ecstatic and totally enthusiastic! We then embarked on a long series of trips, meetings, teleconferences, offers, counteroffers, etc.... which went smoothly up to the point of realizing... after many months of negotiations... that we could not put this thing together without another investor.

So, after many weeks of trying to put this project together... it finally became crystal clear that the two of us could not do this alone! We had come to the end of the line! We both had decisions to make. After much soul searching... after it became clear that myself and my original partner would not be doing this by ourselves, I decided to drop out and stay here in beautiful central Illinois.

We had the option of staying with the project... which was very appealing. The conditions of the new deal... with new partners... were really attractive!

There were so many pros and cons to consider that I



THOMAS J. EMMERICH  
CERTIFIED IRRIGATION DESIGNER

\*GOLF COURSE  
\*COMMERCIAL  
\*RESIDENTIAL  
\*MASTER PLANNING  
\*SYSTEM EVALUATIONS  
TOTAL PACKAGE DESIGN SERVICES

**T.J. EMMERICH ASSOCIATES, INC.**

IRRIGATION CONSULTANTS  
N68W W30986 CLUB CIRCLE EAST  
HARTLAND, WISCONSIN 53029

**414-966-1051**

ended up waffling for too long... and leaving my partner out on a limb. He was waiting patiently for me to decide to stay or go... and ended up having to make the decision to continue on without us.

I also had the problem of having assets that were too limiting and too fixed... selling rental properties in order to invest those proceeds into the golf course was proving to be a difficult task!

And... after some tough negotiations here at Nettle Creek... my responsibilities, compensation, and future buy-in possibilities were redefined. It was amazingly interesting to us how valuable I had suddenly become to the Nettle Creek operation when I was seriously threatening to leave Illinois and return to Wisconsin!

Imagine that! A Wisconsin Badger... born and bred... turning down a golden opportunity to return to the native state that he and his wife love so much. Extremely ironic, I would say.

I still don't know if I exhibited extreme restraint and wisdom in staying here... or extreme foolishness and lack of intestinal fortitude in passing up the opportunity!

So, the fever has cooled... somewhat. The fever was all-consuming... in my case. I had such a case of the fever that I was willing to do almost anything to acquire my dream.

My partner and I pumped in money, time, legal fees, and lots of uncertainty. We thought for a long while that pursuing this golf course was going to work out for us and our families. We really thought that both of our families would be returning to Wisconsin and operating our new golf course as equal partners. We thought that we were really going to be able to close this deal.

In fact, I have now backed away from the dream... for various well thought out reasons. Fortunately, I've been given the opportunity to expand my horizons and begin to experience all facets of management of a public golf operation here at NCCC...



**FEICK  
DESIGN  
GROUP**

---

SPRING GREEN, WISCONSIN      608-588-7888

<p><b>GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTS</b></p> <p>NEW COURSE DESIGN RENOVATIONS MASTER PLANNING</p>	<p><b>IRRIGATION CONSULTANTS</b></p> <p>NEW &amp; EXISTING COURSES SYSTEM EVALUATIONS GPS AS-BUILTS</p>
---	---

Would I ever invest in or attempt to purchase a golf course in the future? A definite maybe, but not a certainty.

For us little guys... buying a golf course is a pretty big bite. We should have been believing in the 30% rule... which is to say that at least 30% of the purchase price... and probably more... is required as equity by any bank willing to consider a loan.

The biggest lesson in the whole pursuit process for me was just that... dealing with the banks and the SBA was far more complicated than we expected! We were 'business rookies'... neophytes who naively believed in many things... when better judgment was trying to speak to us loudly and clearly!

Ah, what the heck! My former partner continued on with the project and is now a partial owner of a very fine golf facility. I decided to work things out here at this family owned course... take on an enhanced position... and bide my time for the future.

We think that we made the correct decision in saying here... as did our friends who are returning to Wisconsin. We do have some regrets... but as Kenny Rogers says... "you gotta know when to hold 'em, and know when to fold 'em." ♣

## *Our Business Is Growing.*

With superior fertilizers, combination products and seeds, Lebanon Turf Products can solve any turf problem. Guaranteed. With over 200 different product offerings and a fleet of turf-care professionals on staff, we can answer your toughest questions and provide you with the perfect product for your soil conditions and turf needs. Call your nearest Lebanon Turf Products dealer or distributor for information. Or 1-800-233-0628.

Country Club

greenskeeper

ISOtek<sup>31</sup>

NX-PRO

par ex

Lebanon Pro

ISOPRO

ProScape

**Frank Baden**

Territory Manager

Bettendorf, IA

(319) 332-9288