

A Pathetic Winter

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

Most of us northerners need a good, cold, snowy winter to feel right about things, you know - life. It is part of our culture and I think there is even a genetic need for some of us. But we didn't get it this past winter and I feel terribly uncomfortable about it. I also believe our golf courses do better if there is snow and cold.

I usually don't put much faith in a rodent's prediction for the arrival of spring, but it coincided again this winter with what we have come to expect in recent years in Wisconsin.

Groundhog Day dawned early and the presence of the sun made people like me smile. With sun comes sunshine and if there is sunshine, Sun Prairie's Jimmy the

Groundhog could be expected to see his shadow. If he sees his shadow we can expect (with 79% accuracy) six more weeks of winter.

But before Jimmy emerged, the sun slid behind the clouds. When he did make his appearance he did not see his shadow. Drat. I suspect I am not the only golf course superintendent in Wisconsin who could have used a couple of extra weeks in the shop. But it wasn't to be. Golf courses all over the state opened in late February and early March. There were record high temperatures on February 25th - mid-60s into the north. The Birkie was canceled in Hayward. The north country, in fact, may have been more shocked than those of us in the south. But

regardless of where in Wisconsin you practice golf turf management, the abnormal weather was taken by many as a bad omen.

Winter didn't arrive in our town until late and we were even beginning to wonder if it was going to get here at all. The average freeze day for the lakes in our town are November 27th for Wingra, December 15th for Monona and December 20th for Mendota. This winter was ridiculous. Wingra went solid on December 18th and it was January 14th before the ice formed in Monona and Mendota. The late freezes pressured the record book for late closings. The latest for Mendota and Monona was January 30, 1932 and Wingra waited until

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December 29th in 1897.

It was only two years ago that the lakes were ice covered for only 47 days, and that broke the old record by over a week. We flirted with a new record for shortest freeze duration this year, barely missing the 47 days.

The shorter winters are going to dictate how we budget our golf course operations. In the past, we hire students for working the three months of summer and covered the operation pretty well. It is a different story when the season begins the first week of March and runs through the first week of December. It is not going to work having adequate employees for only three of the nine or more months we could be open.

The shorter and milder winters are affecting others besides us. They affect those who enjoy and those who provide ice sports. Ice boating, ice fishing and ice skating are three examples of sports suffering from the lack of ice. And if you like skiing and sledding, consider that in our town you need to go back to 1967/68 for a winter with less snow. We had only 26" inches of the white stuff in 1999/00.

The open water and the warm temperatures are confusing the geese too - they don't fly south anymore, it seems.

And think of the people who enjoy hard water golf - they really have something to complain about!

It was a stunning announcement. And unexpected, at least by me. Whistling Straits has been picked as the site of the 2004 PGA Championship, one of golf's four major championships. What an outstanding opportunity for golf in Wisconsin.

The Kohler Company was happy to host the 2005 U.S. Open but since the USGA hadn't decided, the PGA was happy to switch the 2004 PGA from Valhalla CC to the Haven golf course.

It should be a great venue for the

tournament. Many of us were Mike Lee's guest during construction of the course, and more than a few have gone back since its opening to see how it turned out.

It turned out great! The course can accommodate between 27,000 and 45,000 spectators. My guess is that they'll run out of tickets, just like Blackwolf Run did during the U.S. Women's Open in 1998.

Herbert V. Kohler, chairman of the

Kohler Co., is especially happy to have the PGA since it is played in August rather than the spring. "When you're dealing with fescue grass, it will have had time to brown out and meld into several different colors of brown. It gives you a very vivid, picturesque scene."

Throw into that scene the game's best players, the beauty of Lake Michigan and the skills of Mike Lee and his staff and you have the

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potential for an unforgettable event in golf history.

And speaking of golf history, it may come as a surprise to some to learn that the PGA championship has been held on a Wisconsin golf course in the past. Gene Sarazen defeated Willie Goggin, 5 and 4, at Blue Mound Golf and Country Club in 1933. Sarazen, a GCSAA Old Tom Morris award winner, has been one of golf's enduring heroes.

Steve Millett has made many contributions to the Wisconsin turfgrass industry during his six or seven years at Wisconsin while earning his PhD in plant pathology. He also made a lot of friends. This bit of history about him might interest you.

Steve earned the last PhD of the century in the Plant Pathology Department, securing his place in the history of that department. Dr. Doug Maxwell investigated the first PhDs of the century. They were granted in 1912 to Dr. Melhus and Dr. Morse. Both men were students of Dr. L.R. Jones. One thesis concerned a potato disease and the other studied germination and infection in certain oomycetes. They were the alpha of the department and Steve is the omega, as Dr. Maxwell pointed out.

The well known turf pathologists Monteith and Dahl were also UW - Madison plant pathology grads.

The recently completed GCSAA conference saw Wisconsin honored through some of our superintendents.

James M. Krutilla was a 2000 Environmental Steward Award merit winner in the public category. He is the superintendent at Edgerton's Towne Country Club.

Mike Lee was a speaker at the Innovative Superintendent Sessions and gave a super talk. He runs the Kohler Co. golf courses. And all of the authors and advertisers of The Grass Roots were honored when the

Wisconsin chapter publication was selected winning entry in category 2. It was the 16th consecutive GCSAA award.

Howard Atten passed away last January 17th in Elkhorn. Howard was a 50 years member of both the GCSAA and PGA. He played golf at the Evergreen Golf Club and was a good friend of Bill Rogers. Bill was a pall bearer at Howard's funeral.

"Howie lived and breathed golf," Bill said. "He always felt strong about the value of a good superintendent." He designed and built the Edgewater Golf Club at Grafton and wrote a book titled *Golf Simplified*.

Our thoughts are with the family.

I don't know about anyone else, but when our golf course budget was built last fall, I didn't plan on fuel prices where they are now. They are sky high and rising.

The pricing is due to a reduction in supply. Don't you just love it? We pull the oil-producing Arab states out of a jam with Iraq and are rewarded with restricted production. Mexico floods us with drugs and illegals and required an economic bailout to stay afloat. Their country thrives on NAFTA. And how are we shown gratitude? Reduced oil production. And although I don't know it for a fact, I wouldn't be surprised if there is Alaska oil, or at least a portion of it, that is being exported, making all kinds of common sense when we are over \$1.50 a gallon for gas.

Where's Willie? Where's Al (after all, he wants to be your pal). And Al wants Willie's job...

Let's face it - Easter will seem like the middle of the summer this year. The best we can hope for is a mild season with ample and gentle rain. I'll lead the prayers. 🌿



OF COURSE, THERE ARE SOME
DISADVANTAGES TO HAVING
A MILD WINTER....