



The Deer Hunters

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

I had been able to dodge it for years, which naturally led to my confidence that I would be able to do it again this year. We were going to Mother Fletchers on Friday night to hear the Tams; I had waited in line for tickets as soon as they went on sale. There was an alumni group meeting for brunch Saturday morning we had accepted an invitation to attend. The Badgers were playing their last game of the season at Camp Randall Saturday afternoon - a NEVER miss on our autumn schedule. The Madison Symphony

was playing a Charles Ives program Saturday evening. After a short night, it was off to Green Bay on Sunday for the Packers/Steelers game in Lambeau Field at noon. The weekend, obviously, was going to be the most exciting of the year. Adding to all the pleasure was the fact that the golf season was over, done and in the books. I could hardly wait for the weekend to arrive.

Looming large, however, was the annual and inevitable invitation from Bogey Calhoun to spend

the opening of the deer season with him and Tom Morris and Steady Eddie Middleton and Scottie Fennimore and each of their long-standing hunting buddies and family members. These guys thought about opening day all year long, starting with the end of each deer season. I was dreading the year I would get trapped into lugging a shotgun into the woods with them.

"I don't need to go along," I'd tell Bogey. "I have heard so many stories over the years that I feel like I've gone with you lots of

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times. I would just slow you guys down." Somehow or other I had always gotten out of going.

Until this year. Despite our busy schedule. Despite Cheryl's objections. Despite a Badger and a Packer game. Even though I don't like venison (even when it is well cooked). Calhoun would not take "no" for an answer. He enlisted Tom Morris to put the heat on me, something Tom was uncomfortable with doing. In the end, my protestations notwithstanding, I collapsed under the pressure, took the heat from my wife and agreed to be in the woods with the guys at dawn on opening day of the deer hunting season.

As I look back, I now know how little I understood about deer hunting in Wisconsin. The focus was always on the tromp through

the woods on early Saturday morning, usually when it was cold. Worse was being the man on the stand, whether on the ground or in a tree. He dared not move or cough or even shiver. To me, it was less than fun. Then, if you happened to get unlucky (from my perspective) and actually shot a buck, you had the mess to deal with - gutting the animal immediately. After that was the job of lugging it back to a road that could be reached by your truck. It could be, in the hills of southwest Wisconsin, damn hard work. Worse luck was a shot that hit an animal but didn't kill it. Our hunting ethics absolutely required tracking the animal until you either found it dead or until you got close enough for a shot to finish the kill. Not my idea of enter-

tainment. Work on a golf course provided me with plenty of exercise and fresh air; hunting was simply more of the same.

Deer hunting with Bogey, Tom and the rest of the boys was more involved, however, than even I had calculated. We took the day before the season opener - Friday - off to get ready. We zeroed our weapons, bought supplies and cleaned up the building where we were spending the night. I had volunteered not to stay there, preferring instead to drive up to the hunt early in the morning. "You'll never show," Tom said with Calhoun, Middleton and Fennimore vigorously agreeing.

The accommodations were, well, rustic. Our headquarters were on the old Morris homestead where Tom grew up and where his

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brother still farmed. It was in the hills not far from the Wisconsin River, rough land but beautiful beyond words. Contour farming on the ridges and softer slopes added to the natural beauty. And the farms were cut out of deciduous woods, more wooded land than cropland, to be sure. It was, obviously, ideal deer habitat.

We did some scouting, on foot of course, and they showed me where the stands were and where the drives would take place. The Morris' had lots of land to hunt on, and neighbors all allowed the Morris' and their group to hunt on what I guessed must have been nearly two thousand acres. I was impressed and warming a little to the activity planned for sunrise the next day.

The guys were fanatic to a

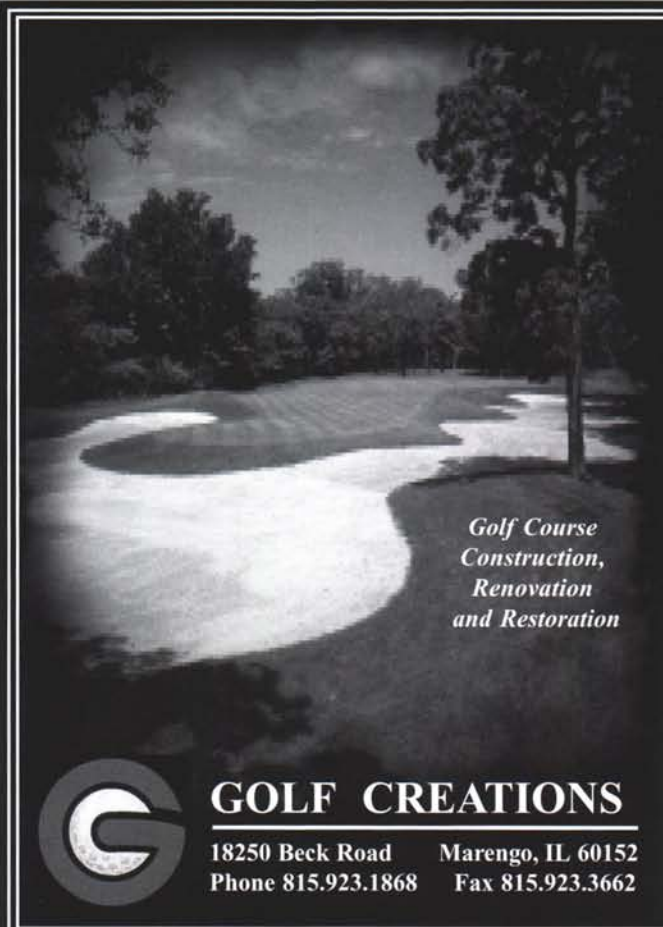
degree I hadn't even imagined. Bogey had all of his hunting clothes buried in the ground, packed with field corn, corn stalks, apples, soil and rough grasses. "I don't want my human scent scaring them away," he said as I was laughing uproariously at him. Turned out some of the other hunters in our group did the same.

I was starting to have a good time; the enthusiasm of the guys was contagious. As I thought back to my own youth, I recalled the Guernsey yearling heifer we found dead in the woods, obviously the victim of mistaken identity by some hunter. She really did not look like a buck deer. Such an incident impacts on one's attitude about hunting, or at least it did with me.

Too many hunters then disre-

spected private landowners, even those of us who did not post our farms NO HUNTING. There was one who parked his vehicle in front of the gate to one of our fields which was where we were spreading manure at that time. The solution was to back the spreader close to the rear of his car, engage the PTO while the tractor was in neutral, and unload 200 bushels of cow manure tight against his car. Great solution to a problem caused by a jerk. I know first hand too many similar incidents that left me feeling not very charitable toward the sport of hunting.

But I could tell my colleagues and new buddies were different. They didn't do any baiting with a salt lick or corn or apples. Of course, with the amount of crop-



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land, the deer were well fed. I also experienced from the guys the notion of fair chase - a balance between the hunter and the hunted. They weren't going to extremes to insure they each got a buck. It was not viewed as an entitlement, but rather a privilege. They had the highest respect for landowner rights, too often neglected as I had experienced in youth. The weapons were in good working order and as accurate as they could make them.

And they made it fun, as I realized that Friday night. A big wood stove in the middle of one side of the machine shed made it toasty warm. They rented a Bucky portable toilet and parked it outside the walk-in door. A generator provided power - there was no permanent electrical service to the building - and extension cords provided plug-ins for bare light bulbs. It was as light and bright as it is at high noon on most days!

Bogey had salvaged big pieces of carpeting that were discarded during a clubhouse renovation and rolled them out onto the concrete floor. Banquet tables borrowed from the clubs for the weekend sagged under the weight of food and dishes and supplies. Card tables were set up for entertainment, but there was no television, no VCR, no CD players. We were left to our own devices for entertainment, just as it should be. Card games filled the void that conversation didn't.

The food, as you might guess, was excellent. And we ate like pigs that night. We drank a little beer (okay, a lot of beer), ate pickled boiled eggs and told stories while the card games were going. It was super.

We hit the hay, figuratively speaking, fairly early. I was not warned that no shower facility would be available nor that I'd sleep in my sleeping bag on the floor, not on a bed. I thought I was

back in the Army. And if sleeping wasn't difficult enough under those circumstances, there was the snoring and the passing of gas. It was what you'd think it would be like trying to sleep in a smelly sawmill.

Four a.m. arrived and I was unrested, but anxious to get to the woods. As dreams do occasionally come true, it had snowed during the night as the guys had hoped. Tracking deer would be easier now, and the cool temperatures insured no meat would spoil.

We gave the men at the stands time to arrive before we started the drive. I had a chance at a deer - one chance since I had a single shot 12 gauge. Of course, I missed, but Tom followed my shot with a clean shot right to the rib cage. The eight-pointer was dead when it hit

the ground. By days end, our group had tagged six bucks and the spirits were high, mine included.

Since then, I have done some reading about hunting as Wisconsin's Aldo Leopold viewed it. He was an intelligent, thoughtful man and the father of American game management. He once wrote: *A peculiar virtue in wildlife ethics is that the hunter ordinarily has no gallery to applaud or disapprove of his conduct. Whatever his acts, they are dictated by his own conscience, rather than a mob of onlookers. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this fact.*

All I could think of is how much Leopold's philosophy about hunting is like the game of golf. Now I am thinking maybe I will go again next year. ♣

