



The Real Birthplaces of Golf

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

There are seemingly a thousand different types of golf facilities out there. There are seemingly a thousand different types of golf facilities within any state...Wisconsin, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Arizona, or wherever. And with all due respect to St. Andrews...the real birthplaces of golf are all located right here in our own back yards!!!

How many of us can trace our golf origins back to some small nine or eighteen hole layout...located in rural or small town America? I certainly can...you all certainly can...and I'll bet that the majority of Americans can trace their birthplace of golf back to some local layout that gave them the chance to learn this game in an unhurried, affordable, and yet very magical atmosphere.

Nobody ever forgets their own birthplace of golf. I will be forever grateful to guys like Jimmy Forbes, the golf pro at Monroe CC, who conducted endless Fri AM group lessons with wiffle balls scattered everywhere...or Jim Krieger, the owner of Windy Acres in rural Green County...where kids sort of graduated to...as they became old enough to be on their own for a day long feast of walking golf with their teen aged buddies!! Mr. Krieger, I remember, only had to scold us once about leaning on our putters and possibly leaving a blemish on one of his greens!!

Make no mistake about it, people...the golf course is a very magical place to most people, especially kids. In thinking back...I remember vividly how being able to walk out onto any golf course was a thrilling experience. It was like walking through a magical fairyland...green grass and trees everywhere, sun shining, wind blowing, lots of hills and hollows to explore...and a definite route to walk

as we sort of wandered all over the property. And it was a different experience for each young golfer...the route that the white ball led us on depended totally on each kid's skill level...giving each of us that different 'golf experience.'

And the greens!!! How did they cut this stuff so short...and what is it really?? We had no idea...which only added to the mysticism of the place. It was a great day as a young teen when I realized that I knew the golf course...and how to play the game...way better than my Dad...way better than my sisters...and most of the time...better than my older brother!!

The misconception is that northern areas of the US are home to most of these birthplaces of golf...which is only partially true. The fact of the matter is that there are still lots of these great facilities scattered around...and their location has more to do with urban vs. rural than it has to do with north vs. south or east vs. west.

These places all share the common thread of being the beginning point for hosts of young golfers each year and through their efforts...the sport grows, matures, and evolves...

In the 1990's though...we've seen the growth of golf via another route. Along with the strength of the US economy in general, we have seen explosive growth in golf through the development of thousands of new, 'upscale' public golf course facilities.

Many of these places are designed and priced such that walking golf and thereby junior golf, are subtly or actively discouraged!

My little corner of the golf world is a very good example. Nettle Creek CC...where I hang my hat...is very stretched out over 310 acres...and

requires golf carts all weekend long. We do this for the revenue mainly...and have seen that today's golfers are pretty lazy and think that our course is unwalkable. Having hoofed it around this layout in four hours...permits me to tell you with authority that it is indeed a trek.

My son and his buddies tried for two years to participate in our junior golf program and then walk nine holes...which ultimately proved too difficult given the length, lack of shade at a new course, and the golf cart pressure from following groups. After awhile...they all gradually lost interest...and the ones who have continued have gravitated over to Morris CC.

Morris CC is a small, private 18 hole layout...is very walkable for golfers of all abilities...and allows junior golf memberships to be purchased independent of the fact that your parents are or are not members!! What a great encouragement for juniors!! That place definitely qualifies as a true birthplace of golf...in my opinion.

Our ownership group recently attended the 2001 National Golf Course Owners of America Annual Conference and Trade Show at DisneyWorld. Attending were owners of all sorts of golf establishments. Each facility is different from any other...yet all have very necessary similarities. The most obvious similarity is that almost everybody in attendance is aggressively trying everything possible to capture their share of their area's golf market.

It was a fantastic conference from a decidedly different viewpoint than the GCSAA or the PGA conferences. These course owners are definitely on the front lines in the battle to see

that golf does not suffer the same fate as did tennis back in the 1980's.

It was pointed out to us in a seminar by Jim Baugh, president of Wilson Sporting Goods, that;

- Sports participation overall in the USA is declining...coincidentally... as the use of PC's and the Internet is rising dramatically! Americans, and American youth in particular, are becoming more sedentary than ever!

- Only a few sporting activities are really growing...soccer, roller blading, street hockey, hiking, rock climbing, etc.

- The traditional sports that we all grew up with...baseball, football, softball, golf, tennis...are taking their hits and are suffering declining participation! Totally can understand that for baseball...how slow and boring! Football never turned me on either...and is suffering a huge decline in youth participation as American youth goes for soccer in a big way...

- Golf...contrary to what the news media (of which GCSAA seems to be a part) is feeding everybody the line that golf has never been healthier!! In reality, there are about 3,000,000 new golfers every year in the USA. There are also about 3,000,000 golfers who quit the game every year also!!! Obviously, golf is somewhat stagnant...contrary to what I would have thought before hearing this guy speak the truth! In other words...golf demand is flat...while golf supply continues to rise and rise and rise! It is no wonder that so many of the new, high end courses are battling for enough rounds and enough revenue...and ultimately, we are seeing many of these developments go under and be reborn with fresh ownership and capital...

- It has been proven that growth in participation in any sport is locally, not news media driven.

Soccer has exploded in the last ten years across the nation...and who is driving that growth? Local groups such as the Morris Soccer Association... who have overseen the growth in youth soccer in this little town of 12,000...to the point that over 800 kids play soccer in our

community. How many kids in this same age group (7-14) play golf locally? Probably about 200-300...if we're lucky. How many of them play golf at NCCC, our local public facility? About 50...if we're lucky and count all of the cart kids who love golf and hate soccer!

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- So what are new players/new golfers looking for when taking up golf? They are looking for the same thing that is described in the beginning of this article. They are looking for the 'golf experience'...a fun, enjoyable day with their friends out amongst nature in a sporting environment. When the basics of golf have been mastered...there is no other sport that is as maddening, and yet enjoyable, for people of all ages.

But, people that are involved with golf, such as ourselves, must be totally able to provide them with the 'golf experience.' Which means that, in addition to the playing field (the course)...we must provide for them the opportunity to learn the game (group lessons, junior golf, etc.) in a low pressure setting (practice range, practice course) where they can learn the basics before getting thrown out onto that racetrack known as a public golf course.

In other words, golf will grow when local facilities decide to get involved in providing the total golf experience. Obviously, this should mean that no matter the situation...each course should have an aggressive junior program in an attempt to become a birthplace of golf for legions of young golfers, right? This should be the case...with no exceptions!

Again referring to my own golf course...I am somewhat ashamed to tell you that we have no junior golf program whatsoever and an extremely limited group lesson situation! Ouch! Talk about practicing what is being preached...

Things were active here in that area through 1998, but then faded due to some ownership changes and the lack of a practice facility on which to conduct any sort of practice sessions.

We are now in the planning and persuasion stage of the process of building a practice facility...which we hope to build in 2001 and open

in 2002. Our vision for this facility is probably too limited...as I am beginning to understand. We might redesign a few areas and squeeze a range onto our existing land...which would be tough for me to support because it would mean basically butchering our already easy first hole!

A more intelligent idea...in the long run...would be to purchase farmland to our north and build a new practice facility and a practice course...executive length...for juniors, women, seniors, and all other types of golfers who only have time for nine holes.

This ideal vision has its drawbacks also...mainly that our owners are in their mid-70's and aren't so keen on investing another \$1,500,000 or so into this golf course! So we're definitely at a crossroads...and have some decisions to make.

Everybody involved in this great game has decisions to make, actually, for the future of the game of golf. Everybody really needs to analyze their own contributions to the growth of golf on their own local level.

Could my facility...little old Nettle Creek...be doing more to become a

birthplace of golf? Most definitely! Are we going to do significantly more to become a birthplace of golf here in central Illinois? I certainly hope so...

Is the golf facility that you're involved with doing much to enhance and grow the game of golf? Are you finding it a constant challenge to find enough golfers to fill the course...or buy the memberships...or whatever?

Maybe you're in a situation in which golfers are just always busting down the doors...and you've got so much demand at your course that incentives and promotions are just not needed? You've got junior golf, senior golf, ladies golf, group golf, regular golf...so much golf that you can ignore the signs and signals of a crowded golf market? Then you are already a great birthplace of golf!

But if your course is like ours...doing pretty good...but could be better...with not the greatest program in place to encourage and retain beginning golfers...then it may be time for a reality check.

It may be that you need to start doing more to insure that your golf course becomes a true birthplace of golf. ♣

