



# A Day With The Masters

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The uncertainty of the weather enveloped the day like a mystery, but despite scattered predictions of light rain, nothing was going to mar the event. I had waited two years for what might be my only opportunity to visit Augusta National Golf Club during the Master's tournament and would enjoy every minute regardless of Mother Nature's plans. The trip, sponsored by the Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association and the Wisconsin State Golf Association, has been an annual event for 31 years.

Several people had warned me not to be late for the chartered flight to Augusta. For instance, there's the story about the person who was 100 yards away when the plane left the runway. Stories like that compelled me to not only set the alarm extra early but also to request a wake-up call. Consequently I was one of the first persons to check in at the airport. The security guards at the terminal were ready for us, because as I passed through the checkpoint one of them smiled and told me to have a good day at Augusta. As I walked down the hallway I could hear the guards talking about the Master's tournament, obviously wishing they were going.

The flight left Milwaukee's Mitchell Airport at 6:15 am. We arrived at Augusta about 9:40 am, then took a 20 minute bus ride to Augusta National. The buses deposited us behind number 5 green. Within 10 minutes of arrival the weather took a change for the better, with the clouds departing and the temperature rising into the 80s for the day. I took the advice of the WSGA and walked the course backwards to 1, then on to #10 tee where I caught up with Steve Stricker's group. At Augusta, each hole is named for a conspicuous plant or plants. Number 10 was the camelia hole, with scores of pink camelias in bloom. For the next couple of hours I tagged along with the crowd following Steve Stricker's progress through the course. He played well, getting as low as 9 under until he hit #16, a tight par 3 with a pond between the tee and green. This hole was known as the Redbud hole. The pin was in the lower left corner, and the green sloped towards the pond to make the shot challenging at best. Bunkers surrounded the hole on the front right, back right, and left side. Mr. Stricker's tee shot landed in the right front bunker and he ended up bogeying the hole to put him at 8 under. With par on 17, a tough run on 18 left him at 7 under for the day, good enough to keep him on the leader board. He eventually went on to take 10<sup>th</sup> place in the tournament with a 7 under score. Tiger Woods, though starting slow, gained a lead by Saturday

he would not relinquish and allowing him to repeat as a Master's champion.

The golf course, though, was the star of the day. As one superintendent said to me, "I never knew perfection was possible until I came to Augusta." The design definitely helps. Pure, shining white sand bunkers are strategically placed throughout the course. The wide variety and density of trees make for beautiful colors, but could be a management nightmare if budgets and skills were limited. The greens are bentgrass mowed at 0.125 inch, and the fairways were bermudagrass still covered with ryegrass from last year's overseeding. The season was perfect for highlighting the ornamental plants throughout the course. Following Steve Stricker from #10 to 18 gave me a perfect opportunity to see Amen Corner in its full glory. This includes the latter half of #11, 12, and the first half of #13. The 11<sup>th</sup> hole is known as the white dog-

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wood hole: these were all in bloom on both sides of the fairway, punctuated occasionally with pink dogwood. The 12<sup>th</sup> was a wonderfully set par 3, requiring a tee shot over Raes Creek. The green and 13<sup>th</sup> tee are set well away from the crowd, giving the players more breathing room than anywhere else on the course. Number 13, a par 5 at 485 yards, was my favorite hole. The fairway and green were ringed with pink, red, and white azaleas which were interspersed among trees climbing up the slopes. The white bunkers and green grass added a stark but warm contrast to the scene.

After watching Stricker's finish, I took lunch at the concession stand near the clubhouse and entrance to the course. Lunch is a simple affair: chips and cold sandwiches at amazingly reasonable prices. The clubhouse, golf shop, and other areas near the entrance impart a sense of history and tradition easily identified with the Master's tournament. In this area was a small museum housing memorabilia and historical factoids from previous tournaments. One display case housed tickets from past tournaments: in 1941, a ticket cost \$5.50 including tax. By 1999 the cost was \$100, with an increase to \$125 for the tournament for 2001. After lunch I took a walk along the famous "cottage row" near the practice green before walking through the course

on my way back to #14 tee. Along the way I was fortunate enough to watch Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, and Gary Player walk along #18 fairway. The crowd showed their appreciation of their contributions to the game by clapping. Walking slow but grinning, Arnold Palmer gave a big thumbs-up to the crowd. These are the types of nuances that make attending a match such as this a truly memorable experience.

I parked myself on the bleachers of #14 tee where I could appreciate the beauty of #13 green and watch some of the world's best golfers put out and tee off. In a Who's Who throng of players, I watched legendary figures such as Ben Crenshaw, Ian Woosnam, Nick Faldo, Raymond Floyd, Tom Watson and others. Another good spot I found was the bleacher section at #16 tee where I had clear sightlines to both #16 and #15 greens. The seating was so close to the tees you could practically hear the players breath.

By 6 pm we were back at the buses ready to begin the journey home. Though the time passed incredibly fast, I packed more memories into those hours than I take in during a week of work. I have nothing but sincere appreciation to the Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association and the Wisconsin State Golf Association for sponsoring the trip. ♣

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