

A Long, Short Walk

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



Like most golf course maintenance facilities, ours is a distance from the clubhouse. That is a good thing, generally. Noise, material and the general hub bub of activity we are immersed in are not always compatible with the most sedate and sophisticated activities reserved for the big house.

But at times it is a modest hassle. Meetings sometimes convene there; office staff dealing with our end of the golf business reside there. I even have to travel to the promontory to get my mail.

So, on an absolutely gorgeous day last month I decided to take the bit of extra time and walk there to get whatever correspondence waited for me.

It was the first bright, crisp sunny day we had had after a week of cool, wet, cloudy and generally dreary weather. Nothing is like a genuine early June day with low humidity and warm temperatures. And talk about green! We won't see color—green color—like this again this year. Someday I am going to do what I have thought

about doing at least a thousand times—borrow a Munsell Color Book from Dr. Kussow and compare the greenest color chip with the dominant green on the golf course. I predict a match!

Walking is making a comeback these days. People are realizing it is good for your health, maybe better than jogging, and it offers some solitude that is hard to come by all too often. It is a revival of sorts—old Henry David Thoreau wrote a lengthy treatise on walking over 150 years ago. The thing I am unwilling to do in public is carry a walking stick with me in town. Somebody would surely think I had lost my senses. That implement has to be saved for walking the pastures and woodlands of Grant County, not over a private golf course in Madison.

Right or wrong, necessary or not, the hesitation to walk across the course is the insecurity of someone—anyone—thinking you are wasting time. “Exercise on your own time” are the words you fear a player will either say or think.



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I set all that aside, made sure I was clean and started hoofing down from the shop toward the course. Before I got to the soil shed one of my young employees stopped and asked, "want a ride?" I loved the courteous thought but told her I was walking to the clubhouse. It was easy to tell she was a little confused!

Before I had crossed the bike path that connects Middleton and Madison I stopped to visit with a neighbor who was walking the old greyhound he had rescued from the dog racetracks. That took five minutes—great conversation with a man I have known for over twenty years.

Looking left to check the blue tee for players, I hustled across the fairway. Guys were on the white box, motioned me over and offered some nice comments about the course. "Grass weather," I said, although I am always pleased for any positive comment even when I cannot honestly take the credit. Two were sitting in a golf car and two were waiting on a bench. I have decided you can have friendships with people you work for, and I value the relationships I had with these now retired players. Two MDs, an emeritus faculty member and a former bank president played almost everyday in the summer. They were enjoying the fruits of their productive working lives; golf was clearly what they enjoyed a lot. I sat down on the bench for a few minutes and we chatted about the fairways they thought were cut too short.

They hit and I got up and continued my short trip to the clubhouse. A strong wind during the storms of the past week had brought a lot of debris out of trees all over the course. The big stuff had been picked up and hauled to the chipper; I spent five minutes picking up smaller branches and twigs from the grove of trees backing up our eighth green, piling them at the base of the largest tree and out of the way of the rough mower. No big deal—it was time well spent.

I paused for a drink from the water cooler—it was cold and tasted really good, a reminder of why golf players get so worked up when one of the dozen coolers on the course is empty. I did notice the button you push to draw water was a little dirty; maybe too many crew members visit there. A little bleach will do the trick.

There, at the range, was L.J. Marks, hitting balls. Mr. Marks is 91. Talk about optimism! He wants to improve his game and lower his handicap. Seeing him is another of the endless examples why golf is such a great game.

Passing near the tees of the only three parr on our front nine, I knew, was going to slow me down. Two groups were waiting to hit—seven players—and they had time to talk. I shook hands all around and this was the first time I had talked to some this season. Bill Gardener wondered if I needed a ride somewhere; Jimmy Walker repeated this claim that the greens had

slowed down over the past five years. "No, Mr. Walker, you are wrong," I replied. "It is documented that the opposite is true, evidence that the stimpmeter had real value." Hank Willis more or less backed me up with "greens everywhere have gotten too fast for some of us and less fun to play."

I stayed and chatted a little while longer, declining one offer to take a shot at the pin with one player's new golf clubs. It is difficult to beat conversation with people whose company you enjoy.

My short walk took me past our second tee ground, the general area where the buildings of the farm that occupied this ground at the turn of the century before it became the golf course it is today. I quietly watched the group putt on the first green. A couple of putts rolled in and the others ended past the hole, a good sign of quick greens this day. I waved and they all waved back.

My walk took me through the rough halfway up the first fairway and parallel to it. The fragrance from the blossoms of the flowers on the linden trees was intoxicating and certainly added to my walking experience. I was hoping the presence of Japanese beetles wouldn't damage them too much. Ralph Harris and Phil Ross were in the group hitting to the green. These men were veterans of the Second World War and were like so many of their generation, quiet and humble about their success and never a word about what they had done for the citizens of the world in Europe. Dr. Stephen Ambrose, the outstanding and prolific writer of history about WWII, spent a year as a Distinguished Visiting Professor here at the UW department of history. Dr. Ambrose was raised in Wisconsin and received a PhD from Wisconsin. These guys sat through one of his courses and had gotten to know him. The 50th anniversary of D-Day brought out the stories of heroism from veterans like them. My father's WWII experiences, the loss of my uncle at 18 in France in the war, and my own experiences in Vietnam forged a friendship with them.



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I was richer for that.

Ralph saw me. When Phil hit his shot, I motioned with my hands around an imaginary club—demonstrating what he'd done wrong. He waved out acknowledgement.

While waiting to cross the fairway and finish my trip to the top of the hill, I leaned against a substantial pin oak. "My gosh," I thought to myself, "I remember planting this tree with Vincent, probably 29 years ago."

Here I was, thirty years as the golf course superintendent, immersed in the middle of a town I had liked, on a course I loved and among players it was a pleasure to work for. Some I counted as friends.

It is one of the most interesting and longest short walks in the world, a walk on the golf course you are responsible for. With my eyes and my mind open, the experience was comparable to experiences of world travel. The changes over time had been huge; they were all improvements, actually. Bluebirds and Baltimore orioles were everywhere that day.

The deep green and healthy grass, the towering hickory and oak, the bright and deep blue Wisconsin sky, and the fresh clean air are all precious, at least to

those among us who notice and appreciate and enjoy them. The golf course is beautiful any time of the day and any season, despite the habit of superintendents to see the warts and corners of neglect. There is an uncompromising sense of order here for me, a pattern that appeals to me. It looks good today in June, and it will look good in January with the snow piled high and white. And in October when the golden and maroon leaves are drifted deep in the rough ground, the beauty is beyond description.

This short walk reminded me of the heavy responsibilities of the past thirty years, which have gone so quickly. But how would it be to not make this walk? We all live in the present but cannot help living in the past, too. And now I think of the future. There will have to be a stopping place for me; nobody can keep going forever. How to stop? When to stop? How to leave off is the real question I have to answer in the not too distant future.

But not today. I have too much to do to have taken even this much time for a short walk to get my mail—a long, short walk in the summer on a golf course in Wisconsin. ♣



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