



Ghostly Images of Golf

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

The guy was a veteran superintendent, husband, and father. He had tons of experience in all three areas, yet found himself at age 45 still having the same fears... and letting the same things haunt him as had plagued him as a young man.

Fear of the dark is something that's never completely conquered. The veteran still got the spooks sometimes...like one night recently when traveling his normal night route checking on some troublesome controllers. He had just passed between some homes next to the carpath and did notice the barking dog. He continued on to his next stop...with the headlights shining on the cluster of Toro controllers. He immediately heard the sound of the barking dog...only this time seemingly much closer. Finishing up quickly...he jumped back into the cab...and thought it strange and a bit unnerving that a dog would follow a truck across the golf course.

His next stop required a walk back fifty feet into the prairie grass, which in September is head high, very thick, and moves in the nighttime breeze. Walking back through the grass...he heard the dog barking again...and not too far away! Got to hit the

right keys now...get this water started...and get back into the truck! Almost instantly, the dog barks again...this time from much closer! That damn dog!! Realizing full well that he had no flashlight, no shovel, no nothing to use against the dog...he became very aware of his vulnerability as he waded back out through the deep grass to the safety of the truck.

His final stop for the evening took him farther out away from the dog...which still didn't stop the veteran from quickly starting up his last quarrelsome controller and retreating back into the truck! A dog really wouldn't stalk and then attack a stranger in the dark, would it? The veteran was not about to find out...

As he got back onto hard pavement and headed for home, the veteran settled down and let his mind wander back to his early days as a night waterman...to that one night when he failed to really keep track of the summertime weather.

The moon was out earlier on that particular evening...but he was too busy squirting water to really notice. Later on...even in the darkness...he did notice the weather start to change. Nothing too serious...could be a false alarm...need to keep grinding through these fairway settings, right?

When the moon disappeared and the nighttime wind began to rise, the rookie knew something was up. But...he had enough experience to know that shutting down prematurely would result in much more work if rain passed by. The quandary was...shut the irrigation system down...or keep moving until the thunderstorm was certain to hit?

That night...the thunderstorm did hit...with a big vengeance. Sometime after midnight...the wind came up in a big way. The neophyte finally realized that he was in trouble...and started disconnecting his 808's as fast as possible.

Suddenly and completely...it was a race against the weather and the night! It was quite a scary feeling for the 19-year old to be out there alone...knowing that fleeing the course in the face of the storm was not an option! His mind and his Cushman raced as he furiously counted the sprinklers yet to disconnect...**only eight more to go!**

The rain and the adrenaline kicked in simultaneously as the air started to crackle with thunder and lightning. As he slid over to the 12th fairway...in one motion...in one series of seconds that stay burned in the human memory for a lifetime...the kid knelt down



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to quickly crank out the sprinkler. The hair on the back of his neck prickled suddenly and sent a huge shiver down his spine.

Instantly the young man braced himself for the impact...as the huge lightning bolt seemed to tear into the earth just out on the invisible western horizon. He realized in an instant that it was much closer than that...the lightning and thunder were only a second apart! He also realized instantly that he had both hands on the brass impact sprinkler...**which would readily conduct electricity, wouldn't it? Better keep moving and get out of here!!**

As happens with summer thunderstorms, lightning seemed to release the torrential rains as the storm hit with full force! The kid still had a half dozen to disconnect, but at this point things were moving so fast...that an army couldn't have stopped him from finishing up! Then...the slippery trip down to the lake to secure the pumphouse...and the last mad dash back across the course to safety! **Don't dump this truckster in a bunker...don't hit a tree...and don't run this thing across a green...they probably won't understand in the morning!!!** Top Cushman speed that night felt like about 100 mph!!!

Finally, the dark outline of the shop loomed ahead as the rain pelted the kid into submission. He felt a strange mix of fear, exhilaration, and accomplishment as he gunned the truckster into the shop and shut off the engine. He stood outlined in the open doorway...watching the rain bounce hard off of the concrete...and felt his neck prickle one more time as the lightning turned night into day.

The kid was still a little pumped up and yelled out into the storm... **"Rain on...you SOB...tonight, I won the battle!"**

Needless to say, it took awhile for the storm to abate and for the kid to calm down and later get some well deserved sleep...

The veteran chuckled as he thought about that evening so long ago. As the old truck ate up the few remaining miles, the veteran let his mind click back to another scary night when he was a younger and more enthusiastic superintendent. He couldn't recall why that particular valve had to be closed that night...but knew that it had to be closed.

He did remember that it had to do with a newly established golf course that was getting too wet.

A big thunderstorm had come up...and the new superintendent knew that the irrigation had to be shut down and that particular valve shut off. He quickly jumped out of bed...checked on wife and little kids...all sleeping soundly...and scooted out to the course. On this night the young super knew that a CarryAll was the vehicle of choice...no weight and no tire marks. He realized when he got out onto the course that lots

more rain had fallen than expected. In fact, the valve in question was under about three feet of water in a drainage area between fairways...so wading out to there was the only option.

On this night the young man did carry a flashlight...which shone upon a metal valve wrench sticking up out of the water! On this night the thunder and lightning show had already begun, but for some idiotic reason the young super felt that wading out into the water to turn off a valve with bare hands on metal was a good idea. Only when cranking down on the valve and having lightning show him the immensity of the water all around him...did he realize that maybe this wasn't such a good idea!! Boom!!! Another lightning/thunder combination did a number on his nerves...and an electric awareness overtook him that...on this night...he was suddenly in the wrong place at the wrong time!

He retreated out of the water cursing himself...and then cursing the Club Car Corporation for making such a slow vehicle!! Needless to say...the young superintendent was a bit wiser as the comfortable lights of the open shop door beckoned through the

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sheets of rain pelting down...

There's a tree on this golf course that scares the veteran's wife every time she sees it at night...and a clubhouse that reminds him of the haunted hotel in *The Shining*. There are small golf course trees that suddenly turn into people...and nearby trains that he just knows are going to jump the tracks, make a 90 degree turn, and plow right through the golf course!

One of his favorite sights is a CSX freight train run along its eternal track just south of the golf course. This rail line runs directly through town...and connects Chicago with the Mississippi River and points beyond. All summer long it's an early morning contest between the sound of the westbound freight as it approaches Morris from the east...and the veteran walking out the door...with the quicker vehicle...but the more round-about route. Since the freight train and I are both heading west...we have a little race to see who will reach the crossing first! I always approach the crossing from the south...looking anxiously for the engine appearing through the trees. I almost always win the race...but a thrill of fear does quicken the heartbeat when the headlight of the engine is too close for comfort!

On a recent October morning, the veteran stood in his shop doorway watching the train by moonlight as it approached the crossing and moved into the long grass along both sides of the track. The train was visible only by its running lights and totally audible as its horn announced its intention to either stay to the tracks...or if contested...would decide to jump the tracks and go where ever it pleased...maybe turning directly north and running right over the veteran who kept beating it to the crossing!!!

The aforementioned tree stands guard over a controller cluster on the east edge of the woods near the 12th green. During the day this tree is totally innocent. But...when making the irrigation rounds at night with me...wife Susan says that it's obvious that there's an entrapped soul in the tree with a face twisted in anguish. I always hesitate to turn my back on this tree...fearing that its long limbs will ensnare me on any given night.

Especially nights in October and November...which seem a bit more eerie than warm May and June nights..

On recent September nights I've been spooking myself badly. Our clubhouse normally has a strong outdoor light that illuminates the entire rear area...which has been off or burned out for the past few weeks. So...as I approach in the pickup...I see a totally dark, spooky looking building. My mind imagines that a crowd of ghosts is going to suddenly start forming on the back porch...a party of ghostly golfers enjoying a few drinks...and strange red lights will start

rising from inside the unoccupied clubhouse. I imagine them bursting forth and moving towards me as I try to activate yet another controller! Once again I need to turn my back on them...which I hesitate to do. I quickly do my thing...and escape in the truck. I am hoping that they won't catch up to me as I bolt down Saratoga Road and start coming in around the rear edges of the cab windows! I don't really feel safe until I see the lights of the neighborhood as I approach the city limits.

Why would a veteran guy of 45 years of age still get spooked by scary things in the night? Why not? We may be older and wiser...but we still possess the same mind that we had as a child or as a young adult. Certain things scared me as a boy...like those damned apples trees in *The Wizard of Oz*... Certain other things never bothered me at all.

We all have our triggers for what sets us off...and October seems to be the month in which these triggers are set off more so than any other month of the year! Hope that you and yours all had a Happy Halloween!!!



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