

Golf Course Management Has Been in His Blood Forever

By Lori Ward Bocher

Marc Davison, your new WGCSA president, was literally born and raised on a golf course. There's barely a time when he wasn't linked to a golf course in one way or another. By now, at the age of 45, he has an impressive resume that demonstrates a wide variety of golf course experience. And through it all, he's managed to maintain an easy-going attitude and a bright smile. Maybe that's because he knows he's doing what he was born to do.

As most of you know, Marc is currently superintendent at the Green Bay Country Club, a fairly new course that Marc helped build. He's been a golf course superintendent ever since he graduated from Iowa State University in 1980. But how did he end up in this business? The answer to that goes way back to before Marc was even born.

"It's been in my blood forever," Marc admits. "My (maternal) grandfather, Fred E. Millies, owned and oper-

ated an 18-hole golf course in Hillside, a suburb of Chicago. When my dad (Phil Davison) was in high school, he worked on the course; that's where he met my mother, Lorraine. After they were married, he worked for the telephone company, Illinois Bell. But he continued to work for my grandfather for a little extra income when he could.

"And then they ended up building our house right next to the clubhouse parking lot," Marc continues. "We had the clubhouse on one side of us and the first tee in our back yard. We were right there in the thick of things. They used to drive the tractors right home to our driveway."

A pesky kid on the course...

At about the same time Marc was born, his grandfather sold off nine holes so that Proviso West High School



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could be built - the school Marc would eventually attend. "So I just remember it being a 9-hole course," he points out. "My uncle, Fred L. Millies, worked for my grandfather. I used to hang around with my uncle and my grandfather and all the guys on the crew. I was a pesky little kid.

"But then the golf course disappeared," Marc continues. "My grandfather sold it for residential and commercial development. He and my uncle bought a farm in Big Bend, near Waukesha, and they built another golf course there, Edgewood Golf Course.

"I was about 8 years old at the time. It was sad to see the golf course disappear. It was kind of my love. I used to spend a lot of hours out there day and night," Marc recalls. "But then I continued to maintain part of the golf course while the rest of it was abandoned and went to weeds. I continued to mow the putting green which was behind our back yard. My friends and I used to play baseball on the putting green. That was our own little park."

That's where Marc first fell in love with golf course maintenance. However, at that time he didn't know he could make a career of it. So when he graduated from high school in 1976, he went to Iowa State University to major in Landscape Architecture. "I thought that, in

order to stay connected to the golf course business and have a decent job, I'd have to work in an office. The closest thing I could think of was Landscape Architecture where I could design landscapes and maybe even golf courses," Marc remembers.

"But after one semester, I decided that wasn't at all what I wanted to do," he continues. "I didn't want to have an office job. I wanted to work outside. So then I switched over to horticulture with a turf emphasis." Marc worked at the Ames Golf and Country Club during the school year and one summer. The other summers he worked for his uncle at Edgewood Golf Course. So when he graduated from Iowa State in 1980, he already had some good experience under his belt.

First full-time job...

His first job out of college was as an assistant superintendent under Rod Johnson at Pine Hills Country Club in Sheboygan. "Rod had started at Pine Hills a month before he hired me, so we were both brand new," Marc recalls. "The golf course was in pretty poor shape. And the equipment was in terrible shape. I'd say 40 percent of the sprinklers did not work and 50 percent of the equipment did not work. So Rod and I were presented with this monumental task."

Because of this, Marc learned a lot in his four years at Pine Hills. "That's where I learned how to grind reels. I did all of the grinding for a few years," he says. "I learned how to paint equipment and rebuild engines. I acquired a great wealth of mechanical aptitude working there before we finally hired a mechanic. It was real beneficial to my career."

Marc also worked with an automatic irrigation system for the first time while at Pine Hills. And he applied all fertilizer and pesticides for the first time in his career. When Marc left Pine Hills in 1985 to become superintendent at Camelot Country Club in Lomira, he took a lot of what he learned with him. And he needed it. "Camelot was a bankrupt golf course at the time, so everything was in pretty poor condition," Marc explains. "In fact, there was no equipment at the course; it had all been sold at a sheriff's auction."

The new owner of the course was Red Roskopf, a salesman for Wisconsin Turf. "I was fortunate to have Red there," Marc says. "He was able to find some equipment at a reasonable price. We started out small, just the bare necessities. Being the superintendent gave me an opportunity to try some things on my own. I contoured the fairways and implemented my first maintenance schemes."

To Blackwolf Run...

But when a new job popped up a year later, Marc "regressed" back to an assistant superintendent. "However, I looked at it as a huge opportunity to broaden my experiences because the course was still under con-

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struction. And it wasn't just any course. It was a Pete Dye course being built by the Kohler Company, so everything was massive and monumental," Marc says. That was in 1986 and the course being built was the first 18 holes at Blackwolf Run in Kohler, then called River Run.

Marc worked as an assistant under Don Clemans for one year. Then when Don moved to Oregon, Marc was named superintendent, a job he held for the next six years. "I was real fortunate to get promoted to the superintendent position," Marc says. "I was in the right place at the right time. And Pete Dye put in a good word for me."

Working at the Kohler course was a whole new experience for Marc. For the seven years he worked there, a course was under construction five of those years. The first 18 holes opened in 1988. Construction on a third nine began in 1987 and opened in 1989. And construction of the final nine holes began in 1988 and opened in 1990.

"We used to work 80-hour weeks those first couple of years," Marc recalls. "The conditions were crummy - a lot of mud and dust. But it was interesting to see it all come together - the irrigation system, the cart paths, the

greens and tees, the ponds, the buildings and bridges. Getting all the grass established was a real big job. I have great memories of the place. It still feels like home."

For his last two years there, Marc and his crew were finally just working maintenance - no more construction. The 36 holes are divided into two separate courses, the River Course and Meadow Valleys Course. Each course had a crew of about 25 in season.

Working at Blackwolf Run changed the way Marc looks at golf course management and life in general. "The biggest challenge was always trying to keep everybody happy, mainly Mr. Kohler," Marc says. "He's a very particular gentleman. He wants everything the best. Although it was awkward and difficult at times, it was a great experience. I learned what it means to make things the best. It was challenging. It was nerve wracking. But it was also very rewarding.

"I still carry with me a lot of the values that I learned there," Marc continues. "Nothing is impossible. Everything should be first class all the time, no excuses. If you can't do it, bring it to our attention and we'll figure out a way to make it right.

"It's just a totally different way of looking a golf course

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maintenance and life in general," he adds. "I've developed a more critical eye about everything since working there. It's not always a good thing. I can see things that just don't look right, or I think about how things would be so much better if they were done differently, or I wonder why other people don't see this or that. That's how we had to look at things all day long or else we'd get called on it. Somebody would see it. It was challenging and rewarding."

New job, more construction...

Marc left Blackwolf Run in 1993 to become superintendent at the Green Bay Country Club, a brand new club with a brand new golf course that was under construction at the time. Ten years later, he's still there - his longest tenure at a course.

"It was time to get back to a more normal, lower-key operation and a slower pace," Marc recalls. "The fact that the course was still under construction was inviting to me. And my construction background definitely was a big plus for me when being considered. I just saw a lot of potential for this job, and it has turned out that way. I've got a good employer and a real good golf course with a good layout and maintenance program."

Since it was a new club, the membership is younger compared to most clubs. The average age is 48.8 years.

"A lot of the members had never been country club members before," Marc points out. "It's a real active membership with a lot of young families."

What are Marc's goals in regards to golf course maintenance? "I try to uphold the highest standards," he answers. "We try to work at or below our operating budget every year. We try to stay out of the golfer's way - get all the work done in front of play. I strive for tournament conditions every day. Just the best possible."

"I remember the first few years we were dragging hoses and setting up roller base sprinklers and hand watering all over because we wanted everything to be green," he continues. "Over the years we've added hundreds of irrigation heads. Now we have the whole place pretty well watered, which is a big accomplishment. Even during drought periods we're able to keep everything pretty green." Marc works with a staff of 18-20 during the summer months.

At this time, there are no Green Bay Packers on the membership list. However, the Packer organization does have a corporate membership at the Green Bay Country Club. "Brett Favre, Chris Jackie and Mark Chumura were members here for a couple of years," Marc recalls. "Brett is a private guy. I don't think he cared for the amount of play that we have. He would have preferred being able to

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jump on the first tee any time he wanted, and that wasn't always possible. It was awkward sometimes. But he played here quite a bit and he'd bring other players out here often, which was exciting."

WGCSA focus...

Marc joined the WGCSA in 1981 when he was at Pine Hills. But he really didn't become too active until about 10 years ago when he started at Green Bay Country Club. "I just didn't have the time prior to that," he admits. He served as vice president the past two years, and in November of 2003 he began his duties as president.

"We have our 75th anniversary coming up in 2005. That's going to be a main focus for us in the next two years," Marc says. "We just formed a committee. We're thinking about putting together a book on the history of the organization."

Marc would like to see more educational offerings at the monthly meetings. "Everyone seems to be hungry for education," he says. "There are plenty of people across the country that do that. I'd like to bring some of them to our organization. Right now we offer an educational component at three of our monthly meetings. I'd like to expand on that some."

What topics are important to superintendents? "Keeping up on environmental issues," Marc answers. "Environment is a huge focus and always should be. There are issues popping up all the time that we need to address versus hide from."

"Pesticide usage is another one. It's always changing," he continues. "New materials come on the market and we lose materials that we've been using for years. So we need to keep current on that. Same with fertilizers; there are always new products and different strategies for implementing fertilization. Same with irrigation and mowing."

Marc also sees an interest in topics dealing with people and management - labor management, overall management, time management, overtime management, communications with different departments at a club such as the food and beverage manager and the golf pro. "There's a lot of communication that needs to happen for everything to click just right," he adds.

The new PDI (Professional Development Initiative) from the GCSAA has Marc's vote of approval. "It gets the superintendent out of his office or away from his golf course," he says. Briefly, the PDI requires superintendents to earn both educational points and service points in order to maintain their Class A status.

"There's some negative feedback regarding the PDI, people saying we're forced to do all of this and that it will be expensive," Marc points out. "But there's a whole array of things that you can do to maintain Class A status. You don't have to travel to the national conference to get your educational points. You can get

them right here in the state. And you can get service points by working with anything in your local community. It's just a way to make sure that superintendents are well rounded, out in the world, and accountable."

In addition to WGCSA, Marc is also a member of the Wisconsin Turf Association, the Northern Great Lakes Golf Course Superintendents Association, and the GCSAA.

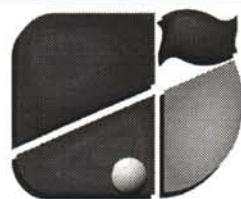
Family man...

When he's not working, Marc devotes a lot of time to his family and church. He and Laurie were married while he was at Pine Hills, and they have five children now. "The two oldest are girls and the rest are boys," he points out. "Three are in high school and two are in grade school. My wife has home schooled all of our kids until they reach the 9th grade. Then they go to the Lutheran high school here in town." Laurie was a special education teacher before she started raising and home schooling their children.

At church, Marc has been involved on many levels - trustee, school board member, youth group leader, usher, and more. "And I'm involved with youth hockey in our town," he adds. "My three boys are in hockey. I've coached in the past, but now I'm just helping out."

What else makes Marc Davison tick? "Have I told you about my ice rink yet?" he enthusiastically offers. "Every winter I make an ice rink for my boys. I flood a large area in our yard and usually end up killing a lot of grass. One year I added lights. One year I added music. One year I added boards. So we're pretty popular in our neighborhood for the kids that like to ice skate."

For someone who grew up with a putting green/baseball field in his back yard, it only seems fitting that Marc would provide an ice rink for his kids. Maybe one of them will grow up to be an ice rink superintendent or become the fourth generation of Millies/Davisons to work on a golf course. ♡



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