



More of a Tropical Atmosphere

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

I have to chuckle when I consider the phrase **'more of a tropical atmosphere'**. This phrase came up in recent management conversation concerning what to do with our huge, concrete, uninviting, underutilized back porch here at beautiful NCCC. The idea is to make our porch more inviting by making it...more tropical. Today being February 5th...puts me totally in favor of anything 'more tropical.'

I laugh because today it's about 20 degrees Fahrenheit outside and we're expecting another shot of snow and cold as we tough out another upper mid-western U.S. winter. More tropical, my butt!

Right about now I'd just love a huge shot of 'more tropical'...complete with heat, humidity, sweat, sunshine, verdant landscape, a nice cocktail...and nicely tanned skin instead of this dry, itchy, pasty white exoskeleton that I'm acquiring as I get older...bring on the idea of 'more tropical' right away!

Diane Lane in *Under the Tuscan Sun*...now that's more tropical, although Italy is technically not in the Tropics. Any guy reading this with Diane Lane under the Tuscan sun would be definitely be feeling 'more tropical,' yes??

Let's all think about 'more of a tropical atmosphere' by planning a totally cool, totally unaffordable annual Caribbean or Mexican vacation...starting with the winter after our youngest child has departed for college!

Winter has persisted long enough...and haven't we all had enough of the cold, the snow shoveling, the basketball games, and indoor house time? I think that I'm the resident expert on reality TV...simply because we watch all of that crap due to winter boredom...which leads to a real lack of tropical attitude and atmosphere.

I, at this point, will settle on the simple goal of opening this golf course by mid-March...getting busier...getting outside...and getting 'more tropical' by enjoying the upcoming springtime weather and helping NCCC become hotter and 'more tropical'.

The upcoming year promises to be a good one here...with lots of changes and improvements. We have survived four years of golf professionals who didn't have a very strong feeling for customer service and frankly didn't have any business trying to interact with the golfing public on an ongoing basis.

I have a very strong feeling that this public golf course now has to start over...as concerns our golf program and our relationship with our patrons. We

have wavered between being a strong blend of annual members/public play/outings and more lately...deemphasizing annual members and stressing discounted public play blended with golf outings.

Golfer customer service had declined over those four years also...resulting in us being perceived as an average, middle of the road public course. Golfer customer service used to be one of our mainstays...but in the quest for more rounds we let slide our attitude and our actions...

The fault, though, does not entirely lie with those departed golf professionals. The breakdown in the relationship between managers and ownership is a two-way street...which starts with hiring the right person to be your golf professional.

As an aside, it does seem to be so easy...perhaps too easy...certainly too convenient... to throw blame at that departed manager. That's right...blame that 'former' guy for all of the ills of Wherever C.C. He was the root source of everything negative about this place...and now that we got rid of him...we'll all sail along and not admit to ourselves that we should all probably be sharing the blame! Sound familiar???

Any golf course or club that has been through that painful learning process knows all about this type of thing. I am entering upon my eleventh season here at NCCC...and am now starting to work with golf professional #5. It is imperative for any golf facility to have sustained high quality management...which sounds very obvious... but is oftentimes elusive.

We have not had sustained high quality management here over the last few years...and have stagnated as a result. It was very frustrating to be a part of a dysfunctional management team...with too limited a voice as to instituting change.

Any business...any golf course or club...needs a management team that interacts beautifully and seamlessly. If you can attain this, your golf course will click...and you will be fostering more of a hot, tropical atmosphere!

Although not quite tropical...the upcoming springtime weather in our temperate latitudes symbolizes a new start...a new season...and a new beginning...for the management of both the golf program and the golf course proper. Everybody flocks outside...comes rapidly out of hibernation...and we all discover anew that the neighbors and almost all of the golfers have indeed also survived the winter.

Sadly...the past few winters have brought some bad times upon some of our senior members who have either contracted some type of terminal illness or passed away suddenly. It is tough to understand how vibrant, active, friendly 70 year old men can suddenly be overwhelmed by something fatal and be taken from their wives or golfing buddies...

Turning to other pertinent matters, February is also the month in which review of all matters of the NGCOA(National Golf Course Owners Association) and their recently completed 'Solutions Summit' take center stage for us managerial types.

This golf course, you see, is owned by a couple who are very enthusiastic members of NGCOA. They attend the national conference every year in Orlando...and send us the audiotapes/proceedings...which I am listening to as I compose this essay. These audiotapes contain lots of wonderful ideas on such things as customer service, pricing, profitability...and on being a golf course that provides a great 'golfing experience'... which leads to better leeway on pricing and profitability...instead of being simply a public course that offers 'OK' customer service...which leads to being viewed as a golf commodity in which price/greens fee is all important.

Cultivate 'more of a tropical atmosphere'...and your golf course will do better financially...which gives the rock steady superintendent more \$\$\$ to work with out on the golf course!!

One of the ideas threading its way throughout these tapes is that of challenging yourself, your ownership, your management and staff to reevaluate everything that you do...including your operations of and improvements to your golf course. If you buy into that concept, keep an open mind, and implement these ideas...you'll then give your golf course 'more of a tropical atmosphere'.

Hope springs eternal as spring approaches...so my sincere hope is that this little corner of Illinois can generate 'more of a tropical atmosphere' in 2004. Our golf course will be beautiful...I can guarantee that. Your golf course will be beautiful...you can guarantee that.

Our mission here for 2004 is to foster a feeling that our members and patrons have not had in abundance recently. We are going to make them feel welcome and appreciated each and every time they golf with us! We are not going to rely on golf discounting nearly as much...as we have seen what a dead end road that can be...We are going to cultivate relationships with our customers that will hopefully make them feel very happy and satisfied in deciding to patronize us.

Customer service and satisfaction is the mission, primarily, of our inside staff. This year...in particular...our golf staff is going to have a chance to really respond and show our clientele what Nettle Creek is

all about...all under the direction of a PGA golf professional who really understands customer service. Young KC Hall understands customer service...and will bring that attitude to our uninitiated staff and patrons alike.

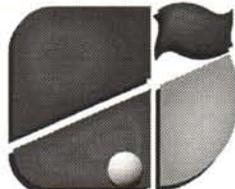
In fact, whenever fellow superintendents question the need for a highly qualified golf professional...two thoughts immediately come to mind. The first thought is that some superintendents...really don't get it...and really don't understand...that a beautifully conditioned golf course of and by itself will not guarantee success. You need somebody that is going to make sure that the golf calendar is filled and that people are happy. It is a tough job and not easily accomplished. Any golf veteran will freely admit that it takes both inside and outside forces to make a golf facility click so sweetly that success is all but guaranteed....

The second thought is that any superintendent that questions or belittles the value of the golf professional is guilty of precisely the same sort of short-sighted thinking, lack of self confidence, and stupidity that used to be heaped upon superintendents...do we forget those days so easily?

I can barely tolerate either a golf professional, a superintendent, or for that matter...an athlete...or any other supposed professional that exhibits such boorish behavior...professionalism means showing respect for what others do for a living...period.

So, do whatever you can to contribute...realign your thinking if necessary...as I did many years ago. Have the self-confidence to admit that others are just as important to collective success as you are...

Make sure that your golf course generates some heat and some sweetness. Make sure that the rest of your facility is just as beautiful as your course...that it generates some heat... and develops itself to where you all want it to be...a tropical place with more of a tropical atmosphere. ♣



GILL MILLER INC.
Golf Course Architects

122 North 2nd Street • River Falls, WI 54022
715-425-9511 • e-mail: info@gillmiller.com
visit our website www.gillmiller.com

Design • Renovation
Master Planning • Practice Centers

Member: American Society of Golf Course Architects