



Golf Course Santa

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

Most of Wisconsin's golf course superintendents are happy to see the golf season come to an end. Winter isn't dreaded by us; rather, we welcome it and the respite it brings to our lives.

That is especially true for longtime WGCSA member Lars Helgeson. "Those of us who trace our ancestors to northern Europe have cold weather and snow in our genes. We like few things more than a snowy, windy mid-winter blizzard, and suffer greatly in the mid-summer heat and humidity."

Lars is a fifth generation Norwegian. His great great grandparents immigrated into Wisconsin from near the Romsdahl Fjord in western Norway. The family has been successful in west central Wisconsin since the mid- to late 1800s, building a large and successful dairying operation. Descendants own thousands of acres today, but Lars took his college training in soil

science a different direction - golf course management. He has been the superintendent at the Old Norway Golf Club near Trondheim, Wisconsin for 35 years. Few are held in higher regard and esteem than this bright, quiet and kind man.

Like many with Norwegian blood coursing through their veins, Lars started to turn gray when he was twenty, and by the age of forty he was nearly white headed. "Probably better than the alternative," he winked as he looked at me at while back.

And many times Lars has noted that there aren't many tall and skinny Norwegians, at least in Wisconsin. "We're stout," Lars would say with a smile as he helped himself to another serving of Scandinavian meatballs and gravy, and a double helping of lefse to enjoy with his strong black coffee.

When cooler temperatures of autumn arrived, Lars

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quit shaving. By Christmas time he had a beautiful snow white beard. It matched his personality perfectly.

A few years ago - five or six, I'd guess - the club president at Old Norway GC very carefully and politely asked Lars if he would consider playing Santa Claus at the club's Christmas party for kids. Lars thought about it for a day or two and contemplated the fact that he was considered a candidate because he was more round than chiseled. Rather than being insulted, the idea really grew on him. He loved Christmas, he loved the winter weather, and he loved kids. "Actually," he recalled to us later, "the notion of playing Santa really appealed to me."

He called the club president and responded with a "Ho! Ho! Ho!"

Lars was hooked by that first Christmas experience as Santa at the club. He loved playing the part, and the kids were wild about him. When he opened his pay envelope there was a nice check and a note of thanks individually signed by all the board members and officers of the club. He put it in the offering plate of the Trondheim Lutheran Church.

The next summer he got his daughter, who lived in town with her family, to do a web search for - what

else? - Santa Claus schools. They were all surprised at how many there were. Lars contacted one in Minnesota, found the cost to be reasonable, and enrolled for the three-day session in late September.

He kept it quiet because he didn't know how some people would react. He knew if Bogey Calhoun found out too soon, there would be suffering a plenty.

When school started in that third week of September, Lars could hardly contain himself; he was so excited. He drove over early in the day and from Trondheim it was only a six-hour trip.

"I wouldn't say that the classes were exactly rigorous," Lars told us, "but it was clear there was more to being a good Santa Claus than you'd ever think there could be."

"We studied the history of Santa Claus and how he evolved from legends and stories and cultures. This was a fascinating part of the education," Lars explained.

"The basics of being Santa were, from a practical point of view, the most helpful," Lars said. You are taught how to make the visit from Santa memorable and positive. A lot of time was spent on how to arrive and how to welcome children. Since I am doing this for kids, this part of the training was really important."

Bogey Calhoun, Tom Morris, Steady Eddie Middleton,





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Scotty Fennimore and I were with Lars while he was telling us about his Santa college experience. Calhoun finally burst out with laughter, finding it unbelievable that Lars was so serious about this role of Santa he played.

Lars went on. "We learned about how to deal with unruly kids and rude parents. There are ways to answer difficult questions from kids, and the instruction taught us how to deal with brats who don't believe in Santa.

"You need to develop your own image of Santa so parents and kids and others think the best of you.

"We developed a check list of supplies and equipment needed for each appearance. Grooming details were carefully and extensively taught. And we all received a copy of the extensive textbook, **BEHIND THE RED SUIT - A How-To Book on Santa Claus.**

"On noon of the third day, those of us who successfully completed the classes and passed the exam received a diploma - BSC - Bachelor of Santa Claus."

Lars is on his way to becoming a legend, at least in the WGCSA and in western Wisconsin. For a month or so, he's very busy as Santa Claus. He always accepts payment for the appearances he makes, and every penny goes to the WGCSA Wee One Foundation, a fund that offers some financial support to superintendents in times of need.

He has accepted invitations from organizations (like the Old Norway GC), churches (Not just the Lutherans,

either!), and even from individual families. He has traveled to all of the hospitals in the tri-county area. Schools have figured out ways to have him attend, and service clubs put a lot of demand on his time at Christmas. Lars has even fooled his own grandchildren.

Lars enlists help on occasion, and his superintendent friends have answered the call when possible. Most memorable was the appearance of Santa when Bogey Calhoun slipped a whoopee cushion on Lars' Santa throne. The gasps and giggles from the waiting crowd of kids were as obvious as the brrrrp! from the whoopee cushion. Lars wised up and didn't ask Bogey along again unless he was accompanied by Tom Morris.

There have been incidents of sick kids on his lap, endless jerking on his real white beard by doubters, and bossy parents.

"That's all part of the Santa territory," Lars always says with a deep laugh.

Although there are few among us who don't love the Christmas season and all that it means, there may be no one who anticipates it as much as Lars Helgeson. In many ways, he is a perfect example of the real meaning of Christmas.

Happy holidays from Lars and the members of the *Grass Roots* staff. ♣



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