



A Good Winter & A Better Spring

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

A good winter in north central Illinois includes many subtle positive elements that...when taken together permit us all to survive the three toughest months of the calendar year. It is a challenge to keep a positive attitude during the dreary months of December, January, and February. Sometimes it is too easy to let yourself slide into non-motivation, and then total boredom.

This winter, though, has been a little bit different for me and for my family. As a guy who is getting older and a little bit wiser, it becomes easier to reflect on the general good fortune of our family...especially when others that we deal with daily have much tougher lives...and a very uncertain future.

In addition to being involved with this golf course, my wife Susan and I own rental property. We deal with five different families on a constant basis. All of those current tenants and almost all past tenants are in their rental situations because of credit and debt problems. These are all good people who simply do not manage money very well.

In fact, all of our current tenants have freely admitted to us that they are renting housing because of bankruptcy situations. Within these five families there is also a subset of further money problems. Some tenants have good monthly income and pay their rent promptly. Another family has four young kids, multiple car problems, employment issues...but still manages to pay rent on time each month.

Still another family has had serious trouble the past two winters finding work. No work, no money, no rent for the landlord. And, although we fret and worry about past due rent, we also fret and worry about their ultimate welfare. What are the future prospects for a guy that looks like a deserter from the Union army circa 1864...with shoulder length greasy hair, emaciated frame, who smokes like a chimney, and in all likelihood drinks way too much booze? Not real good, I speculate. This description is of one of our problem tenants.

But so far, we cannot bring ourselves to evict these people, especially during the winter months. We have a mutual understanding with this couple that come spring, other living arrangements may be necessary.

And although we fret and worry about rental cash flow, rising property taxes, rent increases, and rental property upgrades...we also fret and worry about the people themselves. What kind of future do they have ahead of them?

Grundy County is only one county away from Cook County/Chicago...and is consequently growing and

expanding in certain sectors of the economy. Real estate/housing is booming...as is the construction of roads, bridges, sewer, water, et al needed to service these instant neighborhoods.

The other side of this boom is that which happens every winter. Lots of people are laid off until March or April, and there is a definite lack of quality jobs for a large chunk of the working population.

I remember the Clinton gang and Congress touting the benefits of NAFTA back about 10-12 years ago. Hey, let's give our American companies every possible reason to relocate down to Mexico and leave lots of American workers high and dry...with a great future at McDonalds. Manufacturing jobs move out or close down...are replaced with service sector jobs...and people scramble to update their job skills and can then hopefully pay their rent.



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Also this winter, lots of uncertainty for our public schools. The bad habits of overspending and deficit financing by local school districts over the past ten years are now colliding with the closing of a major local power plant. The resulting lower valuation of that property results in millions less being paid in taxes, which is causing a major crisis for the school districts and our library district. Huge school budget cuts...i.e....teacher layoffs...are causing lots of anxiety for many people locally.

So, compared to all of those problems in the lives of people that are right here in our community...we in our family feel very blessed and fortunate this winter.

I will admit to the fact of wondering about my future in golf. The owner of this golf facility will be 80 years old this May...and has expressed his desire to market this golf property within a few years. How will a late forties, veteran superintendent fit into a new ownership scheme? Honestly, I know that I'd be the first one dismissed due to my salary level. Should I worry about that? Maybe. Am I worried about that? Overall, not very worried at all. I expect some life altering changes here within 2-3 years, and am mightily trying to be prepared for change.

There are many future possibilities out there...and many of them do not include a future here at little old Nettle Creek. To have optimism for the future depends on having an optimistic, positive state of mind on pretty much a daily basis.

April and May are just around the corner. Winter has been survived yet again...with very little discomfort. Every night this winter we snuggled up with abundant food, abundant central heat, warm interior lighting, and later a nice hot shower and then bedtime. Not too tough of an existence, is it?

We cannot imagine how tough living conditions were for our ancestors. Son Ryan gave me a very good biography of John Adams, our second President, for Christmas. After reading about our founding fathers and colonial America, I gained a further appreciation of being an American. Our more immediate ancestors who settled Wisconsin and Illinois in the 19th & 20th century had to be tough, or not survive.

My mind recollects the family stories of the generations of our family that came to Green County after the Civil War. I think about my grandfather, father, and uncles growing up on a dairy farm outside of Juda, Wisconsin in the Depression and WWII years...and of families trying to survive in urban Chicago during that same period of time.

A few years ago, I devoured *Band of Brothers* on HBO. On many cold winter nights since then, I've thought about those WWII Army vets who fought at Bastogne in the Battle of the Bulge. These guys spent night after freezing night outside in foxholes, trying to survive the weather and the combat. How much mental toughness they had! I tried a few times to deliberately force myself to stay out-

side on December nights and imagine myself in their situation. Every time I scooted for the door...after about five minutes...I said a little 'thank you' and vowed to appreciate my life even more.

All in all, it has been a good winter. This mid-February writer can walk right outside my office door and breathe in lots of frigid country air, and strongly feel the warmth of the afternoon sunshine. If I decide to hang around here long enough this Friday afternoon, I can still expect to see the sun hang around with me. I may decide to jump in the truck or possibly go take a walk on the course...which permits an easy inspection of the very abundant signs of spring.

As I drive along these country roads heading for home, I think about the good winter just past and the better spring ahead. I know that I'm very grateful for not having to worry about ice on this golf course this winter. In fact, I would welcome ice...sort of a natural herbicide for the *Poa* that is starting to infest us after ten years. My winter life is really easy for various reasons.

I think that we are permitted to really enjoy life because of the dues paid by past generations.

I think that is our duty is to help others...our children, our friends, and our fellow citizens...to gain a good life.

In all cases, however, people must be in the habit of working to help themselves before they go asking for assistance.

I think that as we age...we become more philosophical...and understand our purpose.

I think that it's easy to put these thoughts down on paper today...the afternoon is beautiful and the weekend is upcoming.

I think that I'd better quit with the philosophy and turn into the driveway of this somewhat familiar looking residence.

I think that the address here is 111 Sherwood Place. I think that I'll go in and harass my wife and kids. They expect that from me. I think that I'm home. ♡



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