



Assorted Short Essays of Golf

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

The following short essays are based on the truth...true short essays of golf and golf management as seen through the eyes of one observer who happens to be very close to the scene.

These essays are comments on that which did actually happen during the very intense golf season of '05...a season in which we all saw severe drought, severe financial pressure, and severe employee/staff/management meltdown.

Not to worry...everybody is fine as of this writing...and still working here at Corn Country CC. These are all normal happenings at any golf facility...with the problem being that if the pressure and meltdown occurs too frequently...people tend to leave and look for less seasonally stressful means of supporting themselves and their loved ones.

The Fight for F&B Sanity. It's as if there are three or four separate orbital worlds spinning away like so many merry-go-rounds here at CCCC.

The F&B orbit is always moving at a faster rate than any of the other orbits...and tends to generate a bit of

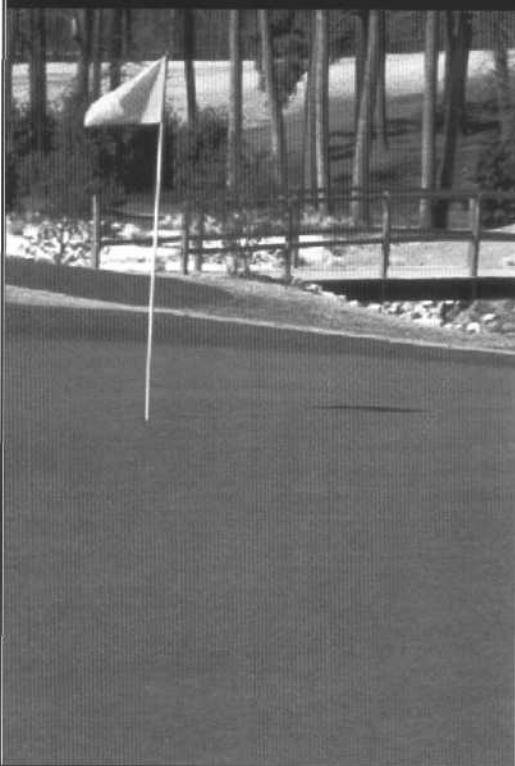
insanity that builds as the weeks fly by. It is a much more intense orbit...with seemingly much more stress and pressure. The pressure is a result of having to deal with the public golfer on a constant basis in a retail situation. The purchasing of food and drink that is to be consumed into the body seems to generate interaction that is much more personal in nature...and results in pressure and stress. Anybody involved at a private club can simply insert the word *member* for the phrase *public golfer* in this paragraph to understand the concept...

The F&B orbit is also almost totally female in character...so when things go slightly out of orbit there are tears, anger, and the cold shoulder, and a sense of it all being a sisterhood thing in which males are good only for errands, assistance, and repairs.

Also, male advice from a fellow manager is usually not appreciated. The only male advice that is tolerated by the F&B females...out of necessity...is that of the elderly male who happens to own the golf course.

Interestingly, it is that elderly male advice, also known as micromanagement, that oftentimes gener-

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ates the tears, the anger, and the cold shoulder to the rest of us who are simply trying to co-exist with those in the F&B orbit.

August and September have developed into big outing months for us here at Corn Country CC. As of this writing at the end of August, the insanity is really starting to build up. Summer female college help has left our employ...leaving a skeleton crew of F&B veterans to finish off the season. With a full six weeks left of intense outings, there is a strong sense of enduring the daily load...of getting through the next outing...and of finishing the season through until Thanksgiving.

The question then becomes... what about next year? Will everybody be willing to gear up again in '06? Our F&B manager is unquestionably great in all facets of her position...and is finishing her third season here. It is not a matter of wanting her to continue here...it's a matter of her keeping sane and wanting to continue here.

The Boys in the Shop. As opposed to the sisterhood thing next door...the boys in the pro shop have their own little brotherhood with an orbit that moves in fits and starts.

Their orbit sometimes operates very smoothly...and sometimes almost grinds to a halt. Stepping onto their merry-go-round is much easier. When I walk into the golf shop...I can usually find the person or answer that I seek...but sometimes not.

Our golf pro is 24 years old...and is enduring his second season at the helm of the golf operation. He now understands completely that his position requires a huge time commitment and much personal sacrifice. He has to worry about outings, public play, membership issues, expense control, merchandise sales, and staffing.

Needless to say...his lack of experience creates stress for himself. He has trouble delegating to those below him...which is so typical of a young manager. He is also very sensitive to criticism...which has led to some further problems.

Earlier this summer it looked certain that he was going to jump off of the public golf merry-go-round and get out of the golf business...during the golf season. After checking into the alternative employment field of insurance and financial products...which always sounds good...but rarely is...he decided to stick it out for the remainder of the '05 season. Will he return next year...and be better able to withstand the rigors of his position?

Raise your hand here while reading this if you can identify with the above paragraphs...aren't golf facilities everywhere just filled with these soap operas? The interesting part of coming to work is not the golf course or the golfers...it's the human interest side of things...it's the employees!

Our assistant pro is also 24 years old...and also a grad of the Ferris State golf management program. A month ago this young man was totally sure of his own depar-

ture from their brotherhood. If his mentor were to depart...so definitely would he also. Myrtle Beach was beckoning...as do all of the Sun Belt golf meccas...singing their song of greener pastures for the young golf bucks who aren't satisfied working seasonally at Upper Midwestern golf facilities.

So, for a while there during the summer...it looked like both of these young, fairly able golf professionals were to be leaving us...*in the middle of the golf season!!*

It was clear to us older managers that quite a bit of immaturity was showing itself in these two self-centered young men...as was the fact imparted to them collectively by us that finishing the season was mandatory for us, for them, and for their professional futures!

The situation has cooled off appreciably since then...and both guys will finish the season and probably return for next year. It's somewhat a marriage of convenience between an elderly owner who doesn't want to start up yet again with new golf professionals...and young guys who now seem to realize that 3-4 years service at a golf course looks much better on a resume than 1.5 years...

The Drought of Summer'05. Looking out over a beautiful, green golf course in early September makes it difficult to even remember how bad conditions were in

northern Illinois for 2/3 of the summer of 2005.

By now, the prairie grasses that we have all across this golf course are five feet tall, changing color nicely as the seed heads mature, and provide excellent beauty and backdrop for many areas of this goat ranch.

By now, almost all drought damaged areas have recovered or are recovering nicely. Bentgrass fairways that looked very stressed now look beautiful. Mother Nature has decided to be kind to us...and is blessing us with warm, sunny days and crisp, cool nights.

The drought that we experienced...and the severe damage to the corn and soybean crop...pales into insignificance compared to all of the problems with Hurricane Katrina.

The drought was insignificant also when compared to the Wisconsin August tornados. So, what the drought really boiled down to was simply 60-90 days of tough weather, long days, and additional irrigation repair expense. Big deal. We have all been through tough summers...which, like this one, are usually finished off by a late summer break in the weather...and an autumn that soon lets us forget the difficult days and the heat of summer.

The Fight for Rounds & Revenue. For the second year running...our little corner of the golf world is expe-

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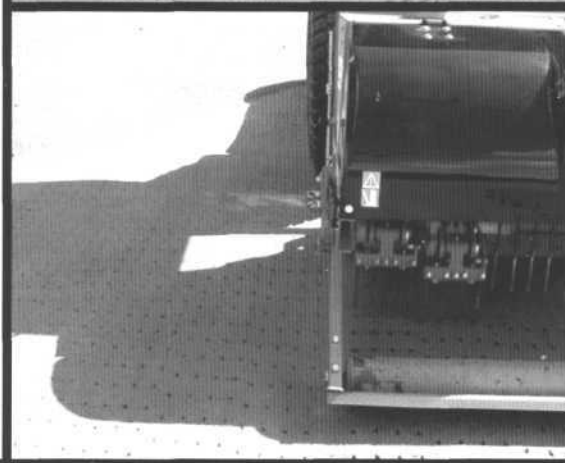
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riencing stagnation in rounds and revenue. We managed only 24,500 rounds in 2004...and if we have an exceptional fall 2005...we might equal or slightly surpass that mediocre level of play. What exactly is happening here? Is Corn Country CC alone in its fight to somewhat achieve our budgeted revenue numbers? Or, is it a case by case situation in which some golf courses, whether public or private, are doing well and others fighting it out? We are located only 1.5 hours outside of downtown Chicago and there are some seven million people in ChicagoLand...yet we struggle. We are directly in the path of major population, residential, and commercial growth.

There is one private club here and one public facility, namely CCCC. Neither club is doing well financially...but both are managing to survive. The small town, private country club is very typical...short of members...money very tight...staff very dedicated...everybody hoping for better days and a full membership.

We, likewise, are experiencing much the same thing. Every week...every month...we are open for the business of public golf. We operate an excellent public golf facility in all areas...but yet, do not bring in the revenue \$\$\$ that we need to hit budget...which, needless to say... affects our cash flow severely.

Blackberry Oaks Golf Course is located only 35 minutes NE of us towards the Chicago suburbs. The growth wave has hit Yorkville full force...wherein new residential developments are literally all over the Yorkville and Oswego areas. This translates into lots of new golfers for Blackberry...so much so that they are generating about \$200,000 in golf revenue per month this summer. That doesn't include any F&B revenue...as they lease that out and net another \$6,000 monthly from their lessee. That is what public golf should be all about.

We...on the other hand...are working hard to produce \$120,000-\$140,000 in golf revenue each month. Our golf courses are very comparable...as are our owners and staff. Blackberry does have a really experienced general manager...who has been there since the course opened in 1994. He knows the golf business really well...and has developed their business, especially over the last couple of years, to a very high level.

So, the combination of the population factor and an experienced golf business manager has led to at least one golf course to a very high level of success.

In view of all of the struggles of so many golf courses...new and old...it's nice to know that financial success in golf is possible. It is an elusive formula...and requires the coming together of many factors. Unfortunately, many courses have never found it and never will find it.

Others, such as ours and maybe yours, will continue the annual fight...and strive to meet the annual budget. Our future is certain. We will continue on...and hope that we can better assemble that elusive formula for financial success in public golf.

One could say that, through it all, 2005 has been a very interesting...yet normal... golf season. ♣

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