



The End of the Line

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

After five seasons as part of a course ownership group...followed by eight seasons of family ownership...my father's younger brother has had enough. After numerous attempts at finding the elusive golden formula that might lead to successful course ownership...he realizes that the time has come for him to retire from the golf course business. His thinking is...enough of the worry, enough of the additional capital contributions, and enough with the negative cash flow. And his thinking is totally correct.

So, these course owners have

decided to hang it up. We were informed officially in mid-July 2006 that this golf course is 'on the market'...and for sale.

Bill and Rosemary, age 80 and 76, respectively, have decided that it is about time to settle their affairs and quit worrying about this under-performing public golf facility. This guy has been buying and selling property all of his adult life...and usually knows when to 'get in' and when to 'get out'. He has decided that the time is right for them to 'get out' by selling this place and try to get their money back out of it! This fine older

couple, so much a part of this golf course for 13 years...has begun the search for buyers...and will try to recover their initial investment. Quite a challenge to find a qualified buyer these days...and quite a daunting task to sell in this over-populated golf course market!

Very sobering is the fact that most courses these days sell for less than their original purchase price. In fact, it is rather uncommon in these 'post boom years' to read about a course being sold for more than the original purchase price.

Very sobering, also, to realize

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that there are many possible scenarios in which my services...or those of many of our current employee corps...would not be needed by new owners. It is an almost everyday experience to read about takeovers, mergers, sales, and layoffs in corporate America. It happens frequently in our golf world also. I totally expect that it may happen here. We are all, myself included, headed for some major changes here at NCCC in the next 12-16 months.

What a change from the golden days of course ownership of 15-20 years ago! In checking out the old photographs from those days...it is easy to see the transformation of this golf course from then until now...twelve years later. The golf course has changed and improved so much during that period of time. This is a much better golf course than it was twelve years ago. It's a shame that all of that improvement probably will not be recaptured in the selling price.

The original ownership group, of which Bill and Rosemary Norton were a part, bought this rag-tag,

unfinished golf course back in March of 1994. Those original partners, by virtue of a very strong selling price, enjoyed the appreciation of investment that will be impossible to duplicate, or even approach, given the current economic climate in the world of golf.

B&R(Bill&Rosemary) bought this course in 1999 from those former partners...when golf was much stronger financially and golf rounds much easier to count. They had just sold off their banking interests and had money to reinvest...or watch it go off to Uncle Sam. The need to reinvest and a desire to stay involved in something combining agriculture and business prompted their purchase of this golf facility.

Since spring of 1999, B&R have employed five different golf professionals and five different food & beverage managers. Numerous employees have come and gone over the past thirteen golf seasons...with most of them being good people who made a positive connection and contribution to Nettle Creek. Others though, have

left their mark in a decidedly negative way, are disposed of and quickly forgotten.

In fact, three long serving golf course employees informed me just this morning that they will be returning to Mexico in mid-November...for the duration. They have been here at Nettle Creek for 8-9 seasons...quite a long time to be away from home earning money for the betterment of younger siblings and others left at home. It gives me a strong premonition that things here are starting to break up a little bit.

The greatest employee longevity, though, has been provided by Deb, our bookkeeper/controller...and myself, as superintendent, manager, and vice-president. We are both veterans of all thirteen seasons here. We find ourselves giving each other knowing looks and winks when the latest 'new/old' idea...the 'didn't work then, won't work now' plan of attack...is being verbally espoused by our latest **newbie** golf professional.

By far the biggest problem that we have had over the past eight golf seasons is exactly that. We have had new golf professionals, 'newbies', about every other season since 1999. Each new professional brings with him new ideas, new policies, and new attitudes...and needless to say...new is not always better! Developing any continuity with members, outing coordinators, and the golfing public becomes very difficult when the faces change constantly in our golf operation.

Our neighbors up the road a half hour, by contrast, are much closer to all of that suburban population and enjoy the services of a 14-year veteran superintendent and a 14-year veteran general manager who have both been with them since their opening in 1992. What a difference! While we struggle along at 25,000 rounds...our friends at Blackberry Oaks(a very compa-

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nable course to ours)...annually produce 5,000-7,500 more rounds than we can ever muster.

And, after eight golf seasons of battling it all, our owners want to turn it all over to somebody else, retire, and enjoy their remaining years with a bit more tranquility. A very logical and wise decision...

So, as I ponder my 50th birthday next May...I ponder my future in general. Where will I fit in? Will it be here? Who really wants to hire an older superintendent when there are so many younger guys out there? Unfortunately, age and experience are not typically assets in this business...when compared to youth, enthusiasm, and a higher level of technical training. Interesting though, is that here at NCCC my age and experience have been highly valued over these twelve years. With new owners, I am not so sure.

The key may be to find a different level of involvement that permits continuing to work in the golf business. For example, the reality is that a thirty something guy makes a great superintendent, but typically doesn't have the experience or financial power to buy a golf course or form a course management company. Maybe that is what an older guy needs to consider doing with the remainder of his career.

But I don't feel old at all...in fact, I feel really good. On a good day the mirror will show me a face that is still fairly youthful...while on a regular day the mirror increasingly confirms what my body is constantly telling me. Why do my knees always hurt...and that stiff right hamstring has tightened up again...making it pretty much impossible to squat down on a green to set a cup...or catch a baseball like Johnny Bench. Not that I want to do either one anymore...

I feel that my experience more than makes up for the fact of being

50, but the real problem with being retained by new owners will be the salary requirement. If a local group buys this course, there is a possibility that they might want a partner and be willing to compensate me at my present level. But, given our financial performance lately, it's more realistic to assume that salary cuts might be part of the new recipe.

It's interesting also to discuss the future with fellow staff members or our golf members. They almost all assume that I will be part of the future here...simply because I've been here for so many years...sort of a permanent fixture. I point out that I would be the first guy to get the axe...simply because I am the highest paid salary guy...and the intentions of new owners are to probably operate with their own people.

Long before the actual announcement of 'For Sale,' it was well known here that B&R intended to sell within a few years. The summer of '05 was a really tough one...with Bill privately declaring then his intention to sell out. The difference now is that he is publicly stating his intention to sell out and retire.

So, none of this is a surprise. Lots of time to prepare, to think

things through, to prepare psychologically for departing a course that has been so large a part of my life for the past 12 years. Combining the age factor with the selling factor has led to much reflection and thinking about the future. Any guy who approaches and passes the half century mark goes through this process...a normal thing to do when accessing one's own mortality.

If we all look back on our collective pasts and realize how far we've come in life...it can give a guy a huge feeling of satisfaction. It may have been intimidating at the time...but somehow it all worked out well. It happens more easily when couples and families anticipate and embrace the work involved and the change that is thrust upon them.

The anticipation of change is refreshing and interesting. There are lots of possibilities...some very exciting...about what may transpire as my 50th birthday and the selling of this course coincide as May of 2007 approaches. I look at it as an opportunity to embrace change...and continue to build a future equally as fruitful as have been the past twenty-five years. I hope...for many reasons...that it works out that way. ♣

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