



Anchors Away!

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

I made the short drive from Madison to Beaver Dam during the second week of September, right after heavy rain had covered much of Wisconsin. It was a Tuesday, and the day before Mike Lyons and the players attending the WGCSA September meeting played five holes and headed for the clubhouse because of the rain.

"It was 'anchors away,'" Mike said, in obvious reference to his service in the Navy. But after the dry periods of another Wisconsin summer, Mike wasn't really complaining about the precipitation that returned soil moisture levels to the normal range.

Although he was born in Chicago and lived there for the first 12 years of his life, he really considers himself a Wisconsin kid. His family moved to West Bend and that is where his life in golf began. While his father labored for the legendary West Bend Company, he started to caddy at West Bend Country Club. He sup-

plemented his caddy income with a paper route and filled his free time with high school sports. Life with his mom, dad, five brothers and one sister was happy and typical of so many Wisconsin kids.

His life took a different direction after high school graduation. "I wasn't ready for college," Mike told me, "and thankfully I recognized it." So he and a buddy from his West Bend high school class enlisted in the Navy - for four years. By enlisting together they were able to go through their four years of naval service together.

Military service did for Mike what it has done for millions of young Americans - "it gave us a chance to grow up and mature, to see the world, and focus on what we wanted to do with our lives once our commitment to the Navy was over."

Boot camp took him to Orlando and his duty station assignment was on the opposite coast - Coronado

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Island and San Diego, California. His 'military occupational specialty' was cooking - on the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk.

It was no small job, feeding 5,000 troops three times a day! "It was good duty," Mike explained. "We worked 12 hours on/12 hours off, and we had a lot of discretion on how we spent our free time when we weren't at sea." The Navy gave him a chance to see the world west of the U.S. — Hawaii, the Philippines, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Australia and many other cities and countries most of us will only see in books or videos.

Mike describes his military service from 1978 to 1982 as a "totally positive experience" and he used that experience when he returned home to Wisconsin to work as a chef at West Bend Country Club. It was during those three years at WBCC that he developed his interest in golf course management. He left the club and moved to Wausau for two years to attend the University of Wisconsin Center - Marathon, getting the basic course work requirements out of the way. Of course, he attended college on the GI Bill. He continued to work as a chef at a dinner club in Wausau, but it never developed into a career option. He returned to West Bend after those two years, worked for a summer on Bruce Worzella's golf course staff, and enrolled in the turf program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Dr. Wayne Kussow was his advisor.

Three UW-Madison turf grads served as mentors to Mike while he was finishing those last two years of college. He spent a year under Pat Norton's wing at Cherokee CC in Madison. "I learned a lot from Pat - he's a really bright," Mike said. "But after that year he moved to the La Crosse area and assumed the reins at Cedar Creek Country Club.

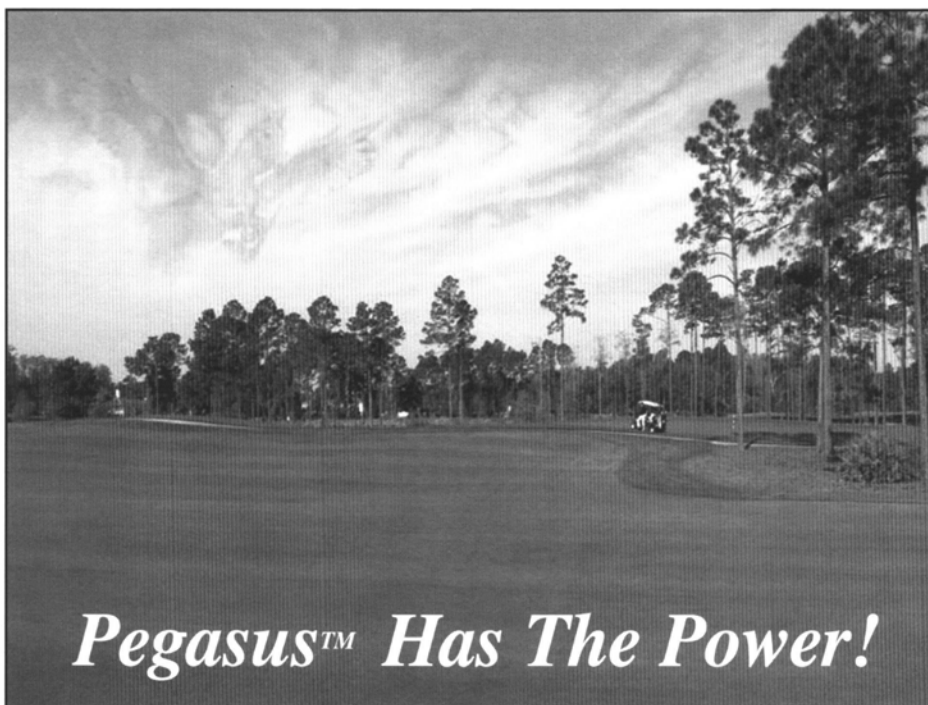
"Mike Semler took over as superintendent at Cherokee for Pat and I knew my career preparation wouldn't miss a beat. It was a plus that Mike hired George Magnin as his

assistant. They were a great team to work for." Since the course was in Madison, Mike also worked during the school year, gaining a four-season experience at the course.

He graduated from the UW-Madison in 1989 at the ripe old age of 29. Rod Johnson hired him to

fill the second assistant position at Pine Hills. He moved to the assistant superintendent position and stayed at Pine Hills for six years.

"As the old saying goes, Rodney taught me everything I know, but not everything he knows," Mike said as he talked about his time in



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Sheboygan. "He gave me lots of room to operate and develop my own style. Rod is an exceptional communicator and I benefited from that. He is also a terrific agronomist and has a sixth sense about golf turf. His leadership skills are well known, and the man has a deep and sincere desire to contribute back to the profession. These are all lessons I have hopefully learned well."

"But you also had to be careful — LBJ is one of the great pranksters of all-time. He's in a league of his own in that regard!"

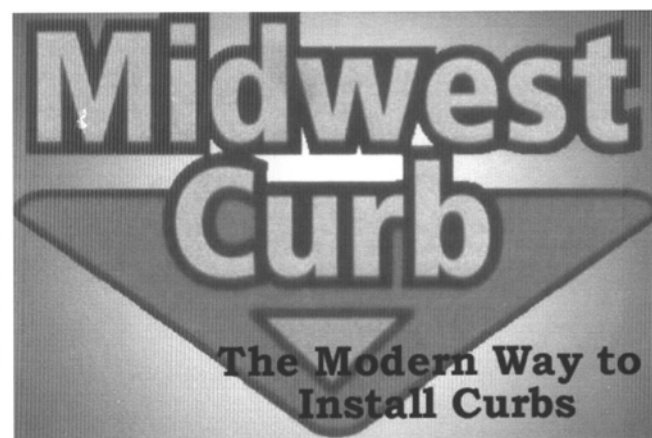
Opportunity called in 1995, and Mike answered that call to Old Hickory Golf Club in Beaver Dam. The timing was perfect; he and Dawn had been married the year before. He was starting his marriage and his career at the same time. This season was his 12th season at OHGC.

Mike loves Old Hickory. It's a great golf course, and he is very excited to have the state's best amateur players test the layout in 2008. Hosting the Wisconsin State Amateur Tournament gives testimony to both Mike and to Old Hickory.

It is also a challenging golf course to manage. *Poa annua* is the dominant grass species, there are shaded areas from the mature trees that dot the golf course landscape, grade changes are significant in places, and he operates with a mid-level budget (very successfully, I might add). Mike also speaks highly of the relationship and friendship he has with golf pro Tony Walters.

"Old Hickory has been real good for me and my family. We also enjoy our location in Wisconsin; we are a reasonable drive to Madison, Milwaukee and Green Bay.

Mike confesses he would have interest in a larger golf course operation, but "the circumstances would have to be right."



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Shortly after he started at OHGC, Mark Kienert and Mike Semler invited him to get involved in the WGCSA. A dozen years later, Mike is down to three more years of active leadership - one more as president and two more as past president. "It's been a long haul and really does require a substantial commitment."

Mike has had many goals in his sights, and success has found many of them. He's interested in not only ideas, but also in consistent implementation of them. He is proud of the legacy scholarship program since it fits nicely with his emphasis on education. He also has led the strong WGCSA support of research at the UW-Madison. "The answers to our most serious challenges with turf will come from science," he says.

A big part of leadership in the WGCSA also requires our president to reflect on the future, and Mike Lyons worries about it a lot. "We have too many golf holes and too few players," he says, "and golf cannot be sustained indefinitely with the reduced income many of us have."

Water is another big issue looming in the near future, as Mike sees it. "Whether a course uses surface water or water from a deep well, there are going to be restrictions. We are going to have to learn to deal with that inevitability."

I arrived at Old Hickory to visit with Mike just as the workday was beginning — it was barely daylight. He is

a hands-on golf course superintendent, especially in the spring and fall. During the summer months he is kept busy managing the staff, doing all the spraying and even cutting cups when time permits. Office work has to be done and although he enjoys it, his real love is the golf course and all of those activities. "E-mail has been a key to reducing the number of meetings we have to attend to keep the WGCSA running smoothly; anything that reduces the time requirement is a huge plus."

Mike has been fortunate at Old Hickory to have an excellent relationship with John Deere. The company makes grass machinery a few miles away in Horicon, and a number of John Deere employees are members of Old Hickory. "Needless to say, we have benefited from their help," Mike said with a smile.

Dawn and Mike have three children - Emily (11), Sarah (9) and Emmett (6). Dawn was a stay-at-home mom until Emmett entered preschool, and she currently works for a paper firm in Beaver Dam.

Mike Lyons fits the image of the all American guy. He is a proud Navy veteran, an alumnus of our land grant college, a devoted father and husband, and a dedicated golf course superintendent. What more could you ever hope for in a chapter president? It's no wonder we are fortunate to have him among us and in our highest leadership position. ♣



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