



A Bit of Summer in February

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

GCSAA conference this year served up a reminder why I prefer to drive to this event each February instead of flying. It was, in a kind phrase, a pain in the neck, going and coming back home.

Anaheim, California is a long way from Middleton, Wisconsin, too far to reasonably drive in the winter. That reality left me with the ugly hassle of flying and suffering what anymore are the inevitable problems associated with commercial flight.

Needless to say, the experience was what we expected. Problems with snow in other parts of the country bled over to airports far from the weather, including Madison. Aircraft and pilots weren't available for our scheduled flight and we started out three hours late. We missed our flight connection in Chicago for LAX, and instead of arriving in California at a time when we had a good part of a day to head out to some local golf courses, we arrived just in time for the Los Angeles rush hour. At least we arrived.

I have been stuck in LA traffic before and it is difficult to describe or understand – six lanes of cars in each direction stopped or barely moving for no apparent reason. It took an hour and a half to get 25 or so miles north to find a motel for the night. I cannot imagine why anyone would want to live and work there.

California was in the midst of a heat wave (and drought), which felt really good to a couple of pale Midwesterners. We took off early the morning after arrival and headed north out of the mountains to drive the big agricultural valley that runs north out of Los Angeles to south of Sacramento. Almost



Rough mountain California landscape.



Not exactly your picturesque Wisconsin dairy farm!

immediately after hitting the big valley, the familiarity of home filled the air - ah, the aroma of fresh cow manure! It was pervasive and my guess is that travelers and city folk alike were appalled. Chad and I chuckled at the thought of all the turned up noses as we breathed deeply and enjoyed the country air

we grew up with.

Dairying in California is not what it is in Wisconsin. Tens of thousands of dairy cattle were confined in acres of sheds and feed lots – they are hardly barns anymore – and milking goes on around the clock. It was stark and a far cry from the 20 - 30 cow



The pickup and camper used by John Steinbeck and his dog that resulted in the book, "Travels with Charley."



Everything you'd want to know about the great writer John Steinbeck can be found here.

herds in Wisconsin when I was young. Personally, it seems crazy to me to use my tax dollars to subsidize irrigation so these producers can harvest seven crops of alfalfa for their dairy herds. Go ahead; grow vegetables and fruit in California if they pay for the water. We get 30 - 35 inches of precipitation in the Middle West, plenty to grow forage for livestock WITHOUT a subsidy. But that makes too much sense and in America these days we don't seem to do many things that make sense.

Halfway up the valley we headed west over the mountains, across the San Andreas Rift Zone, down through the Peachtree Valley and over to the Salinas Valley. It would have been foolish not to take a quick look at the new John Steinbeck Center, and it was certainly worth the time and admission charge. Many of his stories were set in the Salinas area. Then it was north to Monterey, 17 - mile drive and all of the great courses there.

The ATT tournament was just completed the previous weekend at Pebble Beach and the bleachers were just coming down. It was quite a mess despite the acres of plywood, but I would guess that by now the recovery is complete. The course is quite accessible and we took advantage of that to look



Links at Spanish Bay with the Pacific Ocean in the background.



The Links at Spanish Bay.



Another ocean hole, one of many found on the Monterey Peninsula.



18th green at Pebble Beach; the tide is out.



18th hole at Pebble; note retaining wall.



The practice green at Pebble Beach, and...



...the well known iconic clock.

around. I also spent a bit of time in a golf antique shop on the property and perused the books – some priced at \$10,000! Clearly, guys like me aren't the intended market; where I come from you could buy a pretty decent car for that kind of money. The volume I really liked was a first edition of Tulloch's book on the life of Old Tom Morris. The price was a mere \$1,500.

Cyprus Point, Poppy Hills, Spanish Bay, Monterey Bay CC, Spyglass, and Pacific Grove add up to an almost singular golf destination in the world.

It was too late to stop at Pasatiempo in Santa Cruz, the home course of Allister MacKenzie. It was as I'd remembered from previous trips – there aren't many motels along Highway 1, or other highways and intersections in that part of the state. We had trouble finding a place to stay, finally settling on a near fleabag motel near the ocean in Pacifica.



The AT&T is one of the early tournaments of the season.



First tee at PBGC.



Poppy Hills from the clubhouse deck.

The next morning we swung up to San Francisco, filled with anticipation of visiting the Olympic Club and the San Francisco Golf Club. Pat Finlan is the talented superintendent at Olympic and a member of the GCSAA board of directors. I got to know Pat when he lived in the Kansas City area and edited the Heart of America GCSA chapter publication. And the San Francisco Golf Club is where Johnny Miller played golf as a youngster. It also happens to be an A. W. Tillinghast designed golf course. Both were inspiring visits on what felt like a beautiful spring morning in Wisconsin.

From there it was across the Golden Gate Bridge north for a while, down to Berkeley and Oakland and south through the valley that would lead us back to Los Angeles and Anaheim and the GCSAA conference. We did stop at one beef production operation that dwarfed even the dairy farms - hundreds of acres of fat cattle being fed to market weight.

We crashed at the same motel we had the first night in California and used it as a launch site to the final round of the LA Open at Riviera Country Club on Sunday. What a great event for golf fans to attend. We left for the tournament early and there was no traffic at all. We parked at

the VA hospital and hopped a shuttle bus to the Riv. The PGA could not have been more accommodating of GCSAA members. We were in early, with plenty of time to see players warming up on the range.




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Riviera has such a great history, one well written about by Geoff Shackelford. Many Hollywood stars of the film industry were members and active in the club. The clubhouse on the hill with a view of much of the course is superb. The course was in great shape and the greens were firm and fast. Apparently, a few years ago, the course conditions weren't the best, but for this event they were tip-top as far as I could tell from outside the ropes.

What a great way to spend a day in February – on one of America's historic golf courses, in record

warmth, watching the world's greatest players compete. Phil collapsed again. I actually expected a bigger crowd but appreciated the room to move around so easily. We found the tourney to be inspiring.

At the day's end we shot down to Anaheim in modest traffic.

The area around the convention center has greatly changed over the years. I first attended conference in Anaheim in 1974 and literally all around the Disney/convention center area were irrigated strawberry fields filled with workers harvesting and



Views from 17 mile Drive.



Entrance to the "O" Club.



Late winter golf felt like spring at the Olympic Club in San Francisco.



The Olympic Club was in superb condition.



The A.W. Tillinghast designed San Francisco Golf Club is almost a next door neighbor to the Olympic Club.

weeding. Roadside stands offered spectacular fruit at bargain prices. Nowadays it is completely filled in with development, including Disney's California Adventure, which is nearly the size of the original Disney park.

The last time we convened in Anaheim, crime was taking over the area. GCSAA offered warnings and suggested people walk in groups and

never alone. Graffiti was everywhere and the atmosphere was threatening, giving one the feeling of New Orleans or Atlanta or Houston. No more! Visitors pretty much are safe in the convention/Disney areas, although not many blocks west were some rough looking ghettos.

The pre conference seminars offer a varied menu to choose from and I couldn't resist enrolling in a

first-time seminar taught by Frank Rossi and Jeff Carlson. Of course everyone in Wisconsin knows Frank from his time on the UW - Madison faculty. Jeff Carlson has been a Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium speaker twice, if my memory serves me correctly. He currently is the golf course superintendent at the Vineyard Club on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. They co-taught a course titled "Organic Golf Course Management." I would summarize it by saying there are no easy answers on the subject, but they did a superb job of presenting what is known.

Per usual, I participated in a chapter editor's event. I have made a lot of friends over the years in this position of editor and I get to see them once a year at conference. The publication landscape has changed a lot over the years, but the friendships remain. A certain kind of personality seems attracted to the task, which has added to the enjoyment for me.

Wednesday night was a hoot! Syngenta invited us to their annual reception. This year it was held at the new Disney California Adventure. They took over the place, lined the streets with hors de oeuvre stations and invited everyone into the Hyperion Theater to hear Joe Theisman speak. I have never been a fan of big Joe, but I am now. He was entertaining, friendly,



The SFGC also was in prime golf condition.



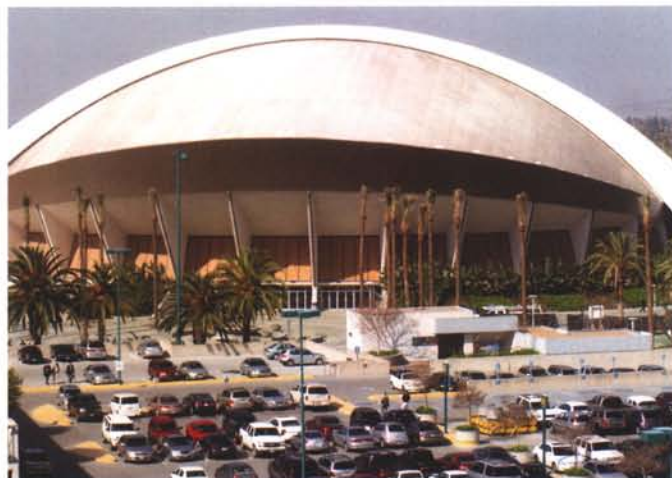
Alcatraz, a well known San Francisco landmark.



The Golden Gate Bridge is among the most recognized in the world.



The California Adventure Park is the same size as Disney Land.



The old part of the Anaheim Convention Center.



California Adventure and Disney Hotels in the background.



The main road separating the convention center from Disney has a distinct tropical look.

engaging and informative. Initially I was disappointed not to have a member of the golf community as a guest, but since most of us in Wisconsin are football fans, listening to a Hall of Famer was pretty good.


Johnny Miller was the keynote speaker on Thursday morning and I hauled my Johnny Miller books with me to conference in hopes of getting them autographed. Steve Mona was at the GCSAA tournament, so I left a note for him asking for assistance in accomplishing my mission. Then I spoke with Jeff Bollig, GCSAA's director of communications. I asked him about the possibility of getting Miller to sign my books and Jeff replied, "Sure. Be at room 303 at 8:15 a.m. Thursday and I guarantee you he will autograph your books."

So I was there, before 8:00 a.m. And sure enough, before anyone else was round, up the escalator came Johnny Miller and Steve Mona, just back from breakfast. Steve and I shook hands, he introduced me to Johnny, and Johnny was more than happy to autograph the books.


"Absolutely," came the easy and friendly reply. "Let's sit down at that table." So we did. We visited for between five and 10 minutes and I immediately became a loyal JM fan!

The opening session may have

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been the best I have attended in 35 GCSAA conferences. There has been less, in recent years, of the ceremonial business. Key people are appropriately introduced and then they leave the stage. It moves along nicely, which is what most people in the audience want.

Sean Hoolehan, GCSAA president, works for an American Indian tribe in Oregon. I got to know him through our mutual membership on a GCSAA committee a few years ago and I enjoyed listening to his experiences in such a setting. Members of the tribe who own the course he manages offered the invocation. It was fascinating! I believe that everyone in attendance shared that emotion.

Presentation of the Old Tom Morris Award always draws people to the opening session. The 2007 recipient was Charles Sifford, an early black player on the PGA tour. Charles, a member of the World Golf Hall of Fame, is an old man now who was a pioneer in his time. After he accepted the award he talked on for 15 or 20 minutes and had thousands in the palm of his hand! He was an excellent choice to receive our highest award.

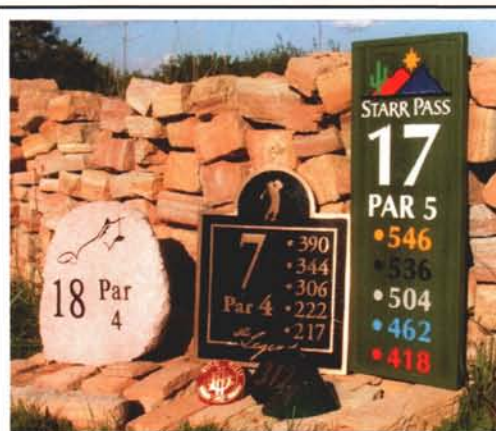
And then Johnny Miller spoke. It was an outstanding presentation, in my view. Lots of guys don't care for him because of comments he has made on television broadcasts of golf tournaments. I am now thinking that he just knows an awful lot about the details of the game and golf courses and is a brutally honest commentator. He is also a devoted father and grandfather (six kids and 15 grandkids) and husband. His religion is important to him and he has lived a clean and moral life. In the context of professional sports, he is a rare bird anymore.

After his comments, Johnny received a standing ovation, which was well deserved. After the Opening Session I trucked down to

the show floor to get a Jacobsen hat (my collection has one from every year starting with 1973) and on my way out I ran into Sean Hoolehan and – you guessed it! – Charles Sifford. I asked Charlie if he would sign my program and he did. I will put that inside his book "I Just Want to Play" in my library. It was all powerful stuff that morning.



Keynote speaker Johnny Miller.



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Joe Theisman was a guest of Syngenta.



Theisman appeared on the stage of the Hyperion Theater.



The Syngenta reception in California Adventure Park was great fun.



Naive Americans offered the invocation for the Opening Session.



This year bunker construction was feature, from start to...

By now it was Thursday noon and the thought that conference and show would be over in a couple of days crept over me, along with the melancholy that goes with that thought. I have loved attending conference every year and after this one, I will get to go to one more, at least as a golf course superintendent. There is a lot of pride in the show event – there is nothing in the golf world like it. I may as well come right out with what I have concluded about our show, and it is OUR show despite the moniker GIS. I actually think it is sad that a show we started and supported for decades now doesn't even have our name on it. No one understands or appreciates the need to change and move on more than I do, but this change is one I absolutely do not like. There are some GCSAA members who have even become resentful of the intrusion on our show. There isn't anything wrong with saying I do not like walking out of the Jacobsen dis-



...finish!

play and the latest in grass machinery and finding myself next to pots and pans peddlers. I do not like walking past scores and scores of booths that have nothing to do with my business, only to find a supplier I deal with in the middle of that.

Honestly, I am just kind of disappointed with it. Why not partition all of those exhibitors for CMAA at one end, all together, and keep our exhibitors by themselves where they are easily accessible by their GCSAA

customers? From an attendee's point of view, I cannot think of anything I like about the convergence of CMAA and our show. I won't deny that there are likely efficiencies involved - exhibitors are bound to spend less going to one show rather than two or three. But we should still at least have our name on it - that is a simple matter of pride and tradition - and we should control the floor plan - that is merely practical. But it is too late in my career to get

involved in any crusades that are likely to fail anyway.

I thought the educational offerings for me this year fell into the "average" range, which is still awfully good. Mostly, the subject matter addressed this year was less relevant to me than in some years past. The early morning innovative superintendent sessions Thursday and Friday, for example, just didn't have the timber I seem use to. The same was true for the research lectures; other than the anthracnose/management practices

update, the rest held little for me. Actually, the same could be said for all of the Thursday lectures - just not enough pertinence to my situation.

Friday was the best day. It started with keynote speaker Pat Croce. He was enthusiastic and relevant and I did get some take home pointers. The USGA Green Section program was excellent, as it always is. The turf tips are always right on and useful, and I enjoyed listening to Dick Rugge talk about keeping a handle on equipment that could conceivably ruin the game. Best of

all was Martin Ebel, a handicapped lawyer and golf player. He summarized our responsibility on the golf course in the areas of accommodations. I had heard his speech before and he was even better this time. And I was very pleased that Dr. Joe Vargas received the Green Section Award.

This year's bookstore had wonderful selections, but nothing special regarding pricing. Bargains, yes; great bargains, no. But it is still one of my favorite features of conference.



WGCSA president Mike Lyons welcome Bob Lohmann to the Wisconsin Hospitality Room.



Mike Bogroff, Chad Grimm, Aaron Goninen and Mike Bremmer enjoyed our Wisconsin Hospitality Room.



Aron and Laurie Hogden.

A group of grizzled old Wisconsin guys - Jim Shaw, Ed Devinger, Bob Lohmann and Dave Weber.



Josh Lepine and Jon Canavan.

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If there is a fun event at the GCSAA conference, it has to be the Wisconsin hospitality room. Our chapter and Milorganite served as co-hosts, and it is a splendid evening among friends. More than once it occurred to me that it was sad that in our busy world you have to travel to California to see and visit with colleagues and friends from back home. But at least we have this opportunity. It seemed everyone there was knee deep in enjoyment, too.

The presence of the Wee One Foundation in a corner of the Milorganite booth speaks warmly

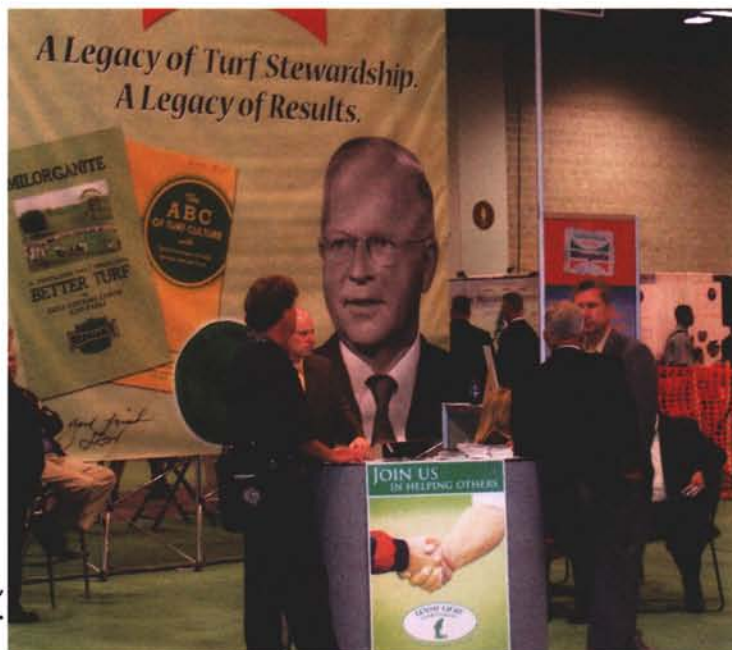
of the MMSD managers who welcomed the WOF, as well as the WOF officer who came up with the idea. I don't know how many new members were signed up, but the organization now has a national recognition. Wayne Otto would be proud and pleased.

The networking opportunities at a national and international meeting like this one can hardly be overstated or exaggerated. The wealth and breadth of practical golf course management opinions and experiences is unmatched. This is one of the best reasons to attend, in my view.

By mid-Friday Chad and I were well aware of some powerful winter weather poised to move through the middle west about the time we were scheduled to arrive home on Sunday. So through the magic of a laptop computer we were able to secure, literally, the last two seats on a flight from LAX to Chicago one day before our original reservations. It left at 6:00 a.m., required \$100 for the change, and necessitated a car trip from Anaheim to LA at 3:30 a.m. But we made it to Chicago and were on the last flight out for Madison. All in all, we were lucky.



Our UW-Madison turf program had a booth on the show floor,



as did the Wee One Foundation, welcomed by MMSD and Milorganite.



Bob Vavrek was a speaker on the USGA Green Section program.



Dr. Joe Vargas was the deserving recipient of the 2007 Green Section Award.



Brent and Randy Smith - son and father, exhibitor and superintendent.

Rescheduling at the last minute raises the suspicion of transportation authorities. Chad and I were pulled aside while going through security in Los Angeles, were questioned and had all carry on luggage gone through. I probably shouldn't complain, but neither of us really fits the profile of a subversive. Better safe than sorry though.

All in all, it was a great conference. As I near the end of my career, I am starting to focus on the things I will miss when retired. With one more to go, the GCSAA conference and show is definitely one of the great benefits of being a golf course superintendent. It represents really good work by the GCSAA staff for the benefit of golf course superintendents. Thanks. 🌱



A bird's eye view of the show floor.



Adam Barr and Rod Johnson met and visited on the GCSAA show floor.



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The following is a list of the vendors who made the Wisconsin Room possible this year in Anaheim. Without their continued support and generosity the evening would not have been possible. Thank you from all of us in the WGCSA.

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