



# Golf Courses Are Not Killing Us

By Rob Schultz, Golf Writer, The Capital Times

## It's a rite of spring.

The grass turns green, leaves grow on trees, flowers bloom ... and some obtuse nitwit screams that golf courses are killing us all.

Or, at least golf courses are killing the superintendents who tend to them, or the children who live near them, or those cute baby robins who nest in trees located within 500 blocks of one of them.

True story: A woman walked out of her home and immediately sneezed. Later, she learned a nearby golf course was spraying a fungicide that day. So she automatically assumed that the fungicide made her sneeze and was somehow killing her and her children. She called city officials and demanded that they tell the golf course employees to stop spraying "that poison."

What she didn't know was that her neighbor was in his garage using heavy-duty turpentine to clean old

paint brushes when she walked outside that day. It didn't matter to her. She figured that it had to be bad for the environment if golf courses sprayed fungicide so she joined an interest group to get the process stopped.

That's the kind of nut-cake logic that makes me want to get my wedge out and ... and ... well, I'm not going to sink to the level of those whack-jobs who think golf courses need to radically change to save us all.

What got my blood pressure rising was Rob Zaleski's thorough and well-written article in Monday's Capital Times about pesticide use on golf courses. He mentioned that a Madison physician named Gary Giorgi was trying to convince Madison parks officials to turn Glenway golf course into a pesticide-free golf course.

"I mean, what are the priorities of the city course? Shouldn't its focus be the health of those who play there?" Giorgi asked.

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### Who said it's not a priority?

Maybe Giorgi should contact one of the United State Golf Association agronomists who spend most of their waking hours making sure that the golf courses we walk, or drive on, aren't killing us.

The USGA spends millions of dollars on pesticide research as well alternative methods to golf course care. Its agronomists, as well as others from around the country, pass on their knowledge to golf course superintendents who are part of one of the strongest and smartest groups - the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America — in the entire golf community.

What is most impressive about our local golf course superintendents is how much time they spend attending symposiums sponsored by the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association or private companies like Reinders that include discussion about pesticide use.

That's why study after study after study shows that golf courses are much safer for you to walk on than your neighbor's lawn after he overdoses his grass with weed killer and pours whatever is left down the sewer drain.

Zaleski's research led him to UW horticulture professor John Stier, who gave the Madison parks department a high grade for not using toxic pesticides on its golf courses. He also pointed out that golf courses serve as valuable green space and wildlife habitat in urban areas. He also said that lots of research exists that proves pesticide runoff from golf courses is "virtually nil."

Giorgi countered with an 11-year-old report that showed that golf course superintendents have higher incidents of brain cancer, prostate cancer and non-Hodgkins lymphoma than the general population. And another report claimed that mice that drank water with low levels of common weed and feed fertilizer experienced a 20 percent increase in failed pregnancies.

I have great reservations about the latter report and so do most superintendents who use all the hours they spend getting rid of an abundance of mice, moles and gophers as proof that critter pregnancies are up ... way up.

As for the cancer report, I talked to at least a dozen respected golf course superintendents after it was first published in 1996 and they all questioned the research of it. In the years that followed I never read another report claiming it was right.


What it all boils down to is that golf course superintendents can fill the back of a pickup truck with all the research that proves they are not harming the environment or themselves with the way they take care of their golf courses. Yet they continually have to defend themselves every time another faux-scientist hatches a bad idea or puts his mitts on a piece of fiction that has not been credibly backed up.

I agree that golfers need to change their attitudes about what makes a golf course attractive. I think golf courses should cover much of their land with native grasses and leave them in a natural, uncut state. If that includes dandelions, so be it.

Golfers need to understand that every inch of a golf course's grass needn't be mowed down to its shortest possible length so they can find their drive that sliced over two fairways. Believe me, that's an issue at many golf courses and too many superintendents are pressured by foolhardy members to mow, mow and mow some more. That's really wrong.

Just don't tell me that golf courses are harming the environment or aren't protecting the people who walk them. Where are the studies that prove that people who play golf every day are dying at an early age? They don't exist and never will.

But that won't stop somebody from holding up a baseless report claiming that golfers who lick their golf balls after a fungicide has been sprayed have an 80 percent chance of becoming a werewolf.

Global warming? Blame it on Odana Hills. 

163 Yard Par 3 eighth hole at the Refuge Golf Club in Oak Grove, Minnesota.



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