



Golf Course Lightning Death Generated Debate in Madison

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

August was a rough month in our town - 16" - 18" of rainfall, storms, and the sad death of a golf player at Odana Hills during an electrical storm. The tragedy was a catalyst for a lot of conversation about what to do when there is a threat of lightning. On one side of the issue is the attitude that it is the golfer's choice to seek shelter and safety or to keep on playing. No one is responsible for inclement weather and therefore personal safety is the responsibility of each player. On the other side of the discussion is the belief that the golf course is responsible for getting everyone to a safe place during an electrical storm.

Electrical storms aren't taken seriously enough at times, especially on golf courses, and I have been guilty of ignoring the prudent and safe path more times than I care to remember. There was, for example, the time I

was applying Merit to unirrigated rough areas and was delighted that it had started to rain; it was a certainty that the material would be watered in per the label. The lightning flashed, but I kept going, determined to finish what I had started. Good luck was with me - I wasn't struck down for my stupidity.

Not long after that incident I was intent on finishing the cutting of a green before I headed in because of the lightning in the area. It wasn't raining, but pitch forks were coming out of the black sky with great frequency. I gave it up when one of those pitch forks of lightning crashed on the other side of the pond, a couple hundred yards from where I was working. Luck was with me again!

The era of the night waterman and a manual irrigation system ended over twenty years ago for me,

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thank goodness, but those early years were scary. I shiver when I think of the times young employees were on our golf course at night during stormy weather, turning brass sprinklers into cast iron water pipe. It is an absolute miracle none were killed by lightning.

So often in the past we were confronted with circumstances that still exist most places today - what does a golf course operate do with regard for player safety? We didn't have a dozen different versions of weather radar to show an approaching storm. We had no siren or loudspeaker system or any other way to notify players, even if we knew of an electrical storm that was close by. By the time a golf course or pro shop person knew lightning was a certainty, usually

the golfers did also. It was for sure we also didn't want to be responsible for false alarms and disrupted games and rounds. The best we did back then was to have properly installed lightning protection on shelter houses.

It was a great moment when our board decided to install a lightning warning system on the course. The two sensors, located at significant distance apart, are able to detect lightning while it is still some considerable distance away. This gives players and golf course employees plenty of time to return to the clubhouse or to the shop. Sometimes players will head to a shelter house, especially if they are walking. I have observed that once the siren sounds the alarm, players respect the warning and recognize the potential danger to them. Staff people are no longer responsible for making an impossible decision with regard to the safety to golf players.

Another thing I like about the system is there is no longer any question about whether or not we should keep working on the golf course or return to the shop. The rule is firm: when the siren sounds, stop what you are doing and get off the course quickly. It has eliminated undecisiveness, question and worry.

I am left with a sense of gratitude that no one was injured or hurt by lightning during my term at Blackhawk, and the chance of that happening in the future are greatly reduced, in my opinion. It is another example of taking good advantage of technology. Whatever the system cost, it wasn't too much. 🌱



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