



The Alarm Clock

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

The most necessary, yet hated tool in the arsenal of any summertime superintendent is definitely the alarm clock. Over the past 90 days, my relationship with my own personal alarm clock has definitely deteriorated. It has come to the point where writing about it may just generate some tolerance and understanding on my part...permitting me to survive another early rising golf season.

Back in April and May, I relished the chance to answer the alarm, spring out of bed, and get to the course bright and early. It felt so good to be outside...and multiple days without a break from the clock bothered me not one bit. The alarm clock was, in fact, my friend that let me know on a daily basis that winter was indeed a thing of the past. I enjoyed setting it...and smiled a bit as I answered it each morning.

As the days and weeks have passed from then until now, I am finding it much more difficult to motivate myself out of bed at 4:30-4:45 AM. It is a daily battle these last few weeks to get enough sleep so that having to answer that AM alarm isn't such a chore.

There are a few typical reasons as to why I and my clock are starting to develop a hate/hate relationship...such as frequency of answering it! Where in my non-existent contract does it say that I am responsible for being at the golf course by 5:00-5:30 AM each and every weekday...Saturdays... Sundays...all days...from April 1 through the end of October? Hey, I love the golf business and I really love being out there at Nettle Creek...but this every day romance needs a little bit of a break! My only day off in recent memory was last Monday, July 7th...which consisted of 5-9AM scrambling around the course like a madman...then leaving for a GOLF OUTING up in Elgin!

What have I become that I spend a day away from my course at someone else's golf course? Am I that addicted? Or do I simply realize that if I had chosen to stay home that day...I simply would have been working as per normal.

Going to a golf outing for any superintendent, by the way, is nothing more than an exercise in patience and futility. Where else can a turf guy have so much fun playing golf with strangers... waiting for golfers (that's a new experience)... drooling over the size of that new maintenance shop off in the distance...and realizing quite quickly that this upscale suburban park district course eclipses one's home course in every possible way! I made the mistake

that evening of returning home and touring my own course before dark...and immediately realized that my tour should have waited until after dark as to not notice all of the flaws...

On a positive note...the four working days since Monday last have seen two rain events...much grooming of this course...beautiful Penncross everywhere...a beautiful transformation of the bunkers on our 7th green...and an appreciation here that we also have an attractive golf course...simply different in that it is produced on a much lower...but very adequate maintenance budget.

The rain events of summer...be they strong or mild...are the blessing of every course and of every superintendent. Strong rain on a Thursday night notches down the alarm clock battle a little bit in that on the following morning...the awakening is more relaxed...the arrival more serene...and the upcoming weekend is anticipated as a chance to relax instead of being felt as something to endure.

Weekends this season consist of early mornings full of too much work...followed by afternoon naps for the exhausted ...with the remainder of the day spent recovering from the grogginess induced by the two hour cat nap. My wife and kids say that I am just a barrel of fun and a load of laughs each and every weekend!

Rain before or during a summer weekend is a beautiful thing. That is...until the pythium season starts to build up. Additional possible rains over this weekend could quite possibly rapidly transform this relaxed feeling into that uneasy feeling of entering the 'pythium zone' for the next sixty days.

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That queasy feeling that simply arises with the certainty that protecting our greens with fungicide...of squirting our tees with phosphites...and of telling our fairways to 'go commando', i.e., no protection whatsoever...is somewhat inadequate. This too basic a program is a requirement of budget...and will undoubtedly result in damage to these same gorgeous bent fairways that as of today are the best that they have looked in July in recent memory!

Sort of a paradox...it seems. The course as of today looks great...but it is only July 10th. The money to keep it all looking great for the next sixty days is available.... should we need it...but only if we really need to spend it. But, we don't want to spend it. But, we should spend it...to preventatively protect this beautiful golf course from the damage that will undoubtedly be induced from the upcoming heat, humidity, and heavy rainfall that are as certain as that damn alarm clock every morning!

But, if we can outguess the weather, turn off the irrigation, and learn to skate on extremely thin ice...we might retain these gorgeous fairways through until mid-September with little or no pythium damage. If we cannot do all of that...we will wish that we had indeed spent the money when we had the chance!

So, like every superintendent throughout these mid-western states...I will continue the daily dance of answering the alarm...be it the one that unfortunately always begins my day...or goes off in my head as I watch the Weather Channel. I will strive to keep the only commandment that pertains to golf courses...do not spend unbudgeted dollars on pythium fungicide...or anything else...unless it is really necessary.

And then, when it is necessary...spend it soon enough to control or eradicate the problem... before it escalates and damages too heavily those gorgeous bent fairways that we had...back on July 10th.

Soon enough also that people above me on the food chain do not self righteously state that, of course, the money was available for pythium control...or any other

emergency...if we really needed to spend it.

We all answer the clock because we need to do it...our families depend on it...and because we are internally wired to wake up way too early. 'Sleeping in' for us golf course types means getting to bed at 9 PM...not waking up late on any day that ends in 'Y'.

I am so looking forward to retirement 16 years into the future when I really will be able to sleep late...until possibly as late as 6:00-7: AM. But, by then, I'll be so inflicted with insomnia that sleep will probably be impossible!

It's only 6:30 PM...but I think I'm going to bed. I have stayed up too late for too many nights...and always pay for it the next day by being constantly tired out. I am even tired out just thinking about tomorrow morning ...and how tired I will be!

I need some rest...because I will be needing to answer the alarm clock...for the rest of the summer...and the rest of the season. Soon it will be Thanksgiving...and I will be thankful that I can simply...turn off the alarm clock. 🍀

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