

ened his mowers for the past three years now.

"Take your hands out of your pocket and steady the cutting unit for me. I'm going to loosen the bracket and take it out of the grinder. It's sharp."

I did as I was instructed, holding the WWII vintage mower away from the grinder while Tom lowered it to the shop floor.

"This is the last one," Tom said. "All I have to do is bolt on the bed bar and knife and it is ready to go back to Syl's golf course. In fact, I could use a hand in getting the units loaded into my truck. You don't look too busy; give me some help."

He backed his Ford F-250 4X4 into the work bay of the shop, pushed a floor hoist into position, and we started to load the five blitzer units. As the last one was set down on the bed, Tom asked if I wanted to go with him to Syl Bachman's. "That way you could help unload them. And I'd have someone to visit with on the way up and back."

I was intrigued. I had cut my lawn at home, Cheryl was downtown at the Farmers Market on the Capitol Square, and it was a beautiful spring day for a ride. Plus, I wouldn't have to drive.

"Let me call home and leave a message, Tom," I replied. "How long will we be gone?"

"It is about an hour up and an hour back," Tom said. "I don't know how long we will be there, but I do know Syl will want to take us to lunch at Dolly's Restaurant in Middlebury."

Tom washed up while I called home and reported in. We were headed out of the shop yard in less than ten minutes.

Middlebury, Wisconsin is located in a small area that had been settled heavily by British immigrants in the 1830 - 1850 period - English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish, mainly. The village had many beautiful homes from that period, and they were well maintained. The area around Middlebury was an area of significant vegetable production, and a couple of canning operations called Middlebury home. It contributed importantly to Wisconsin's ranking as one of the top canning states in the U.S.

"OK, Tom," I finally said, "how in the world do I not know Sylvan Bachman? I mean, I've never even heard of him or the course."

"Well," Tom said after a long pause, "Syl Bachman is the owner and operator of the Almosta Golf Club on the north edge of Middlebury. Almosta isn't exactly a major golf course in Wisconsin, and Syl keeps a pretty low profile. I would guess few people who live more than a couple of dozen miles from Middlebury have heard of him."

"So how do you know him?" I naturally wondered.

"It's a long story," Tom began, "but I'll condense it down. I attended a combined farm auction near

Middlebury because of a Ford 600 5-speed tractor that was listed on a sale bill I saw in the Dinner Pail Restaurant. You know how I love those older model Fords and I'd like to restore a 600 to go with my 8N. I went to the sale, the tractor came up and the bidding quickly moved between myself and another man. I eventually got the tractor. I had to bid more than I had wanted, but it was in better condition than I had expected.

"The guy I was bidding against was Syl Bachman. Shortly after the auctioneer banged his gavel and said "SOLD!", he came over and congratulated me. 'You bought a good tractor,' he said.

"He went on to tell me he knew the farmer who had purchased the tractor new and had, in fact, been its only owner. It had been well maintained for the forty years he had owned and used it on his small dairy farm. Then he asked me what plans I had for the tractor."

Tom paused, took a sip of Coke, and then continued. "I told him I had planned to restore it to mint condition over the next couple of years. Then I asked him what he had intended to do with it. 'I was going to use it on a little golf course I have been building. It has a pretty good cover of grass so I figured it was time to upgrade my towing tractor.'



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"As soon as I heard the guy had a small golf course, needless to say I perked up," Tom went on. "Turns out Syl needed something to keep himself busy with after he retired. He wanted to be outdoors in the summer, he didn't want any pressure, and he did not want to work for anybody. It seemed to him, after reading about golf's popularity, that a nine-hole golf course might be a good use of his piece of land - 40 acres - and a productive use of his time in the summer. So Syl did some more reading, ponied up a few green fees at courses around the county to see some other golf courses, and went to work with a plan he scratched out on a sheet of yellow legal paper.

"And he named it the Almosta Golf Club!"

Tom took another drink of Coke, and then I asked him, "so you helped him with his project?"

"Not really," Tom replied. The first thing I did was sell Syl the Ford 600 I had bought. He surely needed it more than I did. I practically begged him to take it for what I had bid. When he offered to show me his project, I couldn't resist.

"On our way over I told him I was a golf course superintendent; big mistake! Syl had a hundred questions, which I answered for him. We struck an acquaintance and we keep in touch every few months. I offered to sharpen his mowers for him each winter - he only has these Worthington Blitzers, an 84-inch National and a greensmower. He was thrilled and grateful."

Tell me about the course, Tom."

Tom chuckled. "Well, there isn't much to tell. He routed nine holes on the 40 acres, and he was pretty creative about it. There are a few sand bunkers and a small pond that he built by damming up the creek that meanders through the property.

"He has the minimalist approach to maintenance - greens are cut two or three times a week at about a quarter inch, the fairways and roughs are all the same height and cut with the blitzers, and the old National mower mows what the gang mowers cannot get. There are no collars, the few bunkers are raked by players, and Syl changes cups when he can.

# 1999

## Wisconsin Turfgrass Association

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### Tuesday, August 10

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"The parking lot is small, but players can park on the side streets south of the course. Mostly, on the summer days I have been there, kids were playing. They travel by bike, so parking isn't a problem.

"Is there any kind of clubhouse?" I asked.

Tom laughed out loud. "Well, not exactly. Syl is the only employee he has, so the small building - it looks like a portable roadside vegetable stand - has a door hinged at the top. He hooks it at each corner to eye bolts in the roof rafters. The open door reveals a small counter. Syl has a small cardboard sign that says: *Green fee - \$3, used golf balls - 50 cents. Pay the cigar box.* And next to the sign is a cigar box. The whole thing is on the honor system; really, in this day and age, it is unbelievable. You pay the cigar box!

"Syl claims he uses this system because it keeps his labor cost down - to zero! He trusts all the townspeople who play the Almosta Golf Club and doesn't think he is ever cheated.

"Oh, and the sign identifying the course is painted

on a 1" X 8" board about four feet long. It is bolted to a pair of steel fence posts near the entrance. All it says is *The Almosta Golf Club*, which is underlined by an arrow pointing in the only direction you can go anyway. Very unpretentious!"

We talked some more about Syl Bachman and concluded that Wisconsin, even the whole country, could use more facilities like the Almosta Golf Club. It is a place where a kid can learn to play golf even if he cannot afford much. As Tom said, "somebody is going to have to pay our wages in another 15 years. It has to be new golfers."

Almosta Golf Club is a course where kids can keep busy in the summer. It is easy to get to - Tom said a drive through Middlebury during the golf season will nearly always show you a kid on a bike with a bag of clubs across his back. Nowadays, due to Syl and his little course, the Middlebury High School has both a boys and a girls golf team. And they do surprisingly well in competition; they are used to less than perfect conditions and play really well when they are on well conditioned golf courses.

"The whole town of Middlebury appreciates Sylvan Bachman and what he has done for them." Tom said. "And those of us who work in golf should appreciate the Syl Bachmans of the world for what they are contributing to the future of golf.

"We could use even more of them and places like the Almosta Golf Club." ♣

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# David Murgatroyd: A Memorial

By **Mark Kiennert** Golf Course Superintendent, Bull's Eye Country Club

On Friday April 22, the sun didn't shine as brightly as it usually does in Wisconsin Rapids. I just arrived at work, when I was informed that our neighboring golf course superintendent, Dave Murgatroyd, had been killed in an automobile accident.

His wife, Gloria, survived the crash and is in fair condition, but is facing a long road to full recovery having suffered a severely broken leg, broken vertebrae that will require a full body cast and skin graft surgeries. Our prayers are with her and her family at this most difficult time.

The Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association lost a comrade. I lost a confidant and true friend and an associate in this business world. I would suspect that 50% of our membership had heard of him or would recognize the name but would not be able associate Dave's name with his face as in the latter stages of his career. Dave would only attend select meetings during the year. (Auto races in Atlanta and Bristol would give him an excuse to visit his daughter and son-in-law.) To the other 50%, they simply lost a very good friend. Of the latter group, many served under Dave's tutelage and went on to become golf course superintendents at golf courses of their own. Men like Bruce Worzella, Jerry Kershaski, Jeff Bottensek, Jeff Ruesch, Ron Grunewald, Jim Wunrow either worked for or along side Dave at one point in their careers. My writings simply pale in comparison of the stories they could tell. I'm sure that there are other members that have benefited by having associated with Dave through the years.

Dave served as secretary/treasurer for the WGCSA back in the late 70's or early 80's. Dave would have made a great president had he chose to move through those chairs. When I moved to Wisconsin Rapids, it was Dave who offered congratulations and assistance to any of my concerns. I watched his girls, young as they were, doing all the things that all "grounds persons" would do in daily golf course maintenance. Then to hear of him beam proudly proclaiming of their going off to colleges, their marriages and having becoming a first time Grandpa. I'm not sure of the number of grandchildren he and Gloria shared, but I know his passion for all things were boundless.

For those of you who didn't know Dave or know him all that well, this obituary will give you a glimpse into his personal past. Dave worked closely with his father to build the Ridges Golf Course in Wisconsin Rapids in the early 1960's. The golf course was built on barren sandy tract of land that was good for little more than growing pulp wood. The facility featured a campground and a quarter mile race track for Friday night stock car races. The course was constructed long before it became fashionable to build upscale public golf courses. You have to remember, this was in the days before the super highways. The Ridges had a reputation that branched the Midwest.

The course was built on a shoe string with many recycled materials going into the golf course and into the construction of the clubhouse. To this day, old bridge trusses serve to support the walls and roof of the clubhouse. Dave, having inherited this eccentric trait

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from his father, possessed the consummate skills of "one man's junk, is another man's treasure." Dave would constantly remind me that I couldn't clean out my buildings and throw anything away until he had a chance to go through it. There were times that those "recycled" parts found their way back to Bull's Eye on a piece of equipment. Dave was the type of individual that if he needed something, he would invent it or fabricate it from his stockpile of "gathered" materials. Dave was the first person I would tell that we were going to close the golf course and rebuild Bull's Eye.

Dave was one of those individuals that everyone could call friend. In a crowded room, you could always tell where Murgatroyd was by the noise and constant chatter emanating from that corner. This was usually due to the good natured "ribbing" Dave would endure from his friends, but I kid you not, Dave could and would dish it out as well. I will never forget the time when Dave, after the Ridges had fallen on rough times, suggested to his good friend Jeff Bottensek, that if he quit his current job, could he come to work for him as an assistant. To this Jeff replied that he wouldn't do such a thing as it would be "too costly to retrain him." This became a standing joke among the locals superintendent.

Dave was not afraid to offer his opinions on the subject matter as to how they affected the little guy. Dave was aware of my position on the state board and my interest in the politics on the national scene. I could always get a straight answer from Dave. He would give me one whether I asked for one or not. Dave was a "champion" for the "little guy."

Dave had a profound interest in NASCAR auto racing. Local hero Dick Trickle would call him by name. I remember the time that Dave took me personally to Dick Trickle's race shop in Rapids to meet the man who just won the Winston Cup's "Rookie of the Year"

award. Dave admitted to me later that he was going to introduce me to Dick as the "guy who likes cars without fenders," just to see what kind of reaction he could get out of the both of us. Unfortunately, Dick had just stepped out of the shop and didn't get back before we had to "get back to work" ourselves.

Rarely did you see Dave down. He did profess to me on more than one occasion that the scope of golf business, due to legislative changes and responsibilities, had started to wear thin with him. He would always apologize to me for his lack of education in golf turf. His education came entirely from the "school of hard knocks." I know that he didn't take a backseat to anyone. He was extremely analytical in his approaches to problems and very inventive in his solutions. I could always learn something from Dave.

A change in ownership at the Ridges infused new life and enthusiasm into Dave's life. It presented challenges that he would accept and meet head on. I was certain that the "old Dave" was back when the boyish poking fun with each other had returned. If you were in need of a good "belly laugh," you could just hang around Dave. Anyone who was party to some of the verbal exchanges he would have with Jeff Bottensek, were in for a classical treat. Jeff and I would chide Dave, when he might complain as to how busy he was now with all the changes taking place on the course or in the clubhouse, that it was about time he got used to it as he "hadn't done anything for the past eight years!"

I will miss Dave and his smile, his laugh and his self depreciating humor. He was a rare individual. In some respects he was a man, like his father, a man before his time. The WGCSA benefited by his presence and will be less now with his loss. God bless you Dave, till our paths cross once again. ♡

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