



Another Golf Season Will Soon Be Behind Us and What a Year It Has Been for the WGCSA

By **Jim VanHerwynen**, Golf Course Superintendent, South Hills Golf and Country Club

Another golf season will soon be behind us and what a year it has been for the WGCSA. The year kicked off with the April meeting held at Geneva National Golf Club with Jeremy Amosson as host superintendent. This event was followed by a unique opportunity at Big Fish Golf Club in Hayward with host superintendent Tod Blankenship. The WGCSA was joined with two neighboring associations, the NGLGCSA and the MGCSA. In July the association held its meeting at The Club At Strawberry Creek with host superintendent Matt Kregal. Unfortunately in August the meeting at Brynwood Country Club with host superintendent Jon Canavan had to be cancelled due to the tremendous rainfall amounts in southern Wisconsin. All things considered it was a very exciting year for the WGCSA.

On behalf of the WGCSA I would like to personally thank all of the participants at this year's events, the host clubs and their respective superintendents and the many sponsors who made each event a success. The vendor sponsors, in no particular order, included: DHD Tree Products, Agrotain International, Dow Agrosciences, J.W. Turf Inc., Lesco Inc., E-Z-Go, The Bruce Company, Arthur Clesen Inc., Pumpstation Professionals, Municipal Well and Pump, BASF Corp., Pendelton Turf Supply and Midwest Turf.

I would also like to thank Chris Hoel, Tournament Director for the PGA Wisconsin Section for his help at the Superintendent/Pro Tournament held at The Legends At Brandybrook along with Jake Renner host superintendent. To all

of you who participated at the Dinner Dance held at Minocqua Country Club on October 5th and 6th your attendance was appreciated. It goes without saying that the WGCSA Board of Directors did an outstanding job this year once again and I appreciate the team effort put forward in helping me in my first year on the board. I would truly like to thank Mike Lyons for his unbelievable commitment to this board as he not only did more than his share as president but was

always there when I needed him with questions and concerns which were many. I look forward to working diligently again during the off-season to help coordinate another great year for the WGCSA in 2008. There has been much interest already for the 2008 meeting schedule sites and if anyone is interested please contact me soon so we can start the process of planning for 2008 and looking ahead to 2009. Thanks again and I hope to see all of you soon. 🌱

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Almost Sold!!!

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

Almost sold. This golf course...long known to be up for sale...was recently almost sold. After months of secret negotiations, and numerous meetings with lawyers and bankers, the elderly couple and the young golf professional thought that they had reached an agreement. The agreement was tight enough that all employees of the club, myself included, were told that a sale was pending. The agreement was also tight enough that the young golf professional informed his club president and board that he was leaving to buy Nettle Creek. Now that he has backed out, imagine going before that board of directors to ask for reinstatement!

Obviously, being informed that someone else was buying the club came as a big surprise...but not really. It is common knowledge that our owners have had enough of the golf business, had the place listed, and were considering all serious offers to purchase. The problem is that, these days, nobody really wants to buy 'stand alone' golf courses. In the current golf cli-

mate, finding a buyer who was willing to buy and financially able to close is a tough task. Once closed, a new owner would be constantly faced with uneven cash flow, heavy debt service, the possibility of further short-term borrowing, and the wonderful prospect of cash dry winters in the upper Midwestern U.S....for about the next twenty years.

Bill and Rosemary have owned this beautiful golf course since 1999. During their first five seasons of ownership(through the 2003 season), the club performed financially to the point that it generated positive cash flow and necessitated little outside borrowing. We had an experienced superintendent and experienced, mature golf professionals who may have ruffled a few feathers, but knew the public golf business and how to bring in golfers, members, and events.

Starting in 2004, however, we suffered a series of poorly performing golf seasons that have led us into our current situation. A combination of younger, inex-

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perienced golf professionals, a stagnant golf economy, and a change in our revenue formula whereby we eliminated annual memberships created the perfect storm. Consequently, our rounds have fallen off from 30,000 down to about 23,000 for the current year. This loss of volume of 7,000 rounds @ \$35.00/round multiplies out to \$245,000 in lost revenue, a 19% drop.

Golf net income on our financial statement, like yours, is derived from a simple formula: Revenues - COG - expense = net income. Our golf net income back during those more fruitful years was usually around \$600,000...with a goal of increasing it to \$650,000. The past few years have seen golf net income fall to \$450,000, so that negative difference of \$150,000 accounts for many of our cash flow problems. Our golf net income has to cover expenses generated from administration (less depreciation), golf, and maintenance.

We figure that on the F&B (food and beverage) side of things...positive net income from our bar should more than offset negative net income from our restaurant, resulting in a positive situation between the two areas. This year, however, saw us hire an inexperienced food & beverage manager ...resulting in big restaurant losses and a bar/beverage department that did not perform to better.

That equates to too much financial pressure for this elderly couple. That equates to not receiving any return on their investment. That equates to having to borrow more from the bank to pay bills...and then carrying a balance on the line of credit that gets reduced, but never paid off. That equates, in the end, to really needing to divest themselves of this golf course and enjoy the remaining years of their lives. That equates to some quali-

fied, well financed person or group out there needing to buy this golf course!

Fortunately, our owners have no mortgage on this place...and own it free and clear. Just imagine the pressure and the problems for those courses that are carrying a heavy debt load and are experi-

encing these same problems. Not a pretty picture, is it?

Fortunately also, costs here have been well controlled during these lean years. We have adopted, like so many courses, an operating pattern of holding down the maintenance budget while still trying mightily to provide a quality golf



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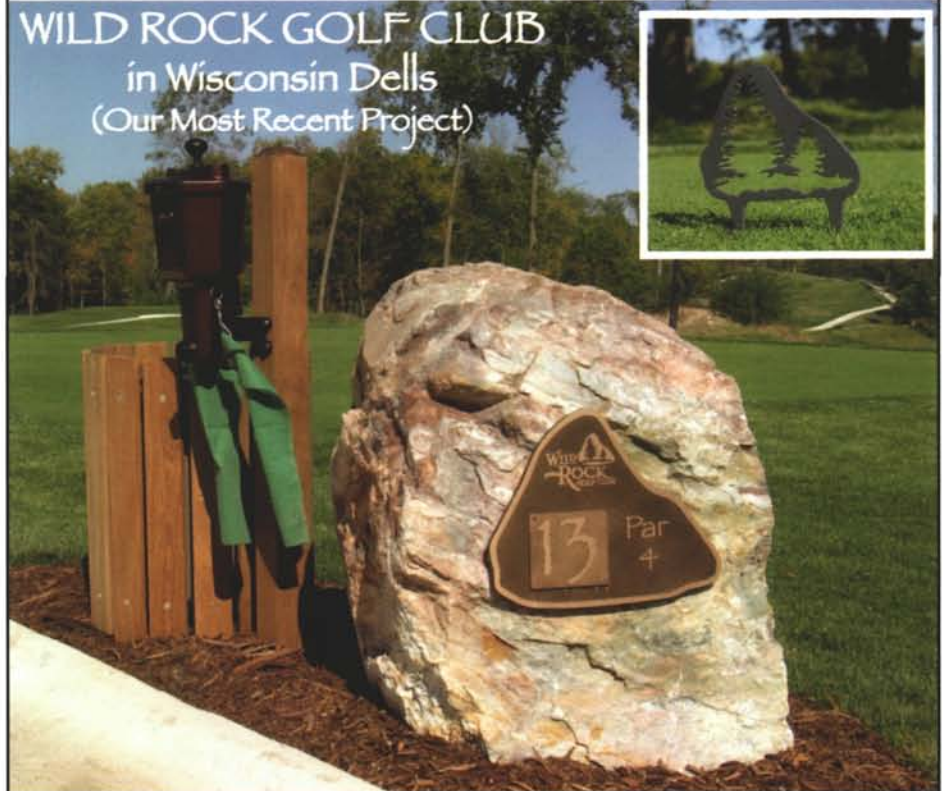
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course. Our operating budget for this golf course has been \$365,000-\$375,000 for about five years now!

At our budget level, we can still provide good...but not excellent playing conditions. We can keep the golf course very playable, well kept and beautiful. But we tolerate flaws here that would never be accepted at a private club. Our golfers continue to praise the golf course...which is sincere on their part...but also a bit naïve. When I hear such remarks...I appreciate them...but also fully realize that there is no comparison between this course and almost any private club. I did have the pleasure recently of playing Pine Hills in the Wee One Foundation Outing. Awe and reality are a few words that come to mind when I think back to that day...

We survive here by limiting ourselves to maintenance...without many or any long-term course improvements. There is no such thing anymore as a tree planting program, or a long-term plan, or an equipment reinforcement or replacement plan. Everything is short-term...and any planning done this fall will decidedly be for one year only.

We survive by not having a course assistant, or a qualified mechanic, or an irrigation technician. We survive by utilizing low wage Hispanic labor, and pay no benefits. We survive by stretching a dollar in various interesting and

enterprising ways. We survive by closing down in December. We survive as do so many privately owned public courses...

The prospect of a new owner gave some of us an appreciation for the current owners of this club. Under new ownership, most of our managers would have been eliminated. I could have kept my position...but only after agreeing to a \$20,000 reduction in salary...with the difference having to be generated by my 'on the side' landscape business. The prospective closing and transfer of ownership was slated for the end of December 2007...giving me about 90 days to consider my options. I told myself...at age 50...that finding a new position that would pay \$80,000 did not seem too likely...so the reality of accepting such a cut in salary was right there for me. I tell myself still that it was simply a chance to expand the landscape business while still having a base salary at the golf course!

In the end, we survive by having an owner who has pockets deep enough to sustain the annual losses. A different owner with more shallow pockets would probably have had to declare bankruptcy long ago!

Reluctantly, our owners have switched gears also and are now gearing up for another year of operation in 2008...with the support of their management team. We of the team have mixed feel-

ings about what has happened. We want to remain loyal...but have much wariness when considering the future. People are considering their options...myself included. The future here is anything but certain.

In all probability, we will all probably stay here until the end. Loyalty...mixed with financial reward ...mixed with home, property, and family...has determined that. When they finally do sell this golf course...we will all separate and move on...having experienced a workplace chapter in our lives that will not be forgotten. Hopefully, this workplace experience will be replaced by something as good...or better.

The 'almost sold' experience was a bit sobering for everybody involved. We are all totally sure that when the real thing does strike...and this place does sell...and the weeks until closing start to shrink away...that sobering feeling will return in a much stronger way. ♣

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At Long Last...Autumn!

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

Even by official determination, like the calendar, fall seemed late this year - essentially September 23rd. By all reckoning, that is a late date for the equinox to arrive.

The weather finally has a hint of the best season in the air. After brief rain on September 21st, the air was warm and clear and crisp the next day, which just happened to be the opening game of the Big 10 football season in Madison.

Honestly, I have never attended a football game anywhere on a more perfect fall day than that one in Camp Randall. Mark and Karen Kienert must have felt the same way - they were projected on all the big screens in the stadium before kickoff to welcome all of the other Badgers to the stadium. I think you call that "15 seconds of fame!" It was a typical Big 10 slugfest, won (barely) by our beloved Badgers. The season still hasn't taken off like expected and may end up a down year. But who cares? We still have a lot of fun at the games.

It wasn't exactly a great summer, at least from my vantage point in south central Wisconsin. A long dry spell of nearly two months in our area was broken in August when it started to rain and wouldn't stop. We, of course, blame Mike Lyons. He called for rain in the last issue of *The Grass Roots*, but forgot to detail either a date to end or a total amount. As it turned out, our course received 16 inches of rain in August, half of or "normal" precipitation for the entire year. We were lucky around here; extensive damage was done in other areas of southern Wisconsin. And all the while the drought in northern Wisconsin persisted.

We set a couple of strange records, in the context of a warm summer, here in town. The coolest daily high temperature for August 18th was set at 63 degrees F. After a bunch of hot days the record for the lowest temperature for September 15th was set with 32 degrees F. There



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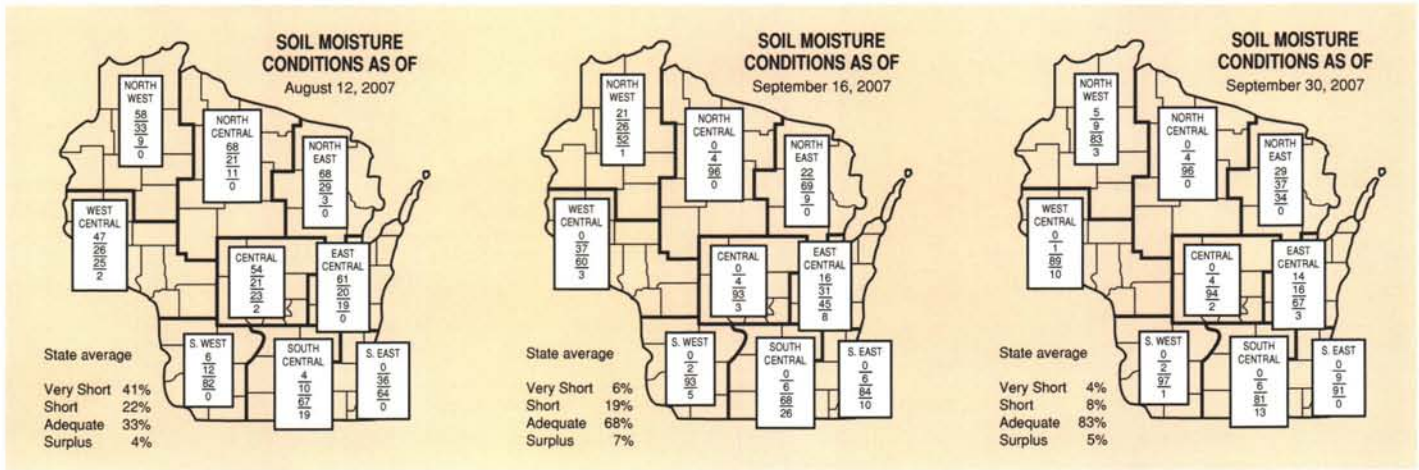
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were some areas of our course white with frost, which hasn't been repeated yet as I write this on October 18th.

With all the rain came all the mosquitoes, and these miserable insects made work and play for many of us miserable.

While some bemoan the thought of cold weather and snow, not me. I am like my good friend Howard Kulke, who says "I get a little grumpy when the temperature gets above 70 degrees F." The pending days of stunning landscape color, fresh apple cider, pumpkins and gourds and Indian corn, sparkling dew on the grass and football games make many of us, weary of a long summer, happy.

Statistics from the Wisconsin Ag Stat Service (shown above) visualize the last couple of months of soil moisture status very nicely.

Interviews for the turf pathologist position at our land grant university went well, and you were well represented in the selection process. That is as it should have been since the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association is funding the first year salary and benefit package. Mark Kienert, Tom Harrison, Aaron Hogdon, Paul Huggett, Terry Kurth and yours truly had a couple of hours with each of the four candidates at the Noer Facility. The faculty members of the turf team - John Stier, Chris Williamson, Doug Soldat and Tom Schwab were involved, as was the TDL lab director Paul Koch. The new hire, in fact, will be Paul's boss. Professors Walt Stevenson, Caitilyn Allen and Murray Clayton were very open and inclusive and considerate of us and are to be thanked for that. The first reading of the resumes indicated a strong field to choose from, and four were invited to Madison for a two-day interview.

In case you hadn't heard, Jim Kerns, James Buck, Young-Ki Jo and Henry Wetzel were the four candidates. The goal, of course, was to get the best person for the job on the job by January 1st. That date will allow a few months of orientation before the 2008 season gets underway.

As soon as we know who the choice is, it will be posted on the NOERNET.

The is no more sure sign that the season is moving along than to receive notice and registration materials for the famous Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium in the mail. Soon enough we will gather at the American Club, talk about the season past, and listen to top notch speakers who will help us with everyone's goal of an ever better year next year. See you there. 🌱



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