

SLICE OF LIFE



By Terry Moore

*Everybody talks about
the weather, but no one can
do a darn thing about it.*

--Mark Twain

Weather makes golf course owners like cloud-watching farmers. Just as in agriculture, golf is highly dependent upon favorable weather conditions. I was thinking such thoughts the other day after I read a little weather note in the *Grand Rapids Press* by local meteorologist Bill Steffen, an Evans Scholar by the way.

Steffen reported that the summer of 2005 for west Michigan has been the warmest since 1955. Also, it's been one of the sunniest. Usually noted for partly cloudy skies due to the effects of nearby Lake Michigan, west Michigan this summer has averaged 78% sunshine. The normal percentage of

sunshine in these parts is 62%. And last summer, not one of the best, it only averaged 56% sunshine.

What this all means to me is that if you own or manage a golf course and can't turn a profit in this type of climate, I doubt you'll ever do so. There's no argument, however, that weather is only one element in the number of rounds per year. The oversupply of golf courses in many sections of the state continues to impact negatively on overall business. The law of supply and demand is often harsh and immutable as operators have discovered. Equally significant is the economy of a state or region. Michigan's economy has suffered in recent years with a dramatic

decrease in manufacturing jobs—long the lifeblood of our state, particularly in the auto industry. This downturn in the Michigan economy has been felt at golf courses. How the golf industry is interdependent with the general economy of the state has always interested me.

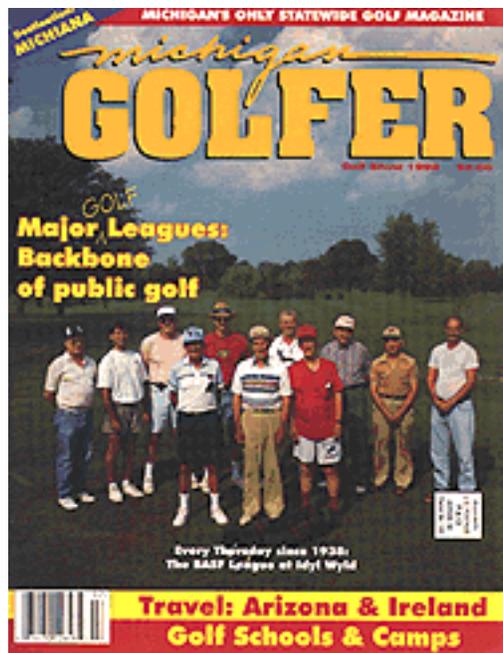
When asked sometimes why Michigan had so many public golf courses (still no. 1 in the country), I usually like to share my pet theory that it was largely due to the history of our industrialized and union-based state. Henry Ford had a lot of faults but his idea of paying his workers a living wage so that they would be buyers of his autos was prescient and made good business sense. The other automakers soon

followed suit. Also, due to the influence of the United Auto Workers and other trade unions, workers earned not only a decent wage and benefits but also had more leisure time for recreation. Let's face it, even if you have a good job you won't be playing golf if you're working 60 hours a week. The 40-hour work week allowed Michigan laborers to have enough time and leisure to play a game like golf that takes at least 2 hours for nine holes. I remember a cover story for *Michigan Golfer* we once did on league play around the state. Many of those leagues—some dating back to the '30s—originated out of the auto industry. Golf leagues are an important source of steady, dependable income for many public golf courses.

OK, back to the weather. I know several savvy golf operators who record the weather daily at their course so as to better understand and analyze their traffic. If an operator just looks at rounds per day or week without comparing it to the weather then he or she is

missing some important factors. Also, bad weather on the weekend is a killer for operators. It's one thing to endure a heavy rainfall or lightning on a Tuesday in May but a rainout on a Saturday or Sunday in July is hard to make up.

And speaking of lightning let



me digress on one my pet peeves. Yes, I'm angry about lightning and how deadly it can be for careless golfers. But what ticks me off even more are owners and operators who don't employ lightning and/or weather alert systems at their courses to ensure greater player and staff safety. It's inexcusable for

public courses not to have adequate weathers systems, many of them computer-based, that should be matched with sirens and horns so as to clear play from courses when dangerous weather approaches. Yes, players must be responsible for their actions out on a golf course but fast-approaching storms ought to be monitored by operators and managers for the safety and well-being of their customers. End of digression.

For sure, we all tend to give too much attention to bad news and negative trends. That's why that sunny factoid from Bill Steffen was so welcomed and encouraging. We all should feel blessed by this long stretch of ideal golf weather. Maybe next summer we won't be so lucky. With that in mind, it's never too early for golf courses to start thinking about a "rainy day fund."

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