

A Loss For Words

By: Nathan Grace Date: Sept. 22, 2005

The best part of writing a monthly column on golf is that I only have to write one column a month. The worst part is that I only get to write one column a month. Case in point is Hurricane Katrina. My column for September was already in the can and being printed in most publications when she came ashore in Louisiana and Mississippi and I had to wait until October to make public the many thoughts I had put into writing in the days and weeks following. Like many others in Mississippi living south of the State's waistband from Vicksburg to Jackson to Meridian, the storm left us without power and many of the all too often taken for granted niceties of life in the United States. We were without power for a week at our home—and we live 110 miles from the beach in Biloxi. That in itself convinced me of the tremendous power of this monster storm, notwithstanding the unrelenting winds we watched and felt blow for most of the morning and early afternoon on that Monday.

By about 1:30 in the afternoon, the eye wall had moved into the southern part of our county and we moved to safer shelter indoors. Halfway between Hattiesburg and Jackson, Katrina still had wind gusts matching a category three storm when the west side of the eye wall dealt us a glancing blow. When we emerged from our storm room and surveyed the hundreds of trees snapped in half and uprooted by the winds for as far as we could see, we thought we had dodged the bullet. There were no trees laying across our home—unlike some of our neighbors—and for the most part everyone was okay: all of our neighbors were alive. What we did not know was how devastating the “storm of all storms” was to the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

The next morning, we heard on the radio how bad it was, but as creatures of vision, we don't believe, or at least comprehend, a story of this magnitude until we see it for ourselves in living color. On Wednesday morning, I lucked into a generator and hurried home to rig up an antenna to a small television so we could watch the local news. That is when the reality sunk in for me. I had tried to be hopeful that the Governor's description of the Coast after his tour of the damage on Tuesday was perhaps not as bad as he had said or not as widespread. Instead, I sat transfixed and speechless before the small thirteen-inch window on the world and saw that it was no longer the world I knew. In an instant, the headache of having no power, no phone, and no cable TV was incredibly insignificant. We still had our home and we still had each other. What was on the television looked more like it had been gleaned from a Steven Spielberg film of fantasy than a helicopter tour of our—my—Gulf Coast. I struggled to locate landmarks on the screen to help make sense of what I was seeing. There was the Beau Rivage and the Biloxi lighthouse, but that was about all I could make sense of amid the tremendous devastation.

For this Midwesterner who left his home in Indiana to attend college at Mississippi State, I confess that I did not know exactly what to expect from the Magnolia State in 1990. The movie “Mississippi Burning” perpetuated all of the stereotypes that my friends had asked about when I announced my intention to earn my degree in Starkville instead of Bloomington or Muncie. What I found was a state full of some of the friendliest, most sincere, and helping people I had ever met. I met my wife at Mississippi State and I came to love the Gulf Coast. Sure I know the water off the panhandle of Florida is “prettier,” but this beach was now my beach. My antebellum history. My gaming industry. My Coast. And that makes it difficult for me to write about golf in light of what is missing from my coast now. So many lost homes and businesses. With time and money, they can be replaced. But you cannot replace the lives lost. The wedding albums destroyed. The kids' trophies. The family heirlooms. Some have managed to find fine china—undamaged with not so much as a chip—amid the ruins of their homes that could not withstand Katrina's furor. Others have nothing but a slab of concrete to mark what used to be their home.

However, life must go on and Americans are known for our resilience. In the past couple of weeks, I have come to realize that, like the restaurants, hotels, and other businesses on the Coast—the golf courses that had sprung up over the past decade and those there before them were as much a vital part of the lives of coast residents as a part of their economy. The thousands and thousands of “snow birds” who descend upon our Coast to escape the harsh winter months in the Midwest and Canada drove the engine of tourism on the Mississippi Gulf Coast even before the first slot machine swallowed up the first quarter. Now, many of those same courses that helped to bring those tourism dollars to our state are severely damaged—some so extensively that re-opening is “to be determined.” It is sobering to think that many of the courses in Mississippi and Louisiana that have received my column for more than four years are no longer there. But after we shake off the initial hit, some degree of normalcy is restored, and homes and businesses are being rebuilt, there exists a tremendous potential to build something greater than we ever imagined on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. There will be many political moves made and billions of dollars invested by the government and private industry, but I sincerely hope and pray that in the end it is done right. Proper planning and long-term initiatives are tantamount to sustained success. And if done correctly, we will look back years from now and know that we once again have come together to work together and to overcome.

And the golf courses will be rebuilt—some redesigned and renovated in the process—and the “snowbirds” will return. And once again, tourism will flourish. In light of the devastation of Katrina, we have to look forward to what can be in order to overcome the feeling of what was when we were sucker punched by Mother Nature. We have learn from the mistakes and make improvements to hopefully help minimize the impact of future storms. New Orleans has the potential to be the shining star of American metropolitan cities and the Mississippi Gulf Coast could become the next Myrtle Beach—with casinos! But we still have many weeks left in this year's hurricane season and as I put the finishing touches on this month's column, Hurricane Rita is squaring her sights on the northeast portion of the Texas Gulf Coast. We can only hope and pray that Rita is more forgiving on southwest Louisiana and southeast Texas than her older sister was to us.

Nathan Grace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Association of America whose freelance “Lipouts” column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2005.