

OPINION

Erin Hills is nothing short of a miracle

Lang and the Zieglers accomplish the unthinkable

The fact that the U.S. Open golf championship is being held this week in the Kettle Moraine somewhere west of West Bend and north of Hartland in, literally, the middle of nowhere is astounding. This is the Miracle U.S. Open. Erin Hills is a man-created miracle.

The only thing approaching this was the bodacious vision of Herbert Kohler to make Sheboygan County the golfing Scotland of North America. What Kohler did first at Blackwolf Run and then Whistling Straits remains incomprehensible. Thousands of tons of sand were moved to reinvent first some prairie and then some Lake Michigan dunes to create as beautiful a golf course as was ever imagined. But Herb Kohler is a billionaire and genius. Erin Hills started with a guy who owned a stationery store.

Without Bob Lang, there is no Erin Hills. The entrepreneur who essentially invented downtown Delafield by developing old buildings into a magically quaint and bustling center of the Lake Country decided that a few hundred acres of God's beautiful rolling hills near Erin would be a golf course. Not any golf course, but one that would host a

U.S. Open. The idea was absurd. The United States Golf Association only holds its Open championship at old and revered iconic golf courses. It's played at places like Pebble Beach, Oakmont, Hazeltine, Pinehurst and other century-old established golfing nirvanas. You don't just build a course and have the U.S. Open show up.

But Lang is nuts. He was crazy enough to not grasp the above basic reality. It's one thing for a developer with a hot hand to decide to build a golf course. And what Lang did in Delafield made him hot. It was the early 2000s and the credit markets hadn't tanked. Hotshot developers were popping up all over. And some, like Lang, built golf courses. But Lang decided to build the best golf course ever and get the U.S. Open to beg him to play there. The idea was delusional.

But it happened. Jordan Spieth and Sergio Garcia are teeing it up this week. Lang indeed built a course so over the top and so amazing that the U.S. Open is here. But Bob Lang doesn't own Erin Hills and doesn't have a nickel to show for what he did. Like many other developers, Lang busted out when the credit and real estate markets crashed. He didn't have the money to see Erin Hills through. Lang needed a White Knight.

Andy and Carlene Ziegler rode in on that horse. When I broke the story on my radio show that the Zieglers were buying Erin Hills from Lang, many didn't believe it. Their money management firm, Artisan Partners, made a name for itself by prudent investing in sensible growth stocks. The



STANDING UP for MILWAUKEE

MARK BELLING

Zieglers were not egomaniacal hedge fund vultures but outstanding Midwest mutual fund titans. Andy Ziegler, despite being worth hundreds of millions of dollars, kept a stunningly low profile in Milwaukee. When I reported the story, many people admitted to me they had never heard of him.

The Zieglers were among the mutual fund whiz kids who came out of the great company managed by another genius, Dick Strong. The Zieglers branched out on their own before Strong was sunk in a disgraceful witch hunt led by former U.S. Attorney Eliot Spitzer. Artisan Partners was thriving. Ziegler had the money. Lang had the unfinished golf paradise. The result is history.

Ziegler not only finished what Lang started but perfected the brilliant, but somewhat flawed, result. With the input of the USGA, Erin Hills was closed and some holes were rebuilt. The result is the rolling hills, sand bunkers and greens that somehow took the natural beauty of the Kettle Moraine and perfected it. The U.S. Open is here.

There are several lessons in this. Great things are not done by committees. They are

the result of astonishing ideas from human geniuses and executed by brilliant tacticians. No government subsidies were used to build Erin Hills. It isn't a TIF district and it didn't get a government stimulus fund grant. Governments build things like the insane Milwaukee Streetcar. Entrepreneurial titans like Bob Lang and Andy Ziegler build places like Erin Hills.

On my annual listener cruise last week, I visited the astonishing Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona. It was the vision of the brilliant artist Antoni Gaudi. They started building it in 1882 and it still isn't finished. (They're aiming for 2026 but based on what I saw that's a pipe dream.) But what is completed is one of the most stunning buildings I have ever seen. It is over the top, bodacious and majestic. Just being there was emotional. Maybe only St. Peter's and the Sistine Chapel can rival it. Gaudi wanted to build the most beautiful church ever. When it's finished, a century and a half or so later, he will have pulled it off.

Erin Hills is like that church in Barcelona. It's like the iPhone. It's like the U.S. Constitution. It is a testimony to human brilliance and innovation.

And, thanks to Bob Lang and the Zieglers, it is ours.

(Mark Belling is the host of a daily WISN radio talk show. His column appears weekly in the Milwaukee Post. Send your personal correspondences to Mark Belling at Clear Channel Communications, c/o WISN, 12100 W. Howard Ave., Greenfield, WI 53228).

Question of the week

Last week's question

What do you think of the United States withdrawing from the Paris accord on climate change?

Or, with college graduations last month and high school graduations this month, what advice would you give today's grads?

(Please choose only one.)

Withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement is one of the most shameful and stupid moves America's president has done. We have just lost respect and confidence of all other nations.

President Donald Trump says we will be the cleanest nation in the world despite that we are currently second only to China in pollution. How will we reach his goal when we will be a major defector against protecting our climate, air and earth by refusing to abide by the agreement?

He should have said he was elected

by the United States, not just Pittsburgh. He's all about pandering to voters in the coal mine states. Shame, shame, shame, Mr. Trump!

— Louise Bozek
West Allis

When President Donald Trump withdrew our country from the Paris climate accord he was merely adding an exclamation point to his earlier actions. By executive orders, he had already gutted our commitment to protecting the planet.

The formal withdrawal was, however, monumental in another way. It signaled the abdication of our country's world leadership role. The torch has been passed — we now stand on the sidelines as others shape the future.

— Sandy Sue Szanderek
Bay View

This week's question

What do you think of former FBI Director James Comey leaking information

to the media (through a third party)? At what point is leaking justified, if ever?

Editor's note: When responding to the Question of the Week, please include your full name with spelling, phone number and city where you live. Phone numbers will not be published. Anonymous responses are no longer accepted by the publication. Call 744-6370, Ext. 15 and leave a brief answer. Readers may also send an email with a brief answer to: dmuck@conley.net.com.

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