



The big cheese retires

After 35 years on the job, Wisconsin's **Monroe Miller** plans to move on

By Pat Jones

I have a confession to make: Monroe Miller pisses me off.

It's irritating the guy can write circles around me, a so-called professional journalist. But he also can grow grass with the best of them, has stayed in the same job for almost 40 years, is a stalwart supporter of his university and has provided mentorship and wisdom to hundreds of young people and peers throughout his career. And he's a great guy.

It's just not fair. Miller is a thorn in the side of full-time golf/turf writers like me. That's why we've all banded together to petition to force him into retirement at the end of this year.

Monroe Miller's work ethic is a result of growing up on a dairy farm.
Photo: Chad Kempf

SUPERINTENDENT PROFILE

But seriously, folks, for as long as I've been in this business, I've looked forward to receiving *The Grass Roots*, the official publication of the Wisconsin GCSA. That's because Miller, the magazine's tireless, unpaid editor for 24 years, put together a great product and interjected his own candid thoughts and editorial spin in an amazingly high-quality way that defied the term "volunteer." There are many unsung chapter editors out there, but, along with my fabulous friend Joel Jackson in Florida, Miller helped to redefine what an "amateur" could do in this critical but often overlooked position.

Miller is a consummate Wisconsin guy – cut him, and he'd bleed cheddar. Born in 1946 in the Madison area, he was – like many superin-

tendents of his generation – a farm kid with a hankering for something more.

"A lot of what I am today, I learned on a 250-acre dairy farm in southwest Wisconsin," Miller says. "I'm now just an urban farmer."

During his undergraduate years at University of Wisconsin-Madison, the legendary professor James R. Love arranged a summer job for him at Nakoma Golf Club, and he was hooked.

"Of all the things I enjoyed about farm life, the thing that wore me out was milking cows," he says. "I didn't want to spend the rest of my life doing that. By noon on my first day on the golf course, I knew that's what I wanted to do. And best of all, I didn't have to milk Holsteins."

After graduation and two years in the Army

as an MP in Vietnam, he returned to school for graduate studies and then landed the job at Blackhawk Country Club in Madison and never left. He's been the superintendent there since 1973. A few years later, he volunteered for what he thought would be a short commitment to serve as the chapter editor for the Wisconsin GCSA's publication. That short stint evolved into 24 years of churning out one of the best magazines in the industry without ever receiving a dime for his trouble. It was truly a labor of love that was rewarded with a zillion GCSAA Chapter Editors Contest awards, the Wisconsin GCSA Distinguished Service Award and the 2004 USGA Green Section Award.

Now, Miller has relinquished the reins of *The Grass Roots* to Dave Brandenburg, CGCS, golf course manager at Rolling Meadows Golf Course in Fond du Lac, and is standing on the precipice of retirement from Blackhawk. He's confident his successor, longtime assistant superintendent, Chad Grimm, will take



Monroe Miller is proud of his contributions to his alma mater, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and of his advocacy for the golf course superintendents in Wisconsin. Photo: Chad Kempf

good care of his baby. He's looking forward to traveling with his wife, Cheryl, and not sweating about article and ad deadlines every day.

Do you ever wonder if you could have gone into journalism full-time?

I thought about it when I was in high school. I enjoyed English, took forensics and made the state championship in play reading. I loved speaking and writing. But I didn't like the idea of someone telling me what to write. I couldn't get into the idea of being assigned a story, so I probably wouldn't have been a good reporter. I wanted to jump right to being a columnist. A column is great because you don't have to worry about it. If readers like it, they like it. If they don't, they don't.

For you, what's the most difficult thing about writing?

I love to write long. The difficult part is to write

short. Mark Twain once said, in a letter to a friend, "I'm sorry this letter is so long. I didn't have time to write a short one."

What article are you most proud of?

That's an interesting question because you forget so much of what you write. The one I probably remember best was "A Super Girl." It was a tribute to my wife written on my 25th wedding anniversary. It evoked a reaction from so many people. You have to be a special person to be married to any of us in golf, because we're not around much. She never complained about me being gone, the fact the lawn wasn't mowed, etc. Cheryl and I are two hearts beating in one line. We both love the same things.

How difficult is it to get other superintendents to write articles?

I quit asking a long time ago because I was afraid I would actually get one. Often they weren't the

best, and I'd spend more time rewriting them than I would if I'd just written it myself in the first place. So, I'd pretty much just ask the guys I knew who could write. And don't get me started on president's messages. Back in the days of fax machines, I'd get these six-page-long faxed messages from the president that I was supposed to boil down to one page. It's a failure of our education system. I sometimes wonder if good writing is going to be a thing of the past in 20 years.

How do you encourage others, particularly younger guys, to get involved in chapter leadership?

The only ones I can influence are the guys who are close to me, and I can only do it by example. I talk constantly about how the guys who influenced me did those things. The young guys just need to get started. The chapter presidency is an eight-year commitment. It's just shitwork mostly - paperwork, meeting notices and such.



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SUPERINTENDENT PROFILE

It's not difficult. You have to have the sense of service and commitment. I haven't noticed it's much different than two decades ago. Some understand the obligation, some don't. My only advice is to just do something.

What have you tried to teach the UW-Madison students who have worked for you throughout the years?

We're lucky to be in a university town with a turf program. But we have strict rules. If you're late three times, you're out. It's a bit of a shock for them, but it's the best thing to do for them. I've taken advantage of my proximity to the school. About 100 former employees of mine are in the business or are superintendents.

Monroe Miller was the unpaid editor of The Grass Roots, official publication of the Wisconsin GCSA, for 24 years. Photo: Chad Kempf



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In terms of mentoring, I try to spend time with the students every Thursday. Primarily, I look for pride in their work, neatness and whether they're enjoying themselves. I challenge them with "story problems" to see how good they are at problem solving. They don't teach those skills much in school these days, and I don't want any kid who leaves here to not have those skills. Most of them do, some don't.

What's the current state of golf in Wisconsin?

I see the same thing here as everywhere else. There are more golf holes than golfers. We're overbuilt. We need more players and members across the board. Some storied old clubs now have initiation fees of \$1,000. Even I could afford to join. There was a lot of extravagance in golf, and that's part of what got us in trouble. Why were we mowing fairways seven days a week? We did it because we could, when things were fat and happy.

What part of your career has been most rewarding?

My wife says, "He never missed a paycheck." I say I never got fired or had to scramble to support my family. That's part of my farm background. If you talk in terms of the industry, I'm proud of my contributions to my alma mater. I owed it a lot and tried to give back. Many of our members are on the faculty, so that sort of participation was well received. The Wisconsin GCSA and the Wisconsin Turfgrass Foundation are helping pay salaries and benefits for university positions that wouldn't exist otherwise. The O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research and Education Facility has one of the best research laboratories in the country. I'm proud to be one of the strongest advocates for the golf course superintendent in Wisconsin.

What's the secret to staying at one club for so long?

Here's the short list:

- Use common sense. Some people don't.
- Work hard all the time, every day. People notice it and respect it.
- Set your ego aside. Everyone has a boss, and you're an employee. Do what you're told.
- Be honest to the extreme with your employers, employees, regulators, etc. Don't blow smoke.
- Set high goals. If you aim high and don't quite make it, you're still good.
- Listen. Understand what people are complaining about.
- Do no harm. It's like being a doctor and following the Hippocratic Oath.
- Remember nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm. When I was growing up, my dad made sure the grass was always trimmed around the barn, the tractors were waxed, and things were neat. He wanted to create a good first impression.
- Look forward, not backward. If you try to live on what you did last year, you're screwed.
- Fix stuff now. Don't wait.
- Cultivate a good relationship with the pro and general manager. It's easy to tell them to go fly a kite, but don't succumb to that temptation.
- If you're going to last, you have to keep up with education. I've been to 36 national conferences in a row, and that has helped me tremendously.



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What do you think about the current state of the GCSAA?

In my career, I've always been a Wisconsin chapter guy. That's where my focus and energy has always been. The only thing that bothered me was the mandate for changes to chapter affiliation a few years back. I hated it. It's like the federal government bullying states around. That said, the GCSAA offers great education and a great show. We made great strides under Steve Mona. He was a great guy. I met Mark Woodward once, and he seems OK.

What's your advice for students or young folks interested in a career in the profession these days?

No superintendent has ever had enough education. Get some experience on the course first before committing to the career – and I mean more than a season or two. Understand the impact the job is going to have on your family. It's

“Get some experience on the course first before committing to the career – and I mean more than a season or two.”
 - MONROE MILLER

not an easy job, but anything that's worthwhile isn't easy. It's all about turning out a tremendous product. You get instant feedback and instant rewards. It's a great career, but it will sap a lot of your energy.

What happens come Jan. 1, 2009, when you suddenly wake up unemployed?

Blackhawk will be in the good hands of Chad Grimm. He's been with me 12 years and has been my assistant for the past nine. His successor as assistant is already here as well. They're both Wisconsin kids with farm backgrounds and solid university education, so that makes me feel

great about handing things off.

As far as retirement, I have a notebook of things I'm going to do. It's my "bucket list." There are a bunch of places I want to go wall-eye fishing. I'm definitely going to St. Andrews to see and enjoy the Old Course. Cheryl and I will travel around and make up for some of the lost time.

Final thoughts?

After 40 years, I can say with authority golf course management is the most continuously interesting work in the world. And it definitely beats the hell out of milking cows! GCI

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