



## Golf Course Architect Plays a Balancing Act

by Lori Ward Bocher

"The best golf courses are the ones where you don't have to do much of anything to the property," believes golf course architect Bob Lohmann. "You try to use the natural areas as best you can so, when you're done designing and building, it looks like the golf course always was there."

Bob is the owner of Lohmann Golf Design, Inc. of Marengo, Ill. He also owns a golf course construction firm, Midwest Golf Development. In Wisconsin, he's known for designing and building Spring Creek Golf Center in Cold Spring and Cedar Creek Country Club in Onalaska.

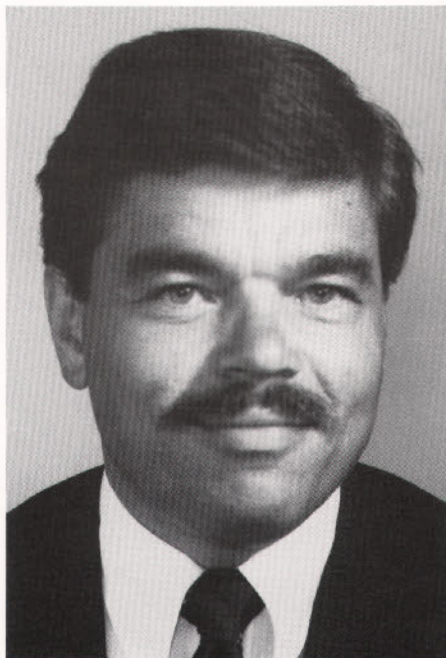
He also designed and shaped an 18-hole addition to the course at Fox Hills Resort and Convention Center, Mishicot. He designed 9-hole additions to Rock River Hills Golf Club in Horicon and Mayville Golf Club in Mayville. And his firm is currently working on an addition to Indianhead Golf and Recreation, Mosinee.

It takes creative balance to design a new golf course. "We start by walking the site," Bob explains. "But we also look at the site on a piece of paper to measure out and familiarize ourselves with what can fit on the site."

"We're always looking for key areas—key green and tee sites," he continues. "Greens are the most important part of a golf course and the flow from tee to green is very important. So we look for those key target areas and try to tie them together."

The original site greatly influences the final design—and the amount of creativity needed to come up with that design. "There are so many different types of sites," Lohmann points out, adding that not all of them are rolling fields like in Wisconsin.

For example, one site in Illinois had been a construction landfill for 25 years and was surrounded by city streets. "Very unattractive," Lohmann recalls. "I sent one of my project architects down there to look at it. In his mind, he was thinking of a golf course site like the partially wooded, rolling



farm fields of Wisconsin. When he saw this dump, he couldn't believe it. Tears came to his eyes. He thought he had the wrong site.

"But we took that site and we've developed what we think will be a very outstanding golf course," he maintains. "It takes a lot more creativity to envision how a golf course will come out of nothing. But I still believe the best golf course is one where you go to the property, walk the site and say, 'Here's a natural tee, here's a natural green, here's a natural fairway.' And when you get done, it just looks like the course always fit."

When designing a course, Lohmann tries to balance the needs of both the player and the client. "We try to develop a golf course that really is playable," he points out. "I'm an average golfer with anywhere from a 10 to 14 handicap. I like to think that a golf course I designed and built will be enjoyable for the greatest amount of people."

"We like to design a golf course that has options to it, too," he continues. "It's challenging for the better golfer, it's playable for the average

golfer, and it's aesthetically pleasing to the person who enjoys being outside. We try to give something to everybody.

"But the most important thing about any golf course design is that you're designing for your client," Bob maintains. "The toughest factor to balance is between having the best golf course that you could possibly have at the lowest budget you could possibly have."

"We're designers. We like to create things that are interesting. And when I talk to a lot of our clients, they always want *Golf Digest's* best new course," he says. "But then there's the reality of the budget. We've built courses that range from \$700,000 to \$8 million."

"We prepare a scope of services for our clients based on their needs," Bob continues. "We have to modify our scope of services until we can meet their needs and their budget and still produce the work necessary to get the job done."

In recent years, environmental concerns have created another balancing challenge for golf course architects. "It's been tough because of the wetlands, flood plains and restrictions from the Department of Natural Resources in Wisconsin and the Corp of Engineers nationally," Bob points out. "They can't even agree amongst themselves what's the proper way to use the land without destroying anything on it."

"Wetlands have really become a key issue," he continues. "They want no net loss of wetlands. When we go on site and see wetlands, we recommend to the owner that we stay away from them. If there isn't enough property, we recommend that he get a different piece of property or expand his property. With the permitting time, the extra costs and the problems that you run into, it's usually more hassle than it's worth."

"A golf course project is a lot different than a building where you can

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build it almost any time of the year," Bob continues. "You have to complete the work to meet a grassing window in the fall of the year so you can get that grass germinated and established in time to open the course the following summer. You miss that window and you miss the whole year. But you get into a permitting process and they don't care (about that window)."

Lohmann also considers maintenance needs when designing a golf course, so he likes to work closely with superintendents. "Because they have to take care of it, they're the ones we really want to work with," he says. "They understand what the course is supposed to look like when it's all done."

"And we have to make sure that we can satisfy the superintendent's needs for maintenance," Bob continues. "But I don't always agree that a superintendent has to have everything that he wants because that takes away from the creativity of the designer. You don't design a golf course to be maintained. You maintain a well-designed golf course. That's just the way I feel."

There are a lot of maintenance problems that can be traced to improper design, such as poor drainage, slopes that are too steep and greens and tees that are too small or too tight, Bob points out. "It also depends on the person who is taking care of that golf course. A good superintendent will learn how to take care of any golf course and how to make it look the best."

"Of course, the superintendent is probably dealing with an owner who says, 'I know it should cost you \$500,000 to take care of this course, but you're only going to get \$250,000, so do the best you can.' That's why we like to bring the superintendent in with the owner when we're building a new golf course and ask, 'OK, how much are you going to spend, how do you want it to look? Before we design you the best, biggest, most beautiful golf course in the world, we want you to know what you're going to have to do to take care of it.'"

After more than 15 years in the golf courses business, Bob has seen certain "needs" or "fads" emerge. "One is for multiple tees, where golf courses can be played from 5,000 to 7,000 yards," he points out. "Another is for alternate-route fairways, where you might have an easy, but long,

way to the green as well as a short cut over a ravine or water or something like that."

Carts and cart paths have grown in popularity. "I don't like carts, but they're a necessity because a lot of people would never play if they couldn't take a cart," Bob says. "Today, we have to look at carts when we design a golf course. We have to think of where the cart's going to travel, make sure that the path doesn't come into play but can still be used by the golfer. It's really difficult when you have to add cart paths to an old golf course—tough to make the paths fit the design."

Landscape elements, such as rocks or railroad ties, are being used more often. "Something different, something that will catch the golfer's eye," Bob says. "Pot bunkers and deep bunkers with steep grass slopes, like in Scotland, also are being used more."

"Another fad is the use of a golf pro or a golf pro's name in the golf course development," Bob points out, adding that some of the pros, like Nicklaus, are deeply involved; but many only lend their names. "We did a golf course with Fuzzy Zoeller once

because the owner said he needed Fuzzy Zoeller's name. But Fuzzy had no idea what was going on. He came to the site once during construction."

Where does Lohmann position himself in the golf design business? "I'm probably somewhere right in the middle," he answers, adding that the golf boom helped his business grow. "I'm nowhere near anyone like Jones or Dye or Nicklaus. But then there are a lot of other people today, such as landscape architects, engineers or site planners, who are doing golf course designs just because of the golf boom."

"All we do is golf courses," Bob continues. "Fee wise, in the Midwest, I'm probably toward the upper end. But nationwide, we don't even come close to Nicklaus, Dye or Jones. It's all a matter of how long you're in the business and what you can produce."

Bob has been in business for himself since 1984, but he's been working in golf course design since 1975. His background has a lot to do with how he became a golf course architect.

"My brother was a golf course architect," he begins. "My family used to manage Tripoli Country Club and

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later we belonged to Hartford Country Club where I learned to play golf. I also played junior golf at North Hills Country Club. My uncles own a tree service/landscape company in Thiensville, Wis. And another uncle used to work for the Milwaukee County Park System. So I was made aware of landscape architecture and golf course design at a young age, and I always wanted to be a golf course architect."

Bob was born in Milwaukee in 1952 and lived in Germantown where his family ran the Lohmann Steak House, which his brothers still operate. He graduated from high school in 1970. Because his father died during Bob's senior year, he attended the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee for two years so he could be close to home and his mother. Then he transferred to Madison to major in Landscape Architecture, and he graduated in December of 1974.

"When I graduated," I sent out probably 150 resumes," Bob recalls. "But there weren't any jobs to be had for landscape architects or golf architects.' So he did the next best thing; he accepted a temporary summer job with Killian and Nugent Golf Course Architects in Palatine, Ill. "One thing led to another, and I stayed with them for nine years."

In 1983, Killian and Nugent split. "I went to work for Dick Nugent Associates for a year and then decided it was time for me to go on my own," Bob says. "So I started Lohmann Golf Design in 1984. It was a time when I felt I needed more responsibility and freedom. I felt that I could do the work my own way. I went on my own with no jobs—just an ambition to try to start by own business, not knowing what it would take."

Bob's wife, Carol, went back to work full time so he could start his business. He literally started in the basement—with an office in his own home. "I did a lot of cold calling and sent out a lot of information to all the golf courses in the Midwest. I also contacted all the people I had met during my nine years at Killian and Nugent," Bob remembers.

"The first year we didn't have enough work to pay all the bills, but we made it," he continues. "Golf started picking up. Really, I was in the right place at the right time and got an opportunity to land a few small jobs."

His early business consisted of a lot of small remodeling jobs. Even-

tually he was designing entire golf courses. And in 1987 he started his own golf course construction firm, Midwest Golf Development. "We used to do plans for a few tees or greens, and we couldn't get a qualified golf course contractor to come in and do the construction," Bob explains. At first they did some shaping and sculpting. "Then somebody said, 'Why don't you build the whole thing?' So the construction firm started out small and worked itself up." Spring Creek was the first course where they did all of the construction. They also constructed Cedar Creek.

Today, Bob's design firm employs nine people, and the construction firm employs about 15 seasonal people plus subcontractors. Bob's wife, Carol, is office manager. The majority of their work is in Illinois and Wisconsin, but they also work in Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, Indiana and Michigan. And they've done some work in Texas, North Carolina and Kentucky.

They strive to keep a balance in their business. "We've worked on a couple of hundred courses, from as little as doing consulting or a tree planting plan, up to the plan specifications and construction management for a new golf course," Bob points out.

"We've worked on plans and specifications for 15 to 20 new courses," he adds. "Some are in different phases of being completed, and some are already open. Some haven't been built because people can't get the financing."

In 1991, sales dropped for the first time in six or seven years, Bob says.

"But our growth before that was so fast that we couldn't do any more without expanding our offices. And I really don't want to expand. So we're leveling out right now. Because of the wide range of work that we do, from feasibility studies to renovation to new course construction, we keep pretty busy."

As owner of two separate firms, Bob keeps pretty busy, too; his "balancing act" doesn't end on the job. Bob finds time to support professional organizations and has been a speaker at seminars and conferences, including the Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium in 1991. He also wrote a column, "Architect's Opinion," for *The Grass Roots*.

"The superintendents should be proud of what they have in Wisconsin and what they've done as an association," Bob emphasizes. "They're well thought of throughout the U.S. People I've talked to who have come to Wisconsin say, 'How do those guys do that? Why do their activities seem so much better than anywhere else?' It's something they can all be proud of."

Golf is Bob's favorite sport. "I usually get out once or twice a week, and I take at least two trips during the year to golf," he points out. "And then there's our architects' meeting every year where we go out and play four rounds of golf."

He also enjoys spectator sports. "I'm still a Wisconsin fan. I have Badger season tickets, I go to the Packer games, and I have Bucks tickets," he says. He also watches his two sons, Matt (13) and Jimmy (10) play sports. ♣



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