



## Seeking New Opportunities at a Slower Pace

By Lori Ward Bocher

When Randy Smith, one of Wisconsin's best known and well respected golf course superintendents, retires from Nakoma Golf Club at the young age of 51, the industry takes notice. Did he burn out? Did he have a better offer? After 24 years, was he tired of the endless challenges at Nakoma Golf Club in Madison?

The reasons for Randy's retirement have more to do with the future than with his present situation. "As a family, we decided that this was a good time to make a change and seek new opportunities for an employment situation that will carry us into my 60's or 70's," Randy explains.

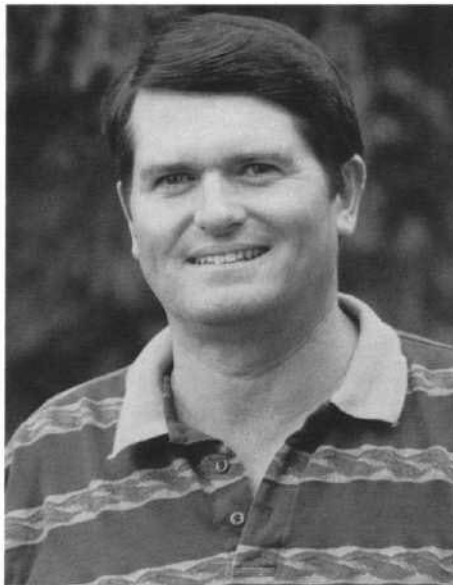
"With Social Security the way it is these days, I'll probably end up working into my 70's," he continues. "But I wouldn't be able to maintain this intensity into that age bracket. Based on experiences in our own families, we felt that the early 50's would be the time to make a career change rather than waiting longer. By the time you're 55 or 60 it gets to be rather difficult to make the change. We feel that now is the prime time."

Randy's wife, JoAnn, will continue with her job as a registered nurse at St. Mary's Hospital in Madison.

The intense nature of being a golf course superintendent has caused Randy to move on — not because he couldn't handle that intensity now, but because he didn't think he could maintain the intensity all the way to full retirement.

"And somewhere down the line I would just love to be able to take a summer vacation," he adds. "I have never, ever had that opportunity. I've always had to take vacation in the mid-winter months."

Randy's departure from Nakoma has been on good terms. And he did all that he could to facilitate a smooth transition. He submitted his letter of



Randy Smith

resignation on May 6, 1996, with a target departure date of June 4. In his letter he stated: "Prior to June 4, I hope to assist in the completion of the club house project; work to renew course conditions and promote master planning to include greens, fairways, irrigation and drainage; continue to work on the five-year capital long-range plan; and help with budget, course specifications and employee job descriptions.

"I have chosen this date to facilitate the smooth transition for a new superintendent to assume this role at Nakoma Golf Club. Winter injury areas will be healing. Spring aerification will be complete. The irrigation system should be fully functional. And all summer staff will be in place."

In reality, the June 4 deadline wasn't met. Randy stayed until the new superintendent (Clark Rowles of Geneva National) started on July 15. He worked on and off through the rest of July. And he will continue to work on a consulting basis as Nakoma gets back to some long-

range planning for course improvement.

When interviewed in mid July, Randy's future was uncertain but secure. "It's rather interesting — the number of calls that I've already received without any solicitation," he points out. He's heard from Nakoma members who would like to hire him for consultation on their own yards or estates. He's received calls from other golf courses that might hire him on a consulting basis. And he has had full-time job offers (not as a superintendent).

"I haven't turned down any job offers. I want to see what's out there yet," he says. "And I haven't totally thrown out the idea that I may be self employed permanently."

Randy became Nakoma's superintendent in February of 1973. "The job was a little more fun 24 years ago," he points out. "We were able to grow and manage fine turfgrass without the stresses that come with the job today. It was a matter of simple maintenance then. Now we're managing turf on the edge all the time. Every afternoon it may live or die just because it is mowed so short."

Demands of the golfers have led to shorter mowing heights and increased traffic, both of which stress the turfgrass. "I can't believe the number of diseases that we have to worry about now versus when I started in the business," Randy says. "Then we had to know about six diseases. Now it seems a different one will pop up every other year."

At the same time, superintendents have lost some of the chemicals that they previously used to combat disease. This combination of more diseases and fewer chemicals makes research even more critical, Randy believes.

"It's important to keep the (golf club) membership aware that monies have to be allocated for research," he

says. "This is not a universally accepted concept among the golf membership."

The golf course crew also has changed significantly in 24 years. When Randy started at Nakoma in 1973, the crew numbered five or six, and no one was allowed to work more than 40 hours a week. "In recent years we've had 18 employees in the middle of the summer and we carry five over winter," he points out. "And they average 55 hours a week."

The increase in crew size is due to the greater demands on the course — and to the weather, Randy believes. "Weather has changed since the early 70's," he says. "We used to get snow in the winter and some rain in the summer, and we'd get the average of 11 90-degree days. Now we get rain in the winter and very little snow that stays. And some summers have been tremendously difficult, particularly last summer."

Budgets have grown tremendously in 24 years. "Now we're working with a \$500,000 operating budget just for the golf course," Randy points out. "What the membership desires, and their willingness to put dollars into golf course management, have changed. They get around the country and play good courses. They come home and want to see their course the same way."

Looking back over the past 24 years, Randy realizes that working with dozens of students from the UW turf program was the most rewarding part of his job. "It's great to work with people who are interested in what they are doing and want to learn," he says. "Many other employees are more interested in the pay check and watching the clock."

"And then it's really fun to see how the students develop their own careers afterwards," Randy continues. "It is so much fun to get back with them or get calls from them. Two or three times a week I talk to past students who are out there in the green industry now."

On the course, Randy is most proud of the recent rebuilding of four greens. The Nakoma course, which opened in 1924, has poorly drained soils and *Poa annua* on its 14 older greens; Randy would like to see those rebuilt, too.

Randy has a fatherly love for the trees on the course. "About 75 percent of the trees on the course were planted by my assistant, Chuck Frazier, and myself," he points out. "We lost some 350 elm trees since the early 1970's. We replaced them three-fold with smaller trees. Now it's becoming quite a forest, and the forest is looking mature."

There are other highlights of his career at Nakoma:

1. Construction of the environmental facility for plant protectants, one of the first in Wisconsin; it has been used as a model for many golf courses, businesses and educators.

2. Being one of the first golf courses to comply with state regulations regarding petroleum pollution control.

3. National recognition for Nakoma's method of recycling fairway clippings, with the development and use of farm spreaders modified for clipping disposal onto the bluegrass rough areas, satisfying their fertilizer needs.

4. Preparing for various club, local, state and national United States Golf Association events.

5. Recognition by professors, peers and turf students for seminars he presented on budgeting, hiring and maintaining quality personnel, and golf course master planning and renovation.

6. Serving on the WGCSA board of directors for six years, as well as being a member of the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association, the Northern Great Lakes GCSA, and the Golf Course Superintendents' Association of America.

In his letter of resignation, Randy and JoAnn donated \$500 to the Nakoma Foundation earmarked for the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program. The program is not yet off the ground at Nakoma, although Randy has been campaigning for it for several years.

"I've had a little difficulty with certain members who think that, because of the public awareness, the general public would instantly want to come to the course and watch birds," Randy explains. "I think we're getting beyond that fear now and they're ready to go in the direction of the Sanctuary Program. I'd like to be known as one of the first to start it at Nakoma, even though it may occur in my departure."

Randy was born in Oshkosh in 1945 and worked on his grandparents' dairy farm while growing up. His father was a commission marketer for an oil company. After graduating from Oshkosh High School in 1963, he chose to major in Soil Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Initially I wanted to look into soil conservation," Randy points out. "But then my advisor, Dr. J.R. Love, encouraged me to get into golf course management."

He received his bachelor's degree in soils in 1967, and then entered graduate school at the UW. Randy's first turf job was mowing two cemeteries while he was a student. And he had internships at Nakoma, Cherokee Country Club and Blackhawk Country Club as an undergrad and graduate student.

After three semesters of graduate school, in 1968 his education was sidetracked. "At that time Uncle Sam decided to change my draft status, so I enlisted in the U.S. Air Force and promptly became a dental technician," Randy recalls.

"Believe it or not, I became a dental technician by trying to get on a golf course," he continues. "I was trying to choose a course of training that would get me on a recreational facility. Just the way things worked out, I became a dental technician."

Randy and JoAnn lived in Anchorage, Alaska for four years while Randy worked at the Elmendorf Air Force Base. Their oldest son was born three weeks before they moved there, and their second son was born in Alaska.

"I became interested enough in dental work that I was thinking about staying in the field or going to dental school, but I elected to stay in the turf profession," Randy remembers.

Randy left the service in 1972 and came back to Madison to return to graduate school and be Monroe Miller's assistant at Blackhawk. "But then I had the opportunity to take over as superintendent at Nakoma, so I did not assume the position at Blackhawk," he says, adding that he started at Nakoma in February of 1973.

And he never left, until now. "We like Madison, and we have had a pretty nice rapport with the club membership here," Randy says, adding that he received kind wishes

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from many members upon his retirement. "There was never any reason to seek employment elsewhere. Through the years we've been very happy where we are."

Randy and JoAnn have raised three sons in Madison. Chad, 27, is a mechanical engineer at Harley Davidson in Milwaukee. Brent, 25, is a sales and marketing representative for Ciba in Illinois. In addition to going to school and being an avid runner, Guy, 15, works for his dad and has his own lawn service with eight customers.

Besides their home in Madison, the Smiths own a cabin on 240 acres

up north near Land O' Lakes. "Perhaps now we'll have a little more time to enjoy it," Randy points out. That's where he does some of his deer and grouse hunting. His pheasant and turkey hunting opportunities are in southern Wisconsin. He also enjoys fishing. "I haven't been able to fish in the summer for the last 10 or 15 years. But I've already been out once this summer."

There are other things Randy will find time for now that he's left 70-hour work weeks behind. Like golfing. And wood working. And photography. And traveling. "We just haven't had the opportunity to travel in the past," Randy says. "I would love to visit

some national parks. In my life, I've only been to one and that was Mt. Rushmore for three hours in the wintertime."

In closing, Randy has these words for his fellow golf course superintendents: "Feel free to give me a call, whether it's for advice or to discuss problems. We probably have seen just about every problem that you can imagine on good old Nakoma Golf Club."

"I think I've had a long and rewarding career," he continues. "I would do it all over again. I'm just happy that I was able to do it this long. And I look forward to the future. 🏌️"

