



## Nakoma Golfers Will Miss Smith's Touch

By Rob Schultz

Madison's private golf clubs have been blessed over the past 20 years. They have had golf course superintendents who have been spoiling their members with near-perfect playing conditions since the early 1970s.

That's why so many in the golf course maintenance business were saddened when they learned that Nakoma's Randy Smith recently resigned. The 51-year old Smith finally bowed to the pressures and demands of one of the most difficult courses to maintain in this state and plans to spend more time with his family.

Although some Nakoma members might not know it now, they're going to miss Smith, one of the few people who understands just how much work is ahead for the club to get the course back to its proud shape of the '70s and 80s.

"There are many challenges ahead here," said Smith as he sat behind his desk inside Nakoma's maintenance facility this week. "And we have to face the fact that the challenges here are becoming even bigger with the (poor) weather of the past three years — especially last summer."

That's not great news for Nakoma, which has already taxed its members with recent subsidies for a remodeled clubhouse, not to mention the redesign of the 10th and 11th holes and the addition of two other new greens a few years ago. Once one of the most popular private clubs in town, Nakoma has lost many members over the past years and joins those that don't have waiting lists.

Nakoma does not have a master plan for the improvement of its course. But if asked, Smith would suggest re-building 14 greens, replacing its outdated 31-year-old irrigation system, re-growing some of its fairways and creating an environmentally sound drainage system for the swampy, muck-based course that sits just 18 inches above the water table.

Smith, who has been working 70-

hour weeks as Nakoma's superintendent for 24 years, is hard-pressed when asked which part of his job is most frustrating. But taking care of its poa-infested greens probably would rank No. 1. Nakoma's members can claim accurately that their greens are similar in grass-type to those at Maple Bluff and Blackhawk, both of which have outstanding putting surfaces every summer.

The difference is Nakoma's bad soil doesn't drain well and has many greens shaded by large trees that can't be trimmed because they're part of the UW Arboretum. Plus, the entire course is unfortunately sloped to face the north. Thus, the greens hold ice and snow much longer than most courses because the sun can't burn it off during warmer spring days.

"We're still waiting for the snow and ice to melt when some other courses are already mowing," said Smith, who sees patchy greens every spring because the poa annua grass that make up its 14 older greens dies every year. "What's frustrating is that they'll barely heal from the winter kill when they get hit from the usual stress. You get three 90-degree days and they really stress. The poa can't tolerate it and they start to decline."

What makes matters worse is that golfers are demanding that their greens be cut shorter so they're faster. It seems everybody wants their greens at U.S. Open speeds. But that kills greens, especially the stressed-out ones at Nakoma. A USGA official told the golf course superintendents at their national convention last February that it's time for the national tournaments, as well as all clubs, to mow the greens so they're nine or 10 on the stimpmeter instead of the crazy 12 - 13 that exists now.

"We gave him a standing ovation when he said that," said Smith. "But the people he needed to tell that to wasn't us but the golfers at the clubs. I can get our four greens at 10 (on the stimpmeter) right now. The other

14 are a stretch to get there. They just can't handle it."

Smith said the new superintendent will need a strong voice if he hopes to succeed at improving Nakoma. He or she will need to make the members understand that many connected with turfgrass research, from the USGA to local scientists at the O.J. Noer Center, have recommended that Nakoma replace its old greens.

That was a hard sell for Smith, who members have asked to perform too many miracles over the years. "I've had mixed feelings from the members," he said. "But when we sit down and talk, they at least have begun to understand how our feelings are about the matter."

Smith plans to stay around and help part-time as long as he's needed. He initially planned to leave June 4, but changed his mind because Nakoma needed him for the transition. It's tough to find a superintendent to switch jobs at the busiest point of the season. "I'd like to converse with the new superintendent to help them do this thing," he said. "And if they can find a better way to get the job done, that's fine."

Nakoma won't be far from Smith's mind or heart wherever he goes. He plans to contribute \$500 to the Nakoma Foundation earmarked for the Audubon Sanctuary Program. He also would like to volunteer his time to help organize pictures and slides for the club's historical library.

"All my memories of this place are wonderful memories," said Smith, one of the nicest men and brightest teachers in the business. He has managed and trained many turfgrass students who have gone on to become superintendents at other courses and even Camden Yards baseball park in Baltimore.

But Smith also listened to his mind and heart when they told him it was time to go. "It was a decision made by my entire family," he said. "We decided to look at other opportunities that are out there. It's better to do that at 50 than at 60 or 65."

Smith has no idea what his next job will entail. "But I just bought a fishing boat," he said. "In my new career, whatever it may be, there will be time left to do some fishing as well as hunting." 🍷