

His Name is Synonymous With Madison Golf

By Lori Ward Bocher

Ervin Graf, semi-retired at age 72, can still remember the advice his father gave him. "When I was a youngster," Erv recalls, "my father told me, 'Son, try to stay in the golf business if you can because it's very rewarding. The people you meet are terrific. There's nothing better that you can do with your life.'"

"When I add up all the years of golf-related service between my dad and me, it's over 90 years," Erv continues, adding that his father, Ervin Sr., was the greenskeeper at Nakoma Country Club in Madison for 47 years. Erv Jr. worked for the City of Madison for 35 years as both a golf course superintendent and director of golf for the city's four courses. When you throw in some consulting he did on the side and the jobs he had as a youngster, there's hardly a course in Madison that hasn't been touched by Erv.

"I certainly have been blessed and feel good about what my input has been to make golf in Madison a great and rewarding experience," Erv says. "Thanks be to God for the guidance that made it all possible for me."

As he relates his life story, Erv is ever mindful of and thankful for the people who influenced him, who gave him jobs, who taught him what he knows. And that first person was his father.

In the beginning...

Erv Graf was born on a farm in Verona, Wisconsin, in 1929. "I was 6 years old when my family moved off the farm into Madison," he relates. "That's the beginning of my golf story. My father was hired as the greenskeeper at Nakoma Golf Club in 1935. His farm background



Erv Graf, Sr. showing Erv Jr. (age 4) how to hold a golf club. The Glenway Golf Course is in the background.

taught him how to work with growing conditions, how to deal with Mother Nature. This related to golf course management, which he soon picked up. The job worked out well for him." So well that he stayed for 47 years.

But it wasn't his father's job that first lured Erv into the world of golf. It was the game itself, and Erv became quite accomplished at it in his early years. "It just so happened that the home my folks bought in Madison was right across the street from a city-owned, 9-hole course on the west side, Glenway Golf Course," Erv recalls. "Immediately there was a fascination. I got right out there and started to learn how to play golf at an early age. I still have a picture of me with my dad teaching me how to hold a golf club."

"Soon I was sneaking across the street, late in the evenings, to play two holes at Glenway that were right across from our house," he continues. "I guess I was hooked on golf. I'd chip and putt under the



Erv Graf, Jr. at Odana Hill Golf Course in 2001.

moonlight. Later on in my playing career, my short game was my best because I had a lot of practice when I was young."

In high school, Erv spent his time both playing golf and working on the course. "I became quite a good player," he remembers. "I was shooting in the 70s and playing on the Madison West High School golf team. There was a golf pro at Nakoma who encouraged me, even to the point of where he thought some day I might be good enough to play on the pro tour," Erv recalls. "As kids, we all have things we dream about, goals."

Erv played in the city tournament for at least 12 years, finishing in the Top 10 several times. That was the extent of his competitive play. But his work in golf course management continued to develop. While in high school he worked summers for his father at Nakoma. "I learned the business from my father," he relates. "I started out mowing greens. In those days we



used walking greens mowers. It's kind of ironic – we're going back to those today."

When he was a senior in high school, Erv worked as a caddie master at Blackhawk Country Club. "Kully Schlicht was the pro and also the greenskeeper there – he was in charge of the whole golf operation at Blackhawk," Erv recalls. "And he knew my dad quite well. Knew that I was interested in learning more about golf. So he asked me to work there. He encouraged me."

No golf in the Army...

Erv graduated from high school in 1947 and worked for his father at Nakoma. He also completed one year of college at the UW-Madison. But in 1950 he was drafted into the Army. The Korean War was on, but Erv served in Germany. When his two years were up, his dreams of being a golf professional had dwindled a little bit. But he knew he

wanted to continue in the golf industry in some capacity. He was ripe for opportunity, and it came.

"In 1955 the City of Madison was building an 18-hole golf course on the west side, the Odana Hills Golf Course," Erv points out. "I was asked if I would be interested in working there during the construction, so I did. That was really a valuable experience, working during the construction phase. I learned a lot about building greens, irrigation, reading plans and following all phases of building a course.

"I guess at that point I had decided to stay in golf course maintenance. My father certainly encouraged me to do that," Erv continues. "So I applied for, and got, the job as the first greenskeeper at Odana. I was there for seven years.

"Then the City of Madison was preparing to build a 36-hole golf course on the southeast side – it

later was named Yahara Hills Golf Club," he recalls. "I guess because of my background with construction at Odana, I was asked to be part of the building at Yahara. We opened Yahara Hills in 1968 after two years of construction, and I became the superintendent there."

Erv held that position until 1975 when the city hired a new parks superintendent, Dan Stapay. He had some changes in mind for the city's four golf courses – Yahara (36 holes), Odana (18 holes), Glenway (9 holes) and Monona (9 holes). Prior to his arrival, the courses were managed by city personnel. "He wanted to hire golf professionals to run the courses," Erv explains. "His objective was to provide better service to the golfers.

"He also wanted to set up better communications between the park office and the courses. So he created a position as director of golf. I

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applied for that job and was fortunate enough to get it," Erv says. "It included total responsibility for the clubhouse and the field operations – dealing with the golf pros and superintendents as well as the day-to-day concerns that we had with four golf courses."

Open communications...

As Madison's golf director, one of Erv's major goals was to keep the lines of communication open, and that he did. "Almost on a daily basis, I made it a point to swing through and stop at each of the four courses to see how things were going," he points out. "And I met with the parks superintendent two or three times a week to keep him posted."

"Every couple of weeks I'd sit down with the greenskeeper, the field staff and the golf pro at each course," Erv continues. "This hadn't been done previously. But it worked well. Things that could have grown into conflicts between the field staff and the clubhouse staff were ironed out."

Erv doesn't see much of a difference today between publicly owned and privately owned courses. "When I first started in the business, I think the overall expectations at the private courses were higher – the membership was looking for the ultimate in playing conditions," he says, adding that city courses weren't quite up to that standard.

"But I've found that, over the years – at least in the Madison area – you have to put out a good product or people are going to go somewhere else to play golf," Erv continues. "Today, the overall management of the courses, whether they be city owned or private, is pretty much the same."

And while Erv didn't have to answer to a green committee and chairman, he did have to report to a citizen committee. "So it isn't that different," he maintains.

On weekends and during vacation periods, Erv did a little moon-

lighting with a good friend, Art Johnson, who was head of Madison's park planning division. Art asked Erv to help him with some private consulting on area golf courses – advice on construction or remodeling or problem solving. The courses that Erv touched in this capacity were: Lodi Golf Course, Koshkonong Mounds in Fort Atkinson, Edelweiss Chalet in New Glarus, Christmas Mountain Village in Wisconsin Dells, Portage Country Club, Cherokee and Blackhawk in Madison, and Tumbledown Trails in Verona.

"When I think back in retrospect, I don't know how we were able to manage our jobs with the city and also do these consulting jobs," Erv relates.

Retired from the city...

Erv retired from city employment and consulting in 1990. "At that point I had completed about 35 years of greenskeeper and supervisory work," he points out. "I left with a great feeling of satisfaction and gratitude which is something we all strive for in our work."

"I would like to mention a couple of people who were instrumental in my career," Erv continues. "One is Jim Marshall, Madison's first park superintendent who was very instrumental in creating both the Odana and Yahara courses. He hired me at Odana and became a good friend."

"The other person is Art Johnson, Madison's park planner, who gave me the opportunity to do

some consulting work," Erv adds. "I would also like to recognize the golf course superintendents and the field maintenance people. I always consider them the backbone of the golf course. If they put out a good product, people are going to have good play, and that's what it's all about. They usually don't get enough recognition."

"I'd also like to mention the golf pros and clubhouse staff people," he says. "All became good friends and helped in many ways in my days as the golf director."

"And last, but not least, I'd like to mention the support of my wife and my family," he continues. "Being in the golf business like I was all those years, I wasn't spending the time with them that maybe I should have. I've tried to make up a little for that at this time in my life."

Erv and his wife, Patricia, had five children, one of whom is deceased. A daughter and two sons are in their 40s, and the youngest son is 37. None of them followed Erv Sr. and Erv Jr. into the golf business. "My kids all took up golf and they like to play it, but they all went in different career directions," Erv points out.

Still employed and playing golf...

Erv's retirement in 1990 is not the end of the story. In 1991 he was contacted by Vitense Golf and on the west side of Madison. In business since the mid 50s, Vitense has a large driving range, two mini courses for the kids, a 9-hole par-3

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course, and other attractions.

"They asked if I would be willing to help out a little bit, especially with their par-3 course," Erv explains. "It needed some improvement. I'm still working there. This is my eleventh year. I've enjoyed it. I put in an abbreviated schedule starting early in the mornings – I'm used to getting up early. I'm done by 10:30 or 11 o'clock in the morning.

"Working here keeps me active physically and out of my wife's way. They've asked me to stay for another 20 years. I said that would be great, but I don't know if I could handle it," he laughs. "I'm probably to the point where I won't be working here much longer."

Throughout his career, Erv has maintained his game of golf. "I still try to play a couple of times a week," he points out. "I play with some fellows who are about my age. One is a lifetime golf professional, Bill Furnari. Another is George Schiro, also a PGA golf professional who has done a lot for junior golf in the Madison area and is recognized by anyone involved with golf here. The third player is Dave Kelliher, a great friend of mine who recently retired from the Madison recreation department. For many years he was in charge of run-

ning the city golf tournament."

When he's not working or playing golf, Erv has another golf-related activity. "For 15 years or so I've been collecting antique and classic golf clubs," he explains. "I have quite a collection, particularly of old hickory shafted clubs. One of the things I do with these clubs, and I have quite a few people who call me, is to make attractive plaques with the beautiful old hickory shafted clubs. They're used for a retirement, a special golfing event, things like that. I do this mostly in the winter.

"My wife, she works with ceramics. I help her out with some of that. She has her own kiln," Erv adds.

Erv is now an "AA" or retired member of the WGCSA. But, in the past, he was active on some committees. "I helped set up the monthly outings at the various courses – deciding where we were going to have the outings, what type of play, promoting them to the membership," he explains. "I haven't been attending a lot of those meetings now, but occasionally I do stop in."

Erv's glad that he followed his father's career advice so many years ago. And, even though they probably don't know it, so are the golfers in the Madison area. ♣

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