

# You Can't Take the Country Out of the Boy

By Lori Ward Bocher



After years of saying nice things about others, helping others, featuring others in his prized publication, *The Grass Roots*, Monroe Miller's time has come. Now it's time for 'others' to give back the same. And while it's easy for 'others' to heap accolades on Monroe, it's not so easy for the veteran golf course superintendent to accept them. Modest and humble, he's truly a man who would rather give than receive.

"I am who I am," Monroe admits. And golf course superintendents, turf professionals, friends and family are glad that he is.

As 99 percent of the readers of *The Grass Roots* already know, on February 13 Monroe received the USGA 2004 Green Section Award. This prestigious award is given annually to someone who has made significant contributions to the game of golf through work with turfgrass. Monroe has been the superintendent at Blackhawk Country Club in Madison since 1973.

"Oscar Peterson, who used to work for me, called me up and said, 'Well, gees, Monroe, if you can win that Green Section Award, anybody can.' And that's the beauty of it," Monroe says. "You don't have to have umpteen degrees or a pedigree that's a mile long. Somebody just needs to look at what you've done and say that it's been beneficial."

In spite of everything beneficial he's done for the golf and turf industries, that's not how Monroe sees himself. "If somebody asked me, 'What single phrase identifies you the best?' I wouldn't say I'm a golf course superintendent. I wouldn't say I'm a Wisconsin grad or anything else. I'd say the thing I'm most proud of. *I'm a farm kid*," Monroe proudly states. "My wife, Cheryl, once said to me, 'You think every kid who was ever raised on a farm is perfect, don't you?' Yeah, I guess that's true." Living proof of the old adage, 'You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy.'

## **Life starts in Madison...**

Farm boy or not, Monroe was actually born in Madison in 1946 while his father, Frank, finished his last two years at the UW-Madison College of Agriculture after serving in World War II. But he was raised on a farm in southwest Wisconsin near Fennimore. "When I was still quite young, my father and mother (Virginia) decided that they wanted to raise their kids on a farm. So they sold a successful business dad had started, bought a farm back in their home town, and raised their family on a dairy, beef and hog farm." Both of his parents are still alive.

When Monroe graduated from high school in 1964, he wasn't sure what he wanted to do. "I just knew I

didn't want to milk cows," he points out. At the UW he tried a survey course in engineering and decided he didn't like that, either. He did like his soils course with Dr. J.R. Love. "One day in class he made an announcement about a job at Nakoma Golf Club. I saw him after class, he drove me out to Nakoma to meet with the superintendent, and I took the job.

"After my first day of working there that summer, I knew that's what I wanted to do," Monroe recalls. "It had machinery. I worked outside. There was a physical aspect to the job. I could see in a short period of time that this was the perfect compromise for me - similar to working on a farm, but I didn't have to deal with Holsteins."

## **Mandatory military service...**

When Monroe graduated from the UW in 1968 with a degree in soils, his first choice was to attend graduate school. But Uncle Sam had another idea, and Monroe was drafted into the Army in the midst of the Vietnam Conflict. After basic training at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, Monroe was selected for the Military Police and shipped to Fort Gordon, Georgia, for MP training. "I just barely made it," he points out. "The minimum height requirement was 5'10", and I was 5'10". I was the smallest MP you could have."

Once through MP training, Monroe 'barely made it' in another sense. He recalls the episode like it was yesterday. "Our whole company is lined up alphabetically," he says. "They start with 'A' and these guys are going to bases in the U.S. and Europe. Then they get down to 'Miller, M.' I take one step forward and this old company first sergeant who was reading off the orders says to me, 'Private Miller, are you a tiger, boy?' I said 'Yes.' And then he said to me, 'Well, you better be, boy, 'cause you're going to Nam.' I almost passed out. Every single person from me to the end got shipped over to Asia. So I missed it by one."

Monroe married his college sweetheart, Cheryl, in 1969 just before going into the military. "I've only cried a few times in my adult life," Monroe points out. "One of them was when Cheryl took me to be shipped out to Vietnam. I figured I was doomed. They were killing 500 GIs a week over there. I cried like a baby until I got on the plane."

## **In Madison to stay...**

Fortunately, Monroe came home alive from his tour of duty in Vietnam, July 1969 to October 1970. He immediately started graduate school at the UW. "Doc Love had me all registered and ready to go," he recalls.

Monroe was in graduate school through 1972, but he never wrote his thesis so he never got an MS degree. While in graduate school he worked at Maple Bluff Country Club. And he and Cheryl lived in the Eagle Heights graduate housing which is just a stone's throw from Blackhawk Country Club. Their first two daughters were born during this time.

"It was a short bike ride from Eagle Heights to Blackhawk," Monroe recalls. "We'd bike up there and sit on Blackhawk Drive overlooking the golf course. I can remember thinking many times, 'Wow. Lucky guy who is the superintendent here.' I actually had that dream come true.

"I started here on January 1, 1973," Monroe continues. "One of the members had called Doc Love and told him they needed a superintendent with college training. He told them, 'I've got just the man for you.' After interviewing there, I got the job."

And he's been there ever since, for 31 years, almost unheard of in his business. Why has he remained at Blackhawk all of these years? He has many reasons.

"First of all, it's a beautiful piece of property," Monroe answers. "It's right on the shores of Lake Mendota. I think the view from our clubhouse is one of the prettiest in North America. I like the stands of native oak and hickory. I have trees here that are over 400 years old! They were marker trees for Native Americans. We're on the National Park Service's list of historic places in America because of the effigy and burial mounds.

"You could know nothing about golf and take a walk on the course and think, 'Wow, this is pretty.' Whenever I get depressed and need a little morale boost, I drive up by our putting green, put my feet up on the golf cart, soak in the view, and say, 'I wonder how my friend the attorney is doing in his little cubbyhole office downtown.' I take in a breath of fresh air. Pretty soon I'm refreshed and ready to go. It's just an extremely pleasant place."

#### **Great place to work and live ...**

There are more reasons Monroe has stayed at Blackhawk. "For all of the years I've worked here, Blackhawk has attracted exceptionally pleasant people to work for," he says. "And I view it as an advantage that this is a golf club. Golf is what matters. It's a classical course, not a development with houses lining the fairways. And we are given everything we need to provide a quality golf course.

"And Madison is a terrific town for raising a family," he continues. "It has the advantages of a metropolitan area, yet I can be out in the country in 10 minutes. I live out in the country. I can smell cow manure in the morning. But I can be to work in 10 minutes. Plus, I've always valued and treasured my alma mater. I can walk to the UW in 15 minutes and drive there in 5. I can do everything I need to do from here.

"I've had opportunities to go elsewhere," Monroe admits. "But I was never interested. I didn't want to move out of state. I was less interested in financial gain and more interested in quality of life. Anything I want to do I can do very, very nicely from Blackhawk."

And Blackhawk has always been very supportive of Monroe's many extra-curricular activities. "In every review I've gotten, I was complimented for my outside participation and encouraged to continue," Monroe points out. However, he's quick to note that "work always comes first. I never work on *The Grass Roots* at work. I make many trips to Kramer Printing in the morning before work or at night before supper. There will be 100 consecutive days during the fat part of the season where I'm here every single day, regardless of what I'm involved in. The work gets done first. All the other things fall into place when I have time."

#### **The Grass Roots...**

Speaking of those 'other things,' none take more time, energy, creativity, and love than *The Grass Roots*. Monroe has been editor of this award-winning publication since 1984. "I was president of WGCSA at the time and Danny Quast was editor. He had started it a few years before," Monroe explains. "I told him I

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wanted to participate in *The Grass Roots*. The man was so relieved that somebody actually offered to help. By March or April I was in charge."

Why did Monroe gravitate to *The Grass Roots*? "English was always one of my favorite subjects," he answers. "I used to pick sentences out of books and diagram them for fun. Writing has always been a part of my personality. And working on *The Grass Roots* is a labor of love. I do that instead of bowling or golf."

For 20 years in a row now, *The Grass Roots* has received the best chapter publication award from the GCSAA. How does he put it together? First, it takes 125 hours per issue, Monroe calculates. "You ask Cheryl. She would hardly recognize me at home without a yellow legal pad," Monroe says. "I think about it all the time. I make notes constantly. I'm never short of article ideas. When I'm asked how I generate my ideas, I tell people that I have a list of 100 topics and different ways to look at them. Generating article ideas isn't difficult for me."

Monroe uses his yellow legal pads and No. 2 pencils to do more than jot down article ideas. He also writes all of his first drafts with them. "I still write it all out in long hand, and then put it in the word processor," he admits. "I like yellow legal pads and No. 2 pencils. It's one of those odd things I can't explain, but I just like doing it that way."

#### **Fun with the 'Back Nine'...**

One of his regular columns, 'Tales from the Back Nine,' is a fun endeavor for Monroe. "It's totally fictional, totally fictional," he reminds readers. "It's just strange situations I think up. One day I'm going to write about a truckload of hogs that has an accident and the hogs end up on a golf course. These circumstances and ideas just fall on me. I don't know where it all comes from."

Two 'Back Nine' columns stand out in Monroe's memory. While most of these articles are humorous, one was quite emotional; 'The Mayor' was a superintendent who was mayor of his town. "That one was reprinted all over the country," Monroe recalls. The second one told about an imaginary trip to Scotland to visit golf courses and find his Scottish roots. "I must have had 50 people ask me about my trip to Scotland," Monroe remembers. "I enjoyed it *enormously*."

Monroe is especially grateful to the UW faculty members who contribute to *The Grass Roots* on a regular basis. "It's such a great extension function for the faculty, and I think they recognize it for that. They're so willing to participate," Monroe says. "Their advice has always been inspiring. I told Wayne Kussow that if he took all of his articles and collected them, he'd have a great book, 'Golf Course Soils by W.R. Kussow.' That's how good some of that material is."

One of the greatest improvements to *The Grass Roots* has been the addition of customized artwork on the cover. "I love all of Jenny's covers," Monroe says.

"With an attractive cover, people look at it and want to see what's inside. I think the one I like best is the drawing of the Old Tom Morris statue."

"My goal with *The Grass Roots*," Monroe says, "has always been to make it a publication that people could pick up and (a) have some idea of what we do in our profession, and (b) will be favorably impressed, or at least not react negatively. My desire to portray a positive image of golf course superintendents has motivated me tremendously to turn out a quality publication with pertinent material."

#### **Wisconsin golf & turf activities...**

Indeed, Monroe's greatest contribution to the WGCSA has been serving as editor of *The Grass Roots* for 21 years and counting. But he has also served in all offices except treasurer, including two years as president.

Another way Monroe has left his mark on the turf industry is by being a founder of the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association and by being one of the main movers and shakers behind the building of the O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research and Education Facility. "Our main goal in starting the WTA was to support turfgrass research in Wisconsin," Monroe says, adding that he has been on the board of directors since its inception. "The Noer Facility followed from that. Our turf researchers were driving all over Wisconsin trying to find places to do research. Their time is too valuable to be spent on the road. Besides, everybody else has a turf research center, why shouldn't we?"

Monroe and his good friend, Tom Harrison (superintendent at Maple Bluff Country Club), were very involved in the construction of the Noer Facility - so much so that Monroe still feels like a proud papa. "It's like it's *ours*," he says. "I'm sure it drives Tom Schwab (director of the Noer Facility) nuts because we still go out there and point out that walls need to be painted, or carpet needs to be replaced, or the shop needs to be cleaned up. But he's pretty good natured about it."

"We used to be a lot worse than we are now," he admits. "We used to go out there and inspect everything because we had worked so hard to get it. It's a beautiful place. Any visiting turf researchers think it's just wonderful."

#### **National involvement...**

When it comes to the GCSAA, Monroe has served on numerous committees, but never in an office. "I'm not very political," he says. "I'm more interested in getting things done, in completing a goal. I'm more interested in results, not the process to get there. But participating in the process is at least interesting."

On a national level, Monroe has been on the USGA Green Section Committee since 1986. The committee doesn't meet very often; instead, members work to promote the improvement of golf turf by promoting Green

Section activities in any way they can. For Monroe, that means giving talks, writing letters, personal arm twisting, and writing in *The Grass Roots*.

"I'm a huge advocate of the Green Section," he says. "I think of all of the agronomists who have pulled me out of trouble. Why wouldn't everybody want to get this kind of help? So I've been kind of aggressive about it. When you get into some tight spots, those guys are always there. The Green Section is *good for golf!*"

"From a selfish point of view," Monroe continues, "I like having someone who is independent and objective coming to my course to review my work and provide a written record of his report. Some people are afraid of that, but I always welcome it because if I can be better, I want to be better."

The Green Section agronomist can also be a great ally when trying to convince golf course management to make a change, Monroe points out. "He comes in and says, 'You guys have got to replace that irrigation system,' and it's done because the Green Section agronomist says it needs to be done. I could talk about it for five years. But you get an outside opinion and they take care of it right away."

**Combining two loves...**

By helping to train the next generation of golf course superintendents, Monroe is able to assist both his profession and his alma mater, the UW-Madison. No wonder he enjoys it so much and is so good at it. According to Wayne Kussow, of the 200+ students that have graduated from the Turf and Grounds Management program thus far, nearly one-half have benefited from having worked for Monroe. "I've never counted," Monroe admits. "Some years I've had five interns, other years it's a couple."

"And how lucky am I?!" Monroe asks enthusiastically and rhetorically. "You talk about a motivated, smart crew. There's nothing like it." In addition to having interns in the summer, Monroe might also have some in the spring and fall. "A lot of them will work somewhere else in the summer, and then work here in the spring and fall. This gives them exposure to another golf course, another season, and another superintendent."

Student interns aren't just a source of labor for Monroe; he takes very seriously his duty to help train them. "I'm an open book. Anything they want to know I try to share with them," he says. "We sit down once a week and hash over what we did. I even go to the point of giving them story problems. We take them to field days, big tournaments, anything that might somehow inspire them, motivate them or reaffirm their career choice. And I try to instill in them the value and pleasure of hard work."

While some superintendents find it easier to have each summer employee stick with the same job all season, Monroe likes to shake things up. "I believe variety is the spice of life," he says. "Young people can get bored easily. So we shift the job responsibilities around. We invest a

huge amount of time in training them. But then there's always something for them to look forward to."

**Badger through and through...**

Is there anyone out there who doesn't know that Monroe is a Badger fan? We're not talking just sports teams here, although he does have season tickets for both football and basketball. Monroe is a fan of the entire University - what it represents, what it has done for Wisconsin, and the picturesque campus itself. More specifically, he's an advocate for the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs).

We've already talked about his efforts to make life easier and more productive for turf researchers. And we've talked about his dedication to training turf students. But Monroe has also served on the board of directors for WALSA (Wisconsin Agriculture and Life Sciences Alumni Association), including two years as president. Because he works just minutes from campus, he represented WALSA on numerous occasions such as senior breakfasts and award ceremonies.

More recently Monroe served on the prestigious CALs Board of Visitors for three years. The board was created to support the College and to give input to the Dean. "I loved it. It was a learning experience for me," Monroe says. "It was an interesting group of people, powerful people in terms of agricultural interests."

CALs recognized Monroe in 1989 by giving him its Honorary Recognition award - mainly for his work in establishing the WTA and Noer Facility. "That was just fantastic. It meant a lot to me," Monroe says. "I just love the place. I can't even put my finger on the reason why. I guess because it's been such a big part of my life and my prosperity. I remember hearing my father talk



about the University. When I was young and we'd be driving through Madison, he'd always go over Bascom Hill on Observatory Drive and say, 'That's where I went to school.' It's just such a part of me."

**Crazy about family...**

By now this article has shown how passionate Monroe is about his work, Blackhawk Country Club, *The Grass Roots*, and his alma mater. You'd think he'd have no energy left for anything else! But he's equally as passionate about family and hobbies.

Monroe and Cheryl have raised three daughters, and papa is very proud of them. The two oldest, Amy and Holly, both live in the Twin Cities area. "They both went there for graduate school and liked it so much that they stayed there," Monroe explains. Amy is a French teacher and her husband is a hydrologist. They have blessed Monroe and Cheryl with their first grandchild, Grace, who just turned 4. Holly is a statistician for the St. Paul school district and also a part-time instructor at the University of Minnesota.

The youngest, Christie, pleased her father in a very special way. "She's a CALS grad," Monroe points out. "She has a degree in genetics and works at a bio-tech firm in Middleton. She's a city gal totally, but there isn't

anyone who would do more to promote CALS because of her wonderful experience there."

Monroe gives Cheryl most of the credit for raising their daughters. She received her degree in nursing from the UW but never spent much time as a nurse. In addition to raising the girls she has worked part-time in the insurance and banking industries. Currently she works for Community Bankers of Wisconsin in Middleton.

**Historical hobbies...**

It would take another full article to adequately discuss all of Monroe's hobbies. "I love the agricultural sciences. I love my agrarian background. Family has always been hugely important to me. I've always had great respect for those who have gone before me. Many of my hobbies are related to these things," Monroe points out.

There's his farm toy collection. "I've never counted them all," he admits. However, if you ever saw the toys that were in his office at Blackhawk, that was only about 10 percent of the collection, he says. He has since removed them because the humidity was too high there.

Monroe also collects book, pictures and other documents related to golf and farming. "I'm a pack rat," he laughs. "I like used books, not new books. I like bargains.



It's the chase that's fun. My wife thinks I'm a hick, the stuff I bring home sometimes."

When Monroe and Cheryl built their new one-story house in 1999, Monroe's hobbies were on in his mind. "I built a library with mahogany shelves from floor to ceiling, and I've got it jammed full of books," he admits.

His basement is reserved for his farm toys and other agricultural treasures. "I built an entire room down there," Monroe explains. "I have an actual boxcar sliding door that looks like a machine shed door, so that's what I call the room - my machine shed. Some day I'd like to build another room that looks like a barn - with a stanchion, gutter, and windows like we had in our barn when I was growing up. I've got lots of overflow that could go in that room."

His annual treks to New England each fall combine many interests. "I started going out there because of its natural beauty," Monroe explains. "It's one of the few places in the world where the color is so intense because of the combination of soil and climate. It's also where my ancestors are from. I have four generations of grandparents buried at Martha's Vineyard. So I go there to track down birth certificates, photograph graves. And I love American history and Revolutionary War history, so I find lots of places to visit."

Monroe also likes to visit presidential homes. "I've been to almost all of them," he says. "In 1959, when I was an 8th grader, Sen. John Kennedy was in Fennimore campaigning for president. My class picked me to go to the Community Center and ask him a question and get his autograph. So I've had this interest in presidents ever since."

### **The future...**

In case you were wondering, Monroe does have plans for retirement. "It's dawned on me that I'll never have enough money put away for retirement because I'm conservative," he admits. "So I've decided that whatever I have when I'm 62-1/2 is what I have and I'll retire. I actually keep a notebook of things I'm going to do when I retire. Being a farm kid and a golf course superintendent, I've never had a summer vacation. I'm not going to sleep in every morning. And I'm sure as heck not going to hire somebody to mow my yard."

### **And now a word from his better half**

No one knows Monroe better than his wife, Cheryl. And for her, words can hardly express how excited Monroe was about receiving the Green Section Award. "It was the happiest I have ever heard him," she says. "He called me at work and said, 'I'm sitting down. And you better sit down, too, because I cannot believe the phone call I just got. I'm just absolutely stunned.'

"And he truly was," Cheryl continues. "He never

dreamed that he'd get such an award. It was a complete surprise. He had no clue that anyone had nominated him. It was just right out of the blue. He's extremely humbled by it and still doesn't understand why he was chosen. But he sure has enjoyed life since. He was on Cloud 9 for weeks."

Not too long after he learned of his award, Monroe did something completely out of character. "One Saturday morning he was getting the oil changed on our car," Cheryl explains. "He knew that I've always wanted a red convertible, especially after the Thunderbird came out. There was one on the showroom floor. On a lark, he bought it! He never does anything on a lark! Even his daughters can't believe that he did this. But he was feeling so good about his award and he told me he wanted me to feel as good about something."

Monroe surprised Cheryl with the car two days before Christmas. "He put a big bow and a big sign on it and left it in the driveway for me to see when I got home from work," she says. "So I got something out of this award, too!"

Cheryl accompanied Monroe to San Diego to receive the award in February. "That was really special," she relates. "We went out to dinner with a group of USGA people. Everyone was lovely and kind. It was a wonderful evening. The next day they did a really great job with the award presentation. Monroe doesn't get very nervous, but he was very concerned about doing a decent job of replying to the award. He spent a lot of time on that speech."

### **UW sweethearts...**

Monroe and Cheryl met at an Alpha Gamma Rho party at the UW. "I was living in a dorm when the fraternity called and asked for some girls to come over for a party at the house," Cheryl recalls. "I went but wasn't having much fun. Just as I was about to leave, Monroe came in. He was going to go upstairs to his room, but his fraternity brothers told him he had to stay because there were more girls than guys at the party. So he walked over and started talking to me. He needed a date for Homecoming and he asked me almost right away. I said yes!"

Was it love at first sight? "Pretty much," Cheryl admits. "By the first date."

In more than 30 years, Cheryl has grown accustomed to being married to a golf course superintendent. "They spend a lot of time away from home. And they always have to rely on the weather for whatever mood they're in," she says. "I think it's a very stressful job. He tries not to bring it home, but he can't help it once in a while. I've gotten used to it, certainly. At first it was difficult. But it has become a way of life and it honestly doesn't bother me - hasn't for years."

Cheryl can tell what kind of mood Monroe will be in just by watching the weather. "If it's rainy and stormy

and cloudy, he's a happy man. I can count on that," she says. "But he's not happy when it's hot and dry and he has to worry about the watering system. So we're at odds that way because I like hot summer weather."

What drives Monroe? "His integrity. Knowing that he's doing the best job that he can do," Cheryl says. "He's a man of his word and he works hard to make certain that what he thinks should be done at the golf course gets done, and gets done in the best possible way. When Mother Nature takes over, he knows he can't change any of that. But for the things that he can change, he does it with every ounce he's got."

According to Cheryl, Monroe has done a pretty darn good job of balancing his work, volunteer activities and family over the years. "He knows all three are important," she says. "It still surprises me that he is able to do all of the volunteer work that he does. But he does a lot of it right at home, sitting with me in the living room with his yellow legal pad in hand. So we're certainly together that way. He's a home body, no question about it. He loves being at home."

Cheryl credits Monroe with being the best grandfather you could ever find. "Anything Gracie wants, he does," she says. "But he was not that way with his own children. He was strict, but always fair and loving. They grew up to be wonderful children with a sense of responsibility and citizenship. All of those qualities that are important to him he certainly was able to transfer to his children. At the time they thought he was too strict, but they have come back and told him time and again how lucky they were to have him as a father."

## What others are saying about Monroe...

### ***"He has a passion for what he does."***

Wayne Kusow, professor of Soil Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has known Monroe for the 20 years he's been at Madison. "We go way back," Wayne comments. "We often get on the phone and just chat."

When asked to describe Monroe in a nutshell, Wayne responds: "He is a visionary. He has a passion for what he does. He's very well organized, very well schooled in turf management, and he knows what he's doing. He doesn't do things just because other people are doing them; it has to make sense to him."

As a professor, Wayne especially appreciates the number of student interns that Monroe has hired at Blackhawk. "Of the 200+ students that have graduated from the program thus far, nearly one-half of them have benefited immeasurably from having worked for Monroe," he points out. "He's a wonderful example (for students) of how to conduct yourself as

a golf course superintendent, both professionally and personally. His recommendations for job-seeking graduates are very highly regarded because people know that Monroe will tell things the way they are."

Wayne's favorite memory about Monroe is how he helped fellow superintendent Tom Harrison burn an old, dilapidated barn on the 5th hole at University Ridge to make more room for the Noer Facility.

### ***"He makes others feel important."***

As senior agronomist with the USGA Green Section's North Central Region, Bob Vavrek has known Monroe for 13 years. "Perhaps the quality I admire most about Monroe is his ability to make others around him feel important," Bob says. "He always publicly and privately recognizes others for their contributions to golf turf management or research. Others may seek recognition from their peers for a job well done. This has never been Monroe's style. He tirelessly works behind the scenes in relative anonymity and rarely takes credit for his considerable achievements."

Bob also admires the job Monroe has done as editor of *The Grass Roots*. "Superintendents and a variety of other turf professionals across the country subscribe to *The Grass Roots* because, hands down, it is simply the best," he points out. "Some of his most well known articles are summaries and critiques of educational meetings. He will document a job well done and is never afraid to criticize and challenge a group or speaker to reach the next level."

Bob remembers one time when he came to Blackhawk for a Turf Advisory Service. After touring the course with Monroe and his assistants in the morning, Monroe told Bob to take his student interns and assistants out on the course while he stayed in the shop - thus giving them a chance to question their boss' practices on the course. "No one has ever done this before," Bob adds. "There aren't many superintendents who are willing to be second guessed by students. He is a master at providing tactful, constructive criticism and he has no problem accepting the same."

### ***"He's a true role model."***

Chris Knox was a college student when he worked for Monroe in the summer of 1998. He was not a turf student, but a business student who had plans of being a golf course manager one day.

"My first day on the job we had to push-mow around every tree on the course, pulling by hand the grass we couldn't get with the mower. It was 90 degrees and humid," Chris recalls. "When we finally finished, I was ready to quit. But I told myself to stick it out for the week before making a decision. Staying on Monroe's crew was the best decision I could have made."

"We all know how difficult working on a grounds crew can be," Chris continues. "But every time I turned around, Monroe was working as hard as or harder than

## How well do you know Monroe?

Having known Monroe since the mid 1980s, I've always appreciated and enjoyed his candor. Like it or not, you always know where Monroe stands on an issue. So I thought it would be interesting to give some of his friends and colleagues a multiple choice quiz to see how well everyone knows him.

1. **Is Monroe a Republican or Democrat?** Four say Republican, one says Democrat (I won't divulge who answered this way). Monroe says: "I've always voted for the best candidate!"

2. **Does Monroe have strong opinions or no opinions?** All five say strong opinions.

3. **Is Monroe a hard worker or a slacker?** All five say he's definitely a hard worker.

4. **Is Monroe a flag waver or a protester?** All 5 say he's a flag waver.

5. **Is Monroe quiet or talkative?** One says he can be both, the other four say he's talkative. Comment: "He's a great listener. But once he's done listening he'll give you an earful."

6. **Is Monroe a farm boy or city boy?** All 5 quickly answer farm boy.

7. **Is Monroe a leader or a follower?** All 5 say he's definitely a leader.

8. **Is Monroe a man with few interests or many interests?** All 5 say many interests.

9. **Is Monroe modest or boastful?** All 5 say extremely modest.

10. **What part of the job does Monroe enjoy most: a) growing grass/nature side of it; b) mechanical/equipment side of it; or c) working with and training others?** Three answer 'a'; one answers 'c'; one splits his answer between 'a' and 'c'. Monroe answers: "I like all three. And that's not a cop-out; that's the truth. Because of my farm background, at first the nature part appealed to me; you sow, you cultivate, and you harvest - but you don't have to milk cows! And the mechanical things are very interesting to me. But I also like the relationships - the young kids on summer crews who keep you young, the people who work here year-round, the golfers who play here. So I'd have a difficult time choosing one over the other."

Final comment from one participant: "As far as these questions go, if you know Monroe at all, I would be surprised if anybody answered too much differently than anybody else." Touché!

I asked Monroe some additional questions.

1. **Who has been the best president in your lifetime?** Ronald Regan.

2. **Who has been the worst president in your lifetime?** Bill Clinton, far and away. I cannot stand that guy.

3. **What is the best thing about America?** You can be whatever you want to be. Freedom to move around and see things. You can live like you want to live, be who you want to be.

4. **What is the worst thing about America?** That's a tough one. I don't have a beef.

5. **If you could have a one-on-one conversation with anybody dead or alive, who would it be?** I'd probably say my ancestor, old William Monroe. He's the one who came over here from Scotland in 1652 and he lived to be very old. What was it like in Scotland? How did you get over here? What was life like in Colonial America? I'm intrigued by that.

6. **What makes Monroe Miller tick? What drives you?** We all have to support ourselves. I've heard my wife tell people that the thing I'm most proud of is never having missed a paycheck. I think that comes from growing up with Depression-era parents and grandparents and hearing so many horrific stories. And then there's what I learned from my parents: "If you're going to do it, do it well and do it right." I try to live by that. I have a hard time doing anything half-assed. And that's not a boast, it's a burden. There are people who have told me I'm a perfectionist. And I'd give anything if I wasn't.

the rest of us. Whenever it was time to learn a new task, he taught me personally. He told me when I did things well, and he pointed out how to improve something when needed. He never told me something I did was bad; he told me how to do that task better.

"The camaraderie developed among the crew members was one I have yet to experience in another job," Chris adds. "Where did that come from? Straight from the top. I will always remember when Monroe pulled me aside the last day of work and told me how much he appreciated what I did for the course. I certainly didn't expect that."

Monroe gave Chris an invaluable lesson on how to work with people. "He never tells you how to do something, he shows. He never dwells on the negatives, but points out the positives. Now that I am in a management position at a golf course, when faced with a challenge I

am constantly asking myself, 'How would Monroe deal with this?' He was a wonderful man to work for, a great friend, and a true role model," Chris concludes.

***"He's not afraid to say what must be said."***

Tom Harrison, superintendent at Maple Bluff Country Club in Madison, has known Monroe longer than most and has much in common with him. "We worked together as students at Nakoma Golf Club starting in the summer of 1966," he recalls. They're both farm kids at heart with a passion for collecting farm toys. And they've both worked at just one Madison course in their careers.

When asked to describe Monroe in a nutshell, Tom laughs. "That might take a while. He's a detail guy. He's big into the history of things, how and why they are the way they are. He's that way about golf, farming, farm toys and U.S. history. He'll stick with something



from beginning to end. Instead of losing interest and moving on, he'll take a life-long interest."

Tom and Monroe go to various farm toy shows together. "He and I take some strange journeys together, like to the John Deere museum in the Quad Cities," Tom points out. "While other people take golf journeys, we bounce around the country going to anything farm related.

"His passion is *The Grass Roots*," Tom continues. "He is known and respected by so many people for his honesty, his integrity, what he does for *The Grass Roots*. He's not afraid to editorialize and say what must be said. He's good for the game of golf that way. And *The Grass Roots* paints a picture of who Monroe is. He writes about so many things and so many people he knows - the people who are the bread and butter, the heart and soul of golf course management. People know Monroe just by what he writes."

**"I can't imagine working for another guy."**

As the equipment technician at Blackhawk, Dave Noltner has known Monroe since 1974. Dave was 17 years old when he spent his first summer at Blackhawk, working with his father. Monroe had been at the course for one year.

"Because my dad had worked there, I knew what this place was like - equipment wise and the condition of the course - before Monroe stepped in as superintendent," Dave recalls. "I've watched this place blossom under his supervision. It really, truly has come a long, long way. The course members really do appreciate the hard work that he puts into Blackhawk."

What's it like to work for Monroe? "Monroe is just awesome," Dave relates. "He cares a lot about his employees - not just at work, but their family lives, too. He's always asking questions. 'How's your mom? How's your dad?' He always eats lunch with his employees in the lunch room. And in the summer, when we have to put up an extra lunch table in the shop, he takes turns sitting at one table or the other. That's when he gets to know his summer employees.

"Monroe is such a down-to-earth person," Dave continues. "When he makes a decision, he thinks it through thoroughly. He also gets input from his employees. If he wants something done a certain way, there's a darn good reason for it."

Dave can witness to the fact that Monroe doesn't conduct *The Grass Roots* business on Blackhawk time. "I was at a dinner a few years ago and some people were speculating that Monroe must spend a lot of Blackhawk's time working on *The Grass Roots*," Dave recalls. "I stepped in and explained, 'I've know this man for many years. He does all of his Grass Roots work after hours. We start work here at 6 a.m. in the summer, and Monroe often goes to Kramer Printing early in the morning and is still here at work

by 6 a.m.' That shows you how dedicated he is to his job and to *The Grass Roots*."


Dave is not looking forward to the day that Monroe retires. "I can't imagine working for another guy," he says. "It's going to be weird for me to work for someone else. When he does retire, I'll have had him for my boss for 35 years. Not many people can say that. I think that alone tells the story of what kind of man Monroe is to work for. I just love it here. He makes it a really, really excellent place to work."

**"He never lets down his guard."**

As the assistant superintendent at Blackhawk, Chad Grimm has known Monroe for eight years. "He's honest, consistent, and hard working," Chad says when asked to describe Monroe in a nutshell. "He never lets down his guard on the course. He's been the same every day for as long as I've known him and, from what I've heard, for his entire career. He's intense as far as his goals and objectives on the course.

"I enjoy working for him. He's a great person. I'd consider him a friend," Chad continues. "As an assistant superintendent right out of college, he has given me lots of room to make my own mistakes and learn from them, to make decisions and grow. It's been wonderful."

Chad was with Monroe when he received the USGA Green Section award at the GSCAA meeting in San Diego. "It was really neat seeing him accept the award," Chad relates. "He presented a great speech. It was really wonderful. He really appreciated it." ❧



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