

Variety in Work and Sports Spices Up His Life

By Lori Ward Bocher



If variety is the spice of life, then Ray Shane, golf program supervisor for the City of Madison, is well seasoned. From golf professional to golf course superintendent, from a private country club to four city-owned courses, from working long hours seven days a week to having a 40-hour/5-day work week, Ray has seen it all. Even his newfound competitive sport, participating in IronMan competitions, finds him training in three different activities - swimming, biking and running.

Ray's life was heavily spiced in 1969 when, the summer before his freshman year in high school, his father moved the family from Spokane, Washington, to Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Not knowing anyone that first summer, Ray turned to the nearby golf course, Sun Prairie Country Club, for some diversion. "The golf course was right there," he recalls, "so I started playing the game and hanging out at the course to give me something to do and to meet other kids."

That first summer he also started working evenings picking up balls on the driving range. "The next summer I worked on the grounds crew at night, watering the greens," he continues. "They still had the manual irrigation system where you had to drag hoses and plug in sprinklers. So I did that every summer until I graduated from Sun Prairie High School in 1973."

By then he was bitten by the golf bug, so he decided to become a golf professional by entering the PGA apprenticeship program right out of high school. "The program has changed a lot in the past 30 years, but when I went through it was a five-year program," Ray explains. "I worked under the



direction of a Class A golf professional at Watertown Country Club, and I attended PGA schools across the country.

"At the schools they taught us about the business end of golf courses, a little bit about teaching the game of golf, and a very minor section on golf course maintenance - just enough to give you a basic understanding so that you could talk to players and members with some knowledge about why superintendents do what they have to do," he continues.

Ray finished the program in five years and was elected to membership in the PGA as a Class A member. For one year he worked as the head golf professional at what was then the Olympia Resort in Oconomowoc. Then in 1978 he became the professional at Portage Country Club, a 9-hole course at the time. And there he stayed for 12 years.

Takes on a dual role...

But three and one-half years into the job he received a heaping dose of variety that spiced up his life once again. Ray explains: "The board of directors had decided that they needed a change in the maintenance of the course, so they told the superintendent in July that they would not be renewing his contract the next

year; they told him early so he would have time to look for a new position. Instead of working out the season, he resigned immediately.

"That left the club in a quandary as far as what to do for the rest of the year," Ray continues. "So they asked me if I would oversee the maintenance of the golf course until they could get a new superintendent. I said I'd give it my best shot. I tried to educate myself by contacting vendors and other people, buying books on turf management, joining the superintendents' association. To make a long story short, when the end of the year came the board said to me, 'Ray, we really like what you've done with the golf course since taking over. Would you be interested in doing a dual role as superintendent and golf professional?'"

"I accepted," Ray continues. "That's what got me into the golf course maintenance end of the business. I knew what a golf course was supposed to look like and how I wanted it to play, but I had no idea of how to get it there. I spent the next several years learning all I could about maintaining turf."

There was more spice to come. In the mid 1980s Portage Country Club decided to expand from 9 to 18 holes. "I was able to get involved from the beginning - the purchasing of the land, the design, the construction and grow-in of the new 9," Ray points out. "That showed me a whole new area of golf course maintenance. It was really quite the experience."

A balancing act...

Of course, during all of these years Ray was still working as the golf professional at the club, too. It was quite

a balancing act. "I was wearing more hats than normal," he relates. "I would get to the course early in the morning and get the maintenance crew going. There wasn't a lot of early morning play because it was a small, private club. So I could work with the grounds crew until about 9 in the morning.

"Then I'd go up to the clubhouse, take a shower, change clothes, work in the golf shop, and direct the maintenance activities from there until mid afternoon or so. If necessary, I'd go back out on the golf course. Those were long days, seven days a week. But what a great experience."

Ray also credits his staff for making it possible for him to do two jobs on the course. "If you set up your programs properly and do a good job of teaching, you can delegate a lot of responsibility," he says. "I had a couple of really good assistant golf pros in the shop who knew

exactly how I wanted things done. Same thing on the golf course maintenance end of it. It went fairly smoothly."

While wearing his golf professional hat, what was Ray's biggest reward? "Working with the junior programs and high school programs, introducing and teaching the game to kids," he answers. "That was really great. I also enjoyed the interaction with the club members and putting on the golf tournaments. Certainly, as a golf professional you have a lot more interaction with the customers than you do as a golf course superintendent."

His greatest accomplishment as a golf professional at Portage? "I took the country club's junior program, which at the time was open only to the members' kids, and we opened it up to the general public. The program grew from 25 kids my first year there to 80 by the time I left. It was

nice to see that growth," he answers.

Already accustomed to a job with a spicy variety, in January of 1990 Ray started another position with a great deal of variety - 'golf program supervisor' with the City of Madison. "I made the change for a couple of reasons," he explains. "The long hours, seven days a week, were starting to get to me a little bit. I was ready for a new challenge. I was 35 years old, so the benefits package of the city looked good. My daughter was young and we wanted to be able to spend some weekend time with her - the soccer games and all the other nice things that come with raising a family. It just seemed like a really good fit at the time."

Ray's biggest adjustment in the new job was working fewer hours. "At Portage the responsibilities were really 24/7. It took a little bit of getting used to coming into a program this size and saying, 'It's 2:30 in the



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afternoon, my eight-hour day is done, I'm going home," he relates. "And I'd wake up on weekends at 5 in the morning and say, 'You know, I don't have to go to work today. What do you do on a Saturday morning?'"

Managing four courses...

As the golf program supervisor, Ray is responsible for the four courses that the city owns - Glenway and Monona (9 holes each), Odana Hills (18 holes), and Yahara Hills (36 holes). "If it's happening on a golf course, then it's my responsibility," he adds. About 80 percent of his time is spent dealing with golf course maintenance, and the other 20 percent with clubhouse operations. But he no longer works as a golf professional.

"We have PGA golf professionals that are independent contractors for the City of Madison," Ray explains. "They run our clubhouses and golf programs. My responsibilities with them are to make sure they're fol-

lowing the guidelines of the contract. They collect our greens fees, so I'm in charge of auditing the books and making weekly deposits with the city. And I take care of clubhouse projects and maintenance - roof repairs, new carpeting, getting the ice machines fixed, making sure the air conditioning units are being serviced — things like that."

Ray's office is at Yahara Hills, but he spends a lot of time on the road between the courses and various city offices. "Typically I start out at Yahara Hills at about 5 a.m. to get the doors open, make the coffee, and greet our crews," he explains. "I'll get reports from the other three golf courses as far as what their plans are for the day. If there's anyone absent or sick, I need to write that into my reports and send it downtown."

"From there it just changes from day to day," he continues. "This morning I spent time reconciling our credit card reports from the different

superintendents. I ran over to Odana Hills to talk to the superintendent about some projects there. I ordered some bunker sand for a couple of courses. I made my trip downtown to the accounting office to make a weekly deposit of greens fees. And then I came back to my office for this interview at 9:30."

"The nice thing about this job is that every day is different," Ray says. "It keeps me going. One day is never the same as another. That's what I love about the golf course business."

Tax-free funding...

Even though Ray's four courses are city-owned, they are completely self sustaining; no taxpayer money is used to support them. So Ray is no stranger to budget challenges. "The last two years our revenues did not cover our expenses," he points out. "But we are lucky in the fact that any excess revenues in good years go into a reserve account to cover years when there's a shortfall. But we've

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had to cut back on some of our capital projects recently.”

The golf department is so self sustaining that it must also help offset city administrative costs by contributing to the departments it works with, like purchasing and accounting. The golf program also makes a payment in lieu of taxes to cover what the city would receive in property taxes if the courses were privately owned. This amounts to about \$150,000 per year, according to Ray. And even the non-golfing citizens of Madison receive benefits from the courses - like green space, wildlife/bird habitat, and a place for winter recreation.

Being city-owned can create some unique challenges — like citizens wanting to control how the golf courses are managed. “We have a fairly aggressive number of people who would love to see our golf courses be pesticide free,” Ray points out. “Most of them don’t realize how deteriorated the courses would become if we just stopped using pesticides. So we’re developing education programs to let the public know that we are good keepers of the environment: we were leaders in integrated pest management; we’ve partnered with the International Audubon Society to get our golf program registered and hopefully have our courses become certified sanctuaries; and we continually look for ways to improve things from an environmental standpoint.”

In recent years, as more golf courses have sprung up in the Madison area, the city’s courses have had to compete just like the rest. “Ten years ago we never had to market or advertise,” Ray points out. “Now we’re doing more and more specialized marketing. We’re offering discounted greens fees during off-peak hours. We’re working hard to develop outings and special play packages.

“And we’re doing a much better job of maintaining the course and the clubhouses so we can meet our



customers’ demands and maintain our position in the marketplace,” he continues. “The customer certainly is winning in the Madison marketplace as far as having good quality golf courses to play and a lot of choices out there.”

One way Ray’s job differs from other superintendents is that he and all of his employees (13 permanent, 60 seasonal) are City of Madison employees. How does this differ? For one, the city won’t hire anyone under 18 years of age for the type of work found on the golf course. So his seasonal workers are all college kids and recently retired people who are looking for a part-time job. Also, he’s unable to provide internships to turf students because of conflicts with the city’s hiring process. And all of his employees are union employees with negotiated salaries, so Ray doesn’t have any control over this end of his budget.

All in all, Ray loves his job. “It’s a wonderful place to work,” he says. “I’ve got a really good staff so there’s no major need for me to come in on weekends on a regular basis. To be in the golf business and to love the game the way I do and be able to have a 40-hour work week, that’s just a dream come true.”

Ironman competition...

Another dream came true for Ray

when he finished his first Ironman competition in 2004. For those who don’t know the particulars, an Ironman (trademarked name) race consists of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bicycle ride, and a full marathon (26.2 miles) — all in less than 17 hours! Talk about variety!

Ray was introduced to the competition by the brother of his ‘significant other,’ Judy Klingelhoets. “I was just going around watching Joe compete,” Ray recalls. “I was always impressed by people who could do these kinds of things. Since I was getting up there in years and had a sedentary lifestyle, I started doing some causal running. Then I decided, ‘When I’m 50 years old, I’d love to be in good enough shape to compete in an Ironman.’ So I started swimming and biking, too.

“Joe took me under his wings,” Ray continues. “My goal was to be in a competition when I was 50. But, the spring before when I was still 49, Joe said he thought I was ready to compete in September in the Madison Ironman. So I did my first Ironman in 2004. My goal was to just finish. If things went well I thought I could finish in 14 hours — the race officials allow up to 17 hours. I completed the race in just under 13 hours. I was bit by the bug and signed up for the next one in 2005.”

There are only five Ironman competitions in the country - in Wisconsin, Idaho, Arizona, Florida and New York. They fill up quickly, according to Ray, with 2,000 people (men and women) in each race. There are also shorter versions of the race — a Sprint Ironman, a Half Ironman, and an Olympic Ironman. Ray competes in some of these to help train. “It keeps me motivated in my training,” he says. “It gives me feedback as to my condition and where I’ll be when the Ironman comes in September.”

He trains six days a week. “Some days I’ll take it pretty easy. Other days I’ll try to do two things - maybe swim for an hour and run for 10 miles, or bike for 30 miles and then go for a run,” Ray explains.

“They call that ‘bricking’ — doing two events in one day to get your body used to going from one activity to another.”

Ray is signed up to do the Wisconsin Ironman again this September, and he plans on competing here every year. But he’d also like to experience the other four competitions. So he’s signed up for the race in Tempe, Arizona next spring.

Ray’s other avocation is golfing. “I still play golf - not as much as I used to — but I still enjoy it,” he says. “I know all of the golf course superintendents in the area and most of the golf professionals. They’ve all been very good to me as far as letting me play on their courses. It’s really been a nice, close-knit family.”

Speaking of family, Ray has one 17-year-old daughter, Sarah, from his first marriage. She lives in Reedsburg with her mother. “She’s a great kid. She’s working in the Dells this summer,” Ray points out.

With ample variety in his work and in his sport, Ray is not planning on spicing things up by changing jobs anytime soon. “Exactly when I retire is up in the air. But I’m sure I’ll retire here. The city is part of the state retirement system, which is a really good system. I could retire as early as 55. But as long as I enjoy my job, enjoy coming to work, and have some really good people to work with, I don’t see any reason to retire too early.”

