

The Grass Roots

Vol. XXIV, No. 5
September/October 1996

The Grass Roots is a bi-monthly publication of the Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association, printed in Madison, Wisconsin by Kramer Printing. No part of *The Grass Roots* may be reprinted without expressed written permission by the Editor.

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About the Cover:

Jen Eberhardt's visual rendition of the 70th anniversary of Milorganite celebrates a company that embodies much of what we hold important — innovativeness, environmental responsibility, hard work and green turf! It is synonymous with names like Noer, Wilson, Latham and Welch — men whose contributions to golf can hardly be counted. May the familiar green and orange and white bags remain so for generation to come.

"Now light is less; noon skies are wide and deep; the ravages of wind and rain are healed. The haze of harvest drift along the field."

— Theodore Roethke

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(Left to Right): Mike Semler, Kris Pinkerton, Charlie Shaw, Dave Smith, Scott Schaller, Gary Tanko, Dave Brandenburg, Andy Kronwall, Mark Kienert.

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See You in September

By Mark Keinert



It seems it was just like yesterday when I made my annual trip into the pro shop to find my good friend Tim Marks, PGA Head Professional at the Bull's Eye Country Club. I was there to let him know that I was going to open the golf course when we could get the cups and flags into the greens.

The frost, almost at near record depths, was now gone. The playing surfaces would support the traffic of the fifty or so members who seemed to pace back and forth on the first tee daily, anxious for that first golf shot of the new season. Tim and I looked awkwardly at each other without uttering a single word. Only the frowns of our contemplating the upcoming season that was now upon us were expressed on our faces. After a brief but noticeable pause, Tim uttered the words "see you in September," words that so adequately capture the essence of the tiresome feelings of the long season to come.

We both looked at each other and laughed as we realized the fatiguing pace we would be working at as we entered the dawn of another golf season. As I remember, I know that my mind was reviewing the hellish year superintendents faced across the country in 1995. Would 1996 be the same? Would we see the record highs again, and dewpoints parked in the low 80's? Dry periods giving way to monsoonal rains? Disease lurking everywhere!

Thankfully and knock on wood, 1996 for many of us has been a real treat. For the first time in two winters, our two golf courses came through winter relatively unscathed. Here we go again. Ready, set, sprint! I can't wait for the first person to ask how come the greens are so slow for this time of year!

It is hard to believe that September is already upon us. For

the golf course superintendent, it is the season for renewal both mentally and physically from the exhaustive pace all golf course employees have been putting in for the benefit of the game. There are cool crisp nights followed by warm seasonal days. The torrid humidity leaves. You can't catch me with a tear in my eye! Our attention now can turn toward renovation, aerification, and those last minute fall beautification projects. We begin to deal with budgetary matters for the next year.

September is also the time of year that serves to bring us back to our senses. The urgency to get things done as we juggled maintenance routines in and around play schedules, shotguns and seemingly endless tournament matches isn't as apparent in September as it was back in mid-summer. Now the

weather is the principle reason for scheduling projects.

Can the hands of time be beaten? Work days start a little bit later as the days shorten. In fact, it is the first weekend after Labor Day that we roll back the starting times for both weekdays and weekends as it is just too dark on cloudy days to get started earlier. The crew starts dreaming of the "thirty pointer" as both bow and gun seasons are now simply a matter of weeks away. I can get away to attend Badger football games without the fear that the golf course will fall apart in a matter of a few hours. Those games become my payback to my family as they have had to put up with yet another summer of Saturdays and Sundays at work. Trips out to the course to make sure that everything

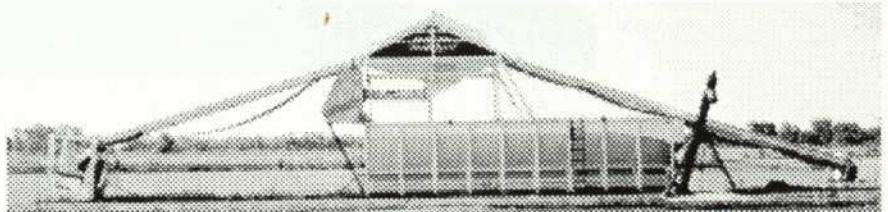
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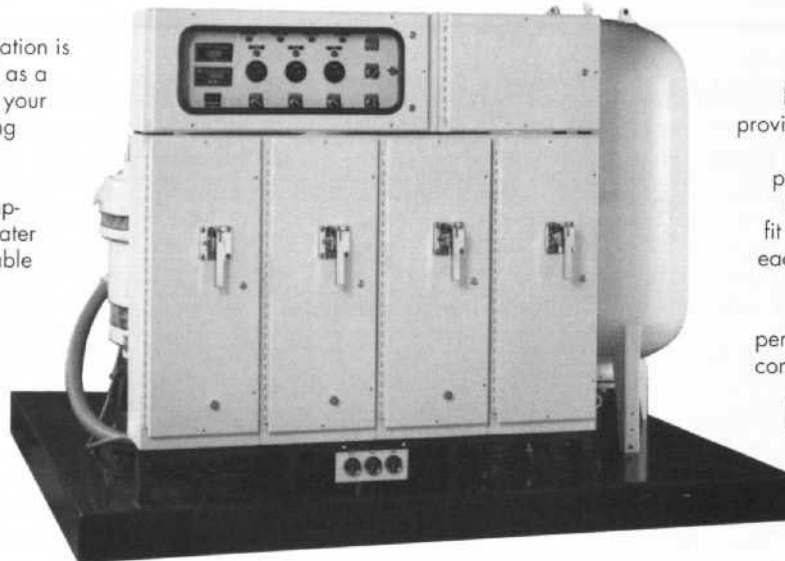
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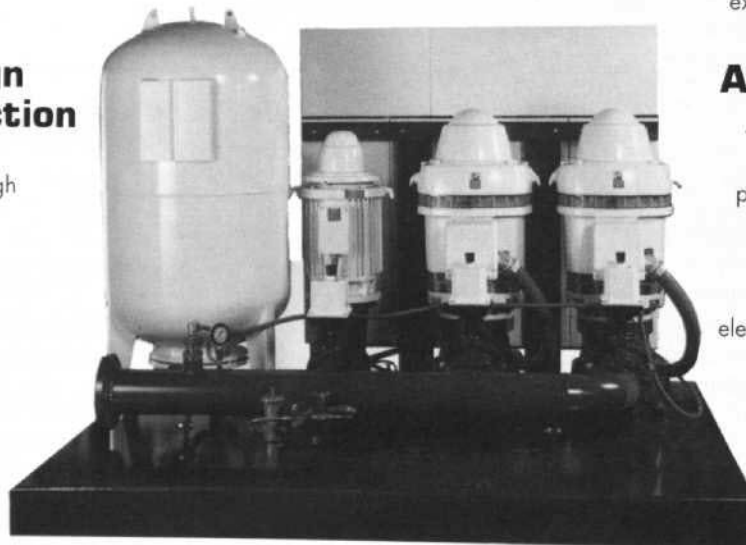
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is well or to make those last minute changes to the irrigation system are now not as frequent as they were just a few short weeks ago. Sundays are reserved for church and watching the Packers. This is truly the time of the year to catch our breath.

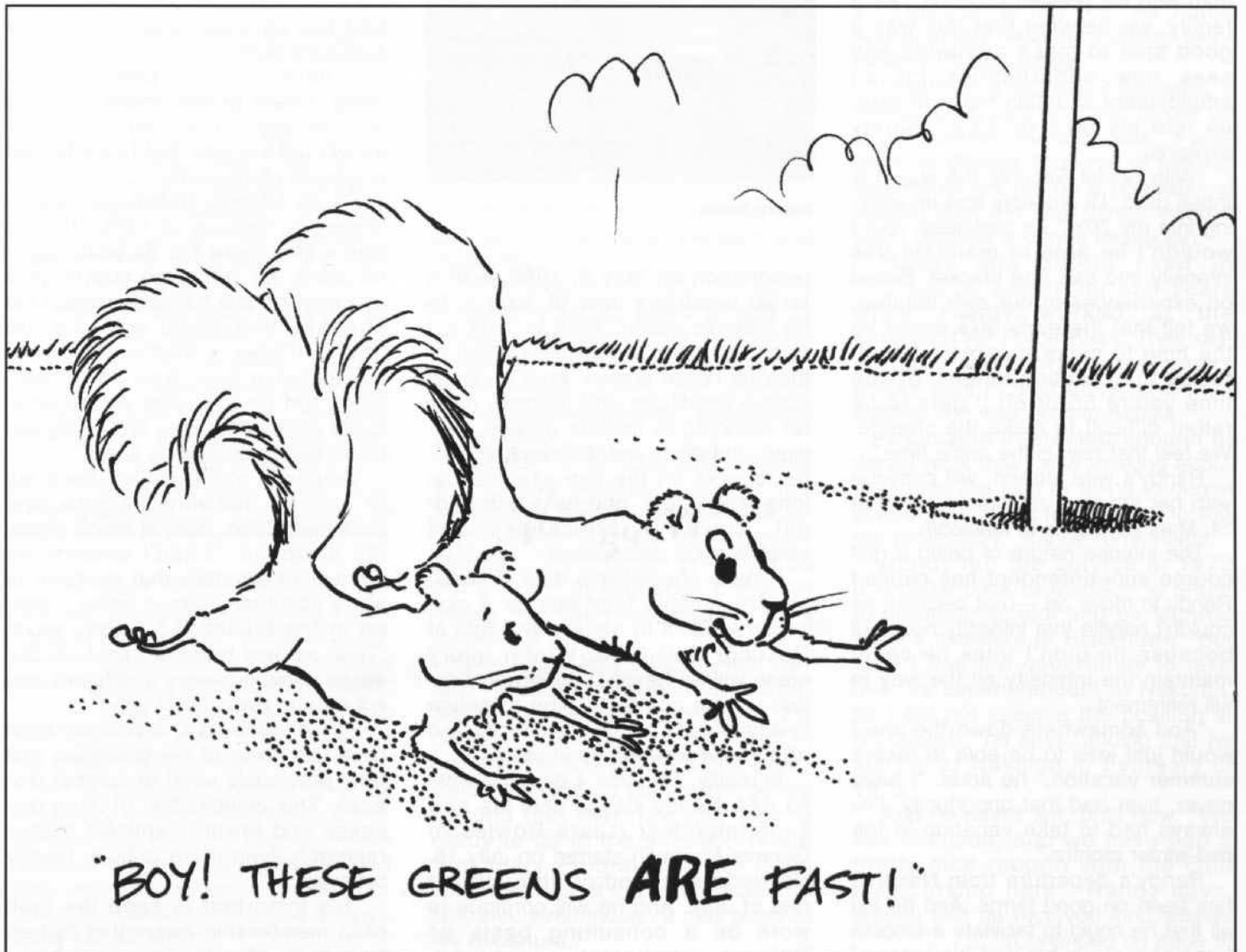
I'm always impressed with September days. The hint of the first frost is in the air. Heavy dew defines the fairways from the roughs in a brilliant silvery white cast against the deep blue skies above. The productivity of the veteran crew is always welcomed by me. The constant interruption of the new employee asking for directions is now replaced by the veterans whom know exactly what and how the work should be completed. I can now go about my business for almost half the day. In my case, anyhow, many golfers have had their fill of golf and have put away their

clubs for the season. Some pack up and head south; still others opt for the opportunity to gamebird hunt. With fewer players to contend with, fall aerification projects can be accomplished now without the usual hassle and pressure we seem to place upon ourselves to see if we can reopen the course once again in record time. These are the days that the membership seems a little bit friendlier. I'm sure that they too recognize that the season has but a few precious days left and that they should be appreciated for the opportunity that they present. Thank God for September!

As a subtle reminder, this year's Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium, will focus on "Trees, Shrubs and More." Dates for this years event are scheduled for early November. This year's event will be held at the Marriott Hotel, out on the west end of town.

This year's topic is an interesting one. I'm one to appreciate the value of the trees after being held hostage by oak wilt, bark beetles, anthracnose, weather related wind and drought damage. There hasn't been one tree species un-affected by damage on my golf course. Crews here at Bull's Eye have removed well over 2,000 trees in the eleven years that I have been employed here as golf course superintendent. I've gotten the stumps to prove it. I know that it is very demoralizing to travel around the state to see the large pockets of dead and dying trees. Sometimes entire stands of trees can be seen in a tragic state of decline with no hope for recovery. Can anyone tell what is wiping out the sumac? Maybe we will get the answers to that and other questions.

Until next time, kick back and enjoy the season. We've earned it. 🌿





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.

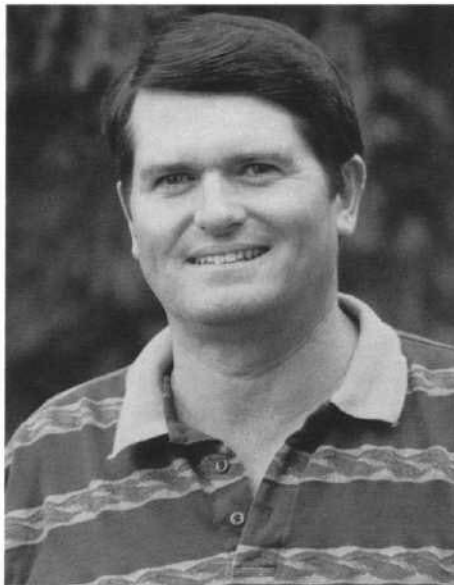
"With Social Security the way it is these days, I'll probably end up working into my 70's," he continues. "But I wouldn't be able to maintain this intensity into that age bracket. Based on experiences in our own families, we felt that the early 50's would be the time to make a career change rather than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

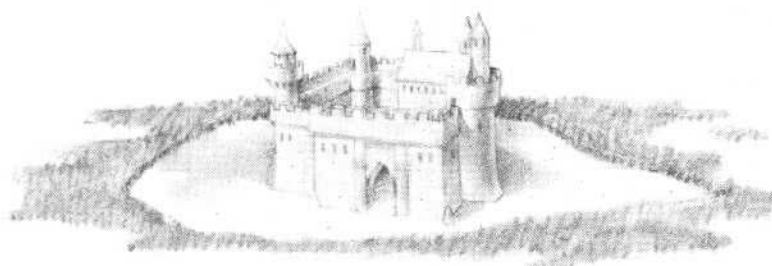
And he never left, until now. "We like Madison, and we have had a pretty nice rapport with the club membership here," Randy says, adding that he received kind wishes

(Continued on page 9)

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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

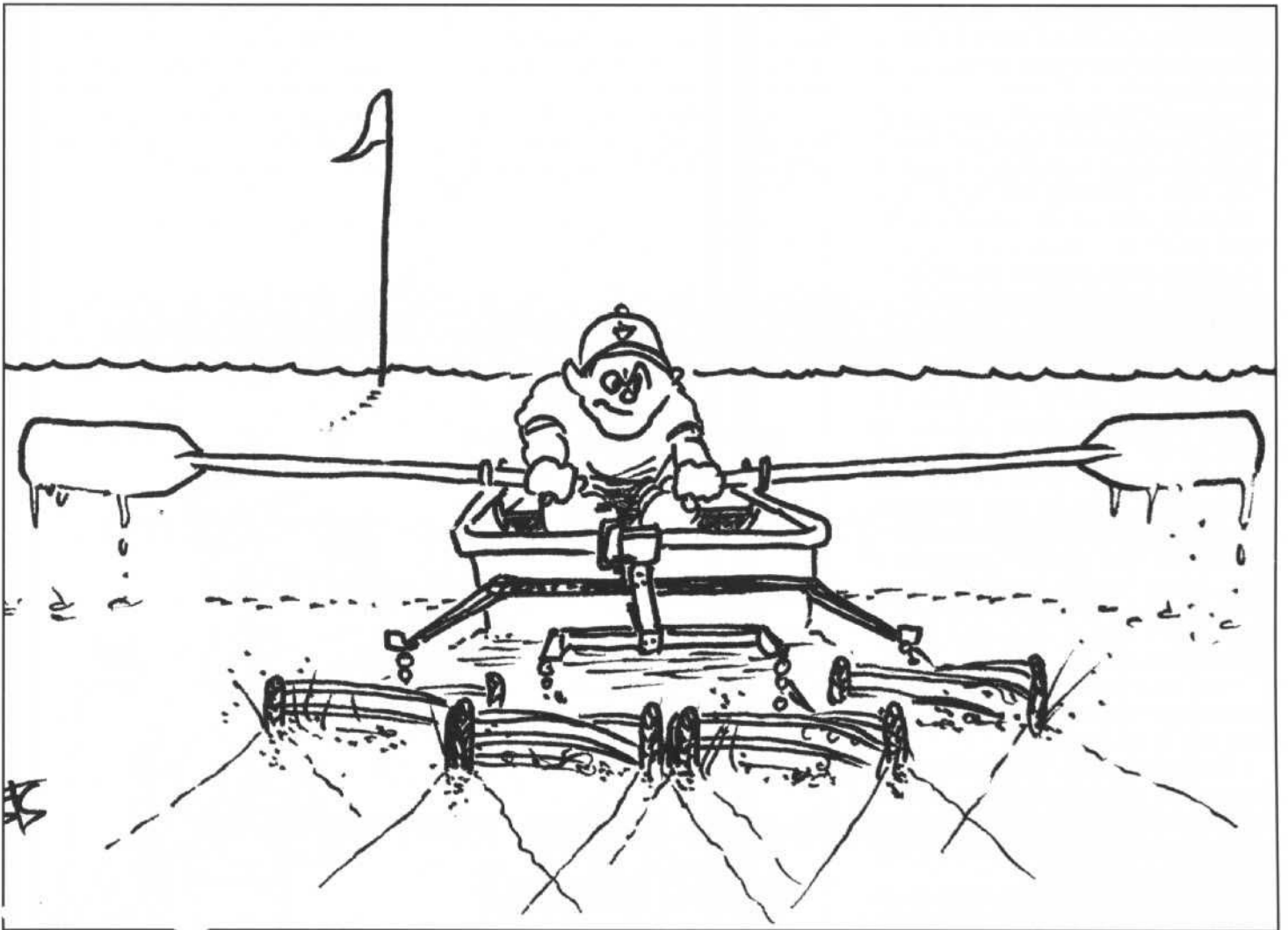
up north near Land O' Lakes. "Perhaps now we'll have a little more time to enjoy it," Randy points out. That's where he does some of his deer and grouse hunting. His pheasant and turkey hunting opportunities are in southern Wisconsin. He also enjoys fishing. "I haven't been able to fish in the summer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





DOG DAYS

By Dr. Frank S. Rossi
Department of Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture
Cornell University

As Tony gazed over the hill on the 12th, he noticed Nicholas, his former employee and new assistant, yelling orders to a staff member on the mobile radio. "No, the clubhouse lawn gets mowed at 3 inches, not a half inch!"

Nicholas arrived where Tony was parked and proclaimed, "Those darn turf students, it seems like if it's not in a book they can't think of how to do something!"

"I remember when you were one of those kids, you now say 'can't think,'" Tony reminded Nicholas. "Matter of fact, I was chatting with Bruce the other day, and he told me about the time you lost your cool with one of the members at Glimmer Glass CC."

"Which time was that?" Nicholas inquired with a sarcastic tone.

"The time when you were told to get ahead of the golfers to mow fairways with the LF-100 and decided to ignore Bruce's directions and started right on #1" Tony recounted. "Then when the 9-holers came out, and one of their golf balls hit your machine. You picked up the ball and threw it in the woods. The member approached you, began to yell, and you told her that you had the right of way and if she didn't like it, she could play somewhere else."

"Oh, that time," Nicholas recalled sheepishly. "Bruce said he'd never tell that one to anybody."

Tony continued. "He mentioned it because I was saying that you've been on edge, yelling at everyone in sight these days, and the staff is getting ready for a mutiny."

You could feel the tension level begin to subside as Nicholas began to sink deeper into himself as a harsh reality was being revealed to him. "I don't know," he muttered, "but I think it is the heat in August that does it to me. Ever since I was a kid I hated these weeks from late July through late August—you know, the Dog Days."

"Granny told me once that the Dog Days date back to the ancient Romans who named the period between July and August 'dies caninula', because the dog star Sirius rises and sets with the sun during this time," Tony lectured. "They thought that the combined effect of the star and the sun is what made it so oppressively warm and humid."

"You mean I'm affected by a star?" Nicholas wondered.

"You might be, but either way, you better cool your jets and get a grip of yourself, man. What does

Angela think of this behavior?" Tony began to pry.

"Not much. Each year she takes the kids for three weeks to her mother's place on the lake," Nicholas admitted. "I really miss them, but I act like such a nut-case that it's better for everyone that we do our own thing."

"You know Nicholas, you need to keep things in their proper perspective," Tony explained in a parenting tone. "We get so caught up in our attention to the golf course that we lose site of what really matters, like being there for our families. A few

