

Nuckolls, demoted, resigns as state golf director

By KEN MACLEOD

Rick Nuckolls is out and Tommy Grisham is in as director of golf for the Oklahoma Department of Tourism and Recreation.

What this means to the state's plan to continue to aggressively improve the conditioning, services and marketing of Oklahoma's 11 state-owned golf courses is a mystery. A better question may be, is there a plan after all?

For the past 18 months, Nuckolls and Grisham have essentially functioned as co-directors, with Nuckolls in charge of pro-shop operations and marketing and Grisham overseeing the superintendents and their agronomic practices. Nuckolls, however, had the title of director and took the lead in marketing and in the plan to form a separate authority for the golf division, a plan that suffered a narrow setback in the last legislative session.

In mid-July, Nuckolls was informed by Jane Jayroe, executive director of tourism, and Doug Enevoldsen, tourism's director and chief of operations, that for purposes of clarity in paperwork and operations, Grisham was being promoted to director of golf. Nuckolls was asked to stay on as a deputy director in charge of marketing. Instead, he promptly resigned.

"I couldn't stay on under those pretenses," Nuckolls said. He said he was not given specific reasons for the demotion, other than he had made a mistake more than a year ago by raising prices for cart rentals at the state courses without following all the proper paperwork channels in advance. Also, rounds played at many of the state park courses thus far in 2000 are down. However, it was expected to take golfers a while to spread the word of improved conditions and service at the state park courses, particularly since Oklahoma has a limited advertising budget.

"We made an organizational change for clarity," Jayroe said. "Instead of a split responsibility with two directors, we wanted everything to go through one person."

Jayroe said Nuckolls' position will be filled and that the emphasis will remain on improving the state system to the point that each course is a legitimate tourism attraction.

"We have a real commitment to excellence in golf and that will continue," she said.

However, Nuckolls' resignation has caused some to question the state's commitment to excellence in its golf system.

Alsie Hyden, director of golf at Lake Hefner Golf Course in Oklahoma City, was one of those who recommended Nuckolls to the state originally and felt strongly that the state was fortunate to have someone so well respected in the golf community.

"The state golf director needs to be able to represent himself well with the Legislature and every-



Rick Nuckolls, right, in happier times with Tommy Grisham.

one else in order to maintain the image of the program with those that make the decisions that affect the program," Hyden said. "Rick was the ideal man for that. He was proving that and they were fortunate to have Rick. This move just blew my mind."

Hyden requested a meeting with Jayroe and Enevoldsen and told them in no uncertain terms that he thought they had made a mistake.

"I hate to see them take a step backward," he said. "That's not a knock on the agronomist. But getting the overall image of the state system turned around was the most important thing and that requires marketing expertise. Rick had worked hard to get that done and I don't think this other gentleman has those kind of skills."

"What's really too bad is, just from talking to people, I think the overall image has turned around. People were starting to feel good about what's going on with the state courses."

The move also brings the privatization issue

back to the front burner. Jayroe admitted the state is still considering privatization of at least some of its courses. There have been reports that offers have been made by private groups to build a new resort at Lake Texoma, but only if the plan included taking over operations of Chickasaw Pointe, the state's new upscale resort course.

Subtract Chickasaw Pointe from the equation and the state system probably has no need for Nuckolls, since most of his plans for future improvement of the state system were based on success at Chickasaw Pointe.

Grisham said he was sorry to see Nuckolls leave, but would soldier on.

"I've been in this business a long time and one thing you find out is you're going to lose high-quality people," Grisham said. "I've lost a partner, but the show goes on."

Grisham said he would be able to maintain good relations with the pros in the system until a new man in on board.

"I've been involved with some of the things that Rick did, such as marketing, merchandising, public relations and running pro shops," Grisham said. "But is that my specialty? No."

Nuckolls quickly moved back to Wichita, where he was a former director of Reflection Ridge Management Co. and president of the South Central Section of the PGA of America. He planned to look for another job in the golf business.

Tourism commissioner Joe Martin said he was concerned that the state would have a hard time replacing Nuckolls with anyone who could match his level of expertise in the golf business.

"Rick was here for 18 months," Martin said. "Who's going to stick their neck out to make that move now? It's going to be very difficult for us to ask for much assistance from the industry. In my mind, we used up a little credit when we hired Rick."

Martin said he did not know of any other reasons for Nuckolls' demotion other than the clarity concerns voiced by Jayroe and that he was puzzled by the move. He said he and other commissioners would be having private conversations with Jayroe to determine what precipitated the action and determine the best future course of action.

"This is real unfortunate," Martin said. "It's not to say there weren't justified reasons. But even if there were, it hurts our golf division significantly. We have to remain positive and develop a strong team for the future."