Turf Byte hobby turns Patton job into "modern operandi"

By Vern Putney

Fresh out of the Navy in the fall of 1969, brush Lt. (jg) Duane E. Patton landed the vacant job of course superintendent at Lawrence (Kan.) Country Club.

A few years later, he insisted his contract include provision that he play three to five times a week.

Patton still is in field command there, but he’s struck far more than golf balls. Patton operates TurfByte, an electronic bulletin board (BBS) system for course superintendents. It has replaced playing rounds as his related job interest.

“I can not imagine working without a computer,” declares Patton. No longer limited to “computer experts,” this form of telecommunicating is becoming increasingly common to all professions.

Many of Patton’s first uses of the computer were tied to duties as secretary-treasurer of the Heart of America Golf Course Superintendents Association. He purchased dBase III Plus and began keeping association records in a data base. This made it easy to keep up-to-date mail lists and association financial records. Patton also developed similar applications for his superintendent’s job. Some programs were written in Basic, but (Base was the program he found most useful.

Recently, he has been using Quatro Pro as his spreadsheet program. This produces course budgets quickly, easily and neatly, he said. A word processor to write reports and articles also is needed. The TurfByte concept evolved from an idea originally discussed in a 1987 issue of Golf Course Management by Jon Scott, now at Golden Bear International in North Palm Beach, Fla., and Bill Spence, superintendent at The Country Club in Brookline, Mass.

Patton bought a modem, joined CompuServe, the largest BBS in the country, and initiated a conversation with Spence, a friend when at Kansas City Country Club.

Spence couldn’t make a meeting at Houston, but Scott and Patton huddled there and started TurfByte on a BBS run by Dale A. Gadd, then a writer for GCM. This proved less than satisfactory because Gadd’s BBS featured a “games section.”

His board was used by many Kansas University students, making it very difficult to get on line. So TurfByte became Patton’s “baby.” With Gadd’s help, he became the system operator (SysOp) of TurfByte in February 1988.

Patton since has installed a separate phone line and bought a 386/20 computer and DESQview software that allows him to “keep track” and keep TurfByte on line 24 hours a day.

TurfByte has about 130 callers from 25 states, Canada and Thailand, and averages about 500 calls per month. (To “connect” with TurfByte, call 913-842-0618 at any time.)

TurfByte has permitted Patton to make many friendships, from Florida to New York to California. It’s also a “learning experience” for callers. One found a neat new weather program last spring. He left a message about his discovery. Soon, many were using Weather briefing.

Hours spent at the desk and with discs hardy are what Patton had in mind as a young man.

Born and raised on a farm in western Kansas, he followed the customary lifestyle lead of “working hard and going to school.”

He graduated from small Scott City Community High in 1959, just as Russia launched its first “Sputnik.” This country was going through a “We need more engineers” panic phase.

Patton enrolled at Kansas University and was strongly encouraged to be an engineer. He was placed in a calculus class “way over my head.” He knew some math, but not much calculus, and was not destined to become an engineer.

Next came accounting. After a few business courses, he closed that book. He wasn’t into figures.

Patton switched his major to education. While student teaching, he discovered he did not much like teaching youths, did not like the rigidity of the school environment, and hated being confined indoors. His options were narrowing.

Since he had worked at Lawrence CC while attending Kansas University, and had enjoyed the experience, he perhaps was natural that he end up as a superintendent. He came to realize that he did not really dislike farming. The unappealing part was the isolation of western Kansas.

His first superintendent job was at a nine-hole course in Iola, Kan. After two years, Uncle Sam beckoned. Continued on page 20
An annual chemical bill on a traditionally maintained, 18-hole course would be 50 percent more.

The golf industry has been теат the golf industry has been maintaining, 18-hole course would be 50 percent more.

"We also feel, with the growing public awareness of environmental needs, our pesticide-free, fertilizer-free approach will be a strong marketing tool in selling the course to potential members."

Truax said he expects opponents to argue he is going the no-chemical route to simply get his permit, and that he will later ask permission to use chemicals after the course is open and the grass doesn't grow.

Recently opened Vermont course promised not to use chemicals, but has already gone back to the state seeking to them, said Stuart Cohen of Environmental and Turf Services, Inc., a Washington, D.C.-based environmental consulting firm.

"I sold it really sold on it," said Sherman Hollow course architect Charles Ankrom, adding that his research leads him to believe Green Life works. "He's getting involved personally in marketing it because it could be a significant break-through."

While conceding Truax "got a raw deal" in not receiving his permit, O'Connor said the developer failed to consider some of the unique problems of his proposed site (a shallow aquifer, for instance) and the political strength abating landowners could muster in opposition.

O'Connor fears the national publicity Vermont has received over Sherman Hollow, and the media attention that will continue to focus on the course, will scare potential developers away.

"I don't want the golf community thinking anything they propose up here doesn't have a chance of getting through," he said. "I've gotten calls from many people asking 'Mike, what's going on up there, anyway? Nothing is going on."

"It's time," he added, "to make the rest of the golf industry realize that, in Vermont, there will be other golf facilities that will succeed under Act 250 (Vermont's primary development law). Golf will continue to prosper because of the public's desire and the willingness to accept what has existed for over 100 years in Vermont."

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