Wayne Otto, a 'maverick' proven a pioneer

By Vern Putney

"Bring back the good old days, when greens held better and putted faster."

This golfer lament doesn't ring true for Wayne Otto, course superintendent at Ozaukee Country Club in Mequon, Wis., though he recognizes that golf course conditions and playability have changed. "Unfortunately," noted Otto, "greens then held poorly struck shots. And I am certain they were not better and not faster 10 to 15 years ago."

The current player craze is for putting surfaces that roll extremely fast. What was considered fast 10 years ago is not even close to fast enough today, Otto observed. Players will not accept slower greens, he added. They feel speed is the ultimate criteria for judging the best greens.

The problems associated with providing these conditions, Otto said, are algae and moss, difficult recovery from wear and tear, such as on yesterday's hole location, coping with much less usable cupping area on highly contoured greens, etc. Because of this, superintendents continually get complaints of "Who in the world put the hole there?"

Backed by 30 years in the field, Otto declared, "The finest putting surface must be firm and not soft and spongy. In 1974, I heard of the practice of using 100 percent sand top-dressing from Dr. John Madison of California-Davis University. Only a few courses were attempting it.

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The smaller cutting units on the greensmower did a far superior job of cutting grass — especially in depressions commonly found on old greens.

Otto said that for the better player, improved playability — more ball roll and better shot control — has resulted. There have been a few complaints from the higher-handicapped players of tight lies, 'not enough grass to hit wood shots.'

Irrigation and drainage are of prime concern to Otto. "I have learned," he said, "that if we are to keep our course in top condition, irrigation water must be applied very discriminately to avoid wet spots and soggy situations. The large pop-up sprinklers now are run much less, and we do more watering by hand or spot watering with hoses and sprinklers. This may seem a step backward but, despite our antiquated irrigation system, the heavy clay soil 'Mequon Gold' soil we must work with, and the undulations, we still have provided much improved playing conditions with good water management."

"Hopefully, we soon will install a new state-of-the-art irrigation system that will give us much better control of water."

As with many superintendents, Otto has found the most satisfying aspect of his job is the installation of gravel slit trenches with drain tubing put in the ground over the years. This work will continue and, perhaps, the problem will disappear. "Ha," added Otto lightly but realistically.

He summarized: "My goal is to produce the best possible playing conditions for our members and our guests in a cost-effective manner, preserve resources both natural and man-made beauty, which is the substance of the golf course."

What of the future?

"We must use pesticides safely and indiscriminately. New grasses must be developed that will be disease-resistant, drought-tolerant, need little or no supplemental fertilizer and yet provide an acceptable playing surface."

Otto, a Milwaukee native, is a 1960 graduate of the Pennsylvania University Turf Program. He spent 1969-1960 in placement training with Harold Glissmann in Omaha, Neb., and from 1950 to 1963 designed and established the turf and maintained the golf course at Sunset Valley Country Club in Omaha.

From 1963 to 1967, Otto was superintendent at Pioneer Park and Holmes Park Golf Course in Lincoln, Neb., then switched to Ozaukee.

Otto didn't confine his drive and talents to daily course activities. He's been helpful away from the links as member of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, past president of Nebraska and Wisconsin GCSAs and the Midwest Regional Turf Foundation, vice president of the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association, and board member of the O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research Foundation.

Besides his wife Jolane, Otto chases several pursuits as very influential and helpful in his golf turf management career.

"Professor H.B. Musser and Dr. Joseph Duich taught turf program students not only how to grow grass but how to deal with the real world. Dr. Duich had a better handle on what's happening in the field than anyone I've ever seen from academia. Maybe that's why he is in demand all over the world."

"I met Glissmann at the Penn State turf conference through Professor Musser. Glissmann hired me, and I did my internship with him. He was known as 'Mr. Turf' in Nebraska. It was indeed an education!"