



In Bounds: ...the rest of the story

By JOHN "JACK" MACKENZIE, CGCS
North Oaks Golf Club

There once was a lad so determined to work on a golf course he begged the superintendent for a job every day after school for two weeks in the spring of 1976. Barely 16 years old and a member's kid, he really didn't have a chance. The club he wanted to work at didn't hire the children of the club's patrons. However, he persisted to beat a path to the door of Bill Pietz for many afternoons that warm April.

Bill, then superintendent at the White Bear Yacht Club, must have seen something in that kid or perhaps he was being kind until the youth quit, for one afternoon he gave him a very small butter knife and told him to remove weeds from tee boxes, every tee box, beginning on the fourth hole. Dissatisfied with the tool he was given, the young man requested he be allowed to use his own knife and produced from his pocket a colorful and very sharp six inch flip blade his father had brought back from the Korean War. "Of course", Bill said, "just be sure to get every weed."

Following many days of cleaning tee boxes the fresh employee advanced to removing rocks from bunkers, hand clipping around tree bases and weeding along the curb at the clubhouse. The youngster's persistence was paying off for after several weeks of manual labor he was given a motorized piece of equipment, a seventy pound rotary mower, to push mow the bunker banks. Even though he was a member's kid, Bill had taken a chance and hired a pretty good worker, one Jack MacKenzie.

Two years later he pulled me from high school and introduced me to the profession of turf management by taking me to a fertilizer seminar. Hooked into agronomics, I have never looked back. Thanks, Bill, I owe you for seeing something in me and taking a chance.

Many years have passed since I became interested in the industry and Bill, God Bless him, keeps tabs on me from heaven. The hours seem longer, competition for open positions is fierce, and the market is saturated with many qualified individuals hoping to make their mark as superintendents. It is a long hard road to travel

in today's market of declining interest in golf. For these and a few other reasons I discouraged my son from following in my footsteps when he inquired about becoming a golf course superintendent himself. It is a tough life, rewarding, but tough.

Yet the last few years have been great fun working with him. Our bond as a team has strengthened and I will miss him next year as he pursues other employment interests. We will continue to share something in common however; his high school buddy and two-year employee at North Oaks Golf Club, Eric Proulx, will remain on my crew.

I first met Eric seven years ago. He and my boy Tyler were in knowledge

...and now you know the rest of the story...

bowl and math league together so twice a week I drove them to school prior to classes. Armed with his French horn, Eric was prompt, courteous and happy every day when I picked him up. His parents did a darn good job in his upbringing. I shouldn't have been surprised when Tyler asked if his good friend could work on the crew.

Eric applied himself to his summer job with the same enthusiasm he had during school. Eager to learn, polite, hard working and a good listener, he showed signs of being a real go getter in life. It appeared to me that his drive would do him well in any vocational pursuit. He chose computer applications and was signed up to begin a college level program last August.

That was until he attended an open house at the campus and, among other things, met his peer group. Eric informed me the next day, "I really don't see myself enjoying my choice of study. In fact, the people I met seemed sort of scary." This was from a youth who now had a pink Mohawk and sported two piercings (that I know of); in his lip and eye brow. Ah, the mysteries of youth!

It wasn't long after his education revelation that Eric came to me and announced in a determined manner his intent to get a degree in turf management and become a golf course superintendent. He told me of his love for the outdoor opportunities, watching this grow and friendships with the diverse staff. Basically he said that he really had fun doing his job on the golf course.

After many discussions regarding everything I had told my son about the industry -- long hours, strong competition, declining interest, limited economic rewards and often difficult challenges with Mother Nature -- he still wanted to fulfill his quest. Who was I to stand in his spirited way. His eyes declared a very strong interest and it was up to me, the father of his best friend, to guide his next course of action.

Beyond a solid background working on a golf course Eric appreciated he would need an impressive resume from an accredited school system. He looked at many two year programs including Rutgers and Penn State as well as local choices. And he visited with the turf department at the University of Minnesota. Eric, after much thought, decided upon taking care of his basics at a community college and then transferring to the University of Minnesota/St. Paul. Good for him, as I have always appreciated my B.S. from the U of M. His process and actions indicated a will to become a very good superintendent.

Eric's mother on the other hand had some reservations regarding the need to attain such a great (and expensive) education. Thus I was invited to their house for a little industry promotion exercise over a bowl of booya. Having never met Eric's mom in person I didn't know the kind of individual to expect. She was just like her son; thoughtful, respectful, curious and hospitable. When it all was said and done she agreed that a four-year education was very important for Eric to succeed in the golf industry. And then our discussion went onto other topics.

We talked about high school histories, growing up, local golf courses, people whom we both may know and other social conversation. Then she asked me one final question, "You seem pretty young, but maybe... did you ever know my father, he used to work at the White Bear Yacht Club, his name was Bill Pietz?"

I guess it is pay back time Bill. You are in my thoughts as I work with Eric, your grandson, to become everything you encouraged me to become. Thanks again.