

MGCSA Honors Larry Vetter With 2008 Distinguished Service Award

Written and Presented by
JERRY MURPHY, CGCS

It is a real pleasure and honor to introduce to you a man who needs no introduction, Larry Vetter, a former golf course superintendent, a colleague and a very special friend. As you know, Larry is being honored tonight by being awarded the Minnesota Golf Course Superintendents' Association's Distinguished Service Award.

This award is given to those who have dedicated much of their time, attention and skills to providing leadership for our Association and building a strong foundation upon which future leaders can build.

Larry was born in Iowa and spent most of his early years there. Of course, we won't hold that against him in as much as he has become a true blue MINN A SOTAN.

After high school years, Larry attended the University of Iowa where he received a BBA degree in Marketing and General Business. Enjoying college and being encouraged by others, Larry enrolled in Iowa State University where he received his BS degree in Horticulture with a specialty in Turfgrass Management under the well-known Dr. Elliot Roberts.

Larry developed a keen interest in the Turfgrass field which was recognized early by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America who awarded him a scholarship in 1965.

It was also in 1965 when I had the pleasure of meeting Larry for the first time. I was involved in rebuilding a green at Somerset Country Club. I heard someone call my name and looked around in time to see this handsome young man and Dr. Jim Watson crawling over the fence. I think they were there to inspect our workmanship on the green. Dr. Watson made the introductions, indicating that this young man was going into the Turf Management field. After visiting with him for a short time about the industry, it became apparent to me that Larry would leave his mark on our profession.

Larry didn't waste any time getting into the profession as he accepted the position of Assistant Superintendent at The Minikahda Club in 1965. In 1966 he joined MGCSA and GCSAA and took over the responsibilities of Superintendent at The Minikahda Club where he remained for the next eleven years.

Larry became deeply involved in the Association almost immediately by working on various committees. His expertise and dedication was recognized and appreciated by the membership who elected him to the Board of Directors in 1970. In 1972 he was elected as the Vice President and then was elected twice as the MGCSA President in 1973 and 1974.

It was a busy time in MGCSA history. As you know, each generation builds on the foundation of the preceding generations. And it was now time for our Association to turn the next corner. To do so it was going to take strong leadership and out-of-the-box thinking. It was also a point in time when the Association was struggling financially. The check book rarely had more than a couple of hundred dollars in it and there was little if any savings. Of course there was no such thing as research funds and scholarship funds were a far-off dream.



Larry Vetter, left, received the DSA from MGCSA president Rick Traver, Jr., CGCS at the Annual Awards and Recognition Banquet at Windsong Farm Golf Club on December 5.

The professional image of the Superintendent was in need of help and our *Hole Notes* was just that, "NOTES". It was run off on a mimeograph machine and was one page, newsy and nice, but didn't inspire much of a professional image!

I remember receiving copies of *Hole Notes* from Larry several times with red ink markings all over it and his comments always indicated he was looking for ways and developing ideas to improve the "NOTES."

When you look at the *Hole Notes* now and compare it to the '60s and early '70s look, you will see a huge improvement and what a testimonial to Larry for having the foresight to recognize the impact a professional publication would have on our profession. Larry spent several years as Editor of *Hole Notes* refining and developing its content and look and with each published issue it became more and more of a professional journal. This was a labor of love for him and a vast improvement for all of us. Thank you, Larry, for building that solid foundation!

Larry was also very instrumental in the hiring of our first Executive Director, Mr. Al Wareham. He recognized the value of having an identifiable office where correspondence could be generated and mailed, where records could be kept, filed and stored and where the golfing community could identify with our organization. Before Al, the Association Secretary had the duty of keeping all the records, etc. with him or her. No one wanted the job knowing that after being elected the many boxes or records would be handed over to reside in his office, basement or wherever there was room for them. You can only imagine how many important items may have been lost or misplaced during those years.

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I remember well the Annual Meeting where the Board was asked to stand in front of an apprehensive membership to state their case, to answer questions and explain why they supported such a move. Not many were as far-sighted as Larry and there was much concern and some resistance. The question most often asked was "how can the Association finance this type of venture"?

Earlier we talked about how poor our Association was in those days so this was a very legitimate and weighed heavily on everyone's mind. The short answer was that the Executive Director selection was done carefully. Al was the recently retired Executive Director of the Minnesota Golf Association, so by hiring him he could dedicate his time to our Association and use some office space, phones, staff, etc. at the MGA office. The next biggest concern was the possible loss of identity followed closely by concern that the MGA might have access to some of MGCSA's deliberations. Remember, the Association was working hard to develop a more professional image which would lead to better working conditions and higher salaries and the MGA membership was made up of the very ones the Association was trying to influence- our club members. Can you imagine where the Association would be today without an office and an Executive Director? Again, our thanks to Larry for pushing so hard to get this format established.

Larry was the lead person in another area where Minnesota received a great deal of national recognition. During the 1976 GCSAA Conference which was held in Minneapolis, Larry was in charge of all of the welcoming activities with a charge of making it a memorable event.

Larry determined that the real problem for thousands of members coming into a large city was that it is confusing and sometimes frustrating for them. Then by the time they were comfortable with the city and knew where to go for the various events it was time to depart. His plan was simple - get them informed as soon as they hit town.

Do you remember the old leisure suits? I kind of liked them. Anyway, Larry had all the volunteer men greeters dressed in blue leisure suits and stationed with their wives or girlfriends at all the hotels and at the airport. He supplied information packets so each attendee would be greeted, welcomed and given

information on where to eat, what to see and do and how to find their way around the city. I still don't know how he did it but he managed to arrange for the nicest weather we had all winter that year.

GCSAA was so impressed they sang MGCSA praises for months after the Conference and they still offer that type of service at the conferences in some form or another.

Larry has always been innovative and at the forefront of new ideas. As an example, he was the first superintendent in this area to professionalize his office by hiring a part-time secretary for the grounds department. To keep crews motivated, he instituted a competitive crew competition with special rewards and recognition times. He worked closely with The Toro Company in evaluating and testing new equipment and ideas.

Larry always had an eye on the bigger picture. When the idea of several turf organizations forming some kind of partnership, Larry became a staunch supporter and participated in the initial planning and organizational meetings from which the MTGF was born. And his involvement didn't stop there. After the MTGF became a reality Larry and then MGCSA President Mike Brower signed the contract with the MNLA which allowed the very successful Minnesota Green Expo to become a reality. Larry was also responsible for revising that contract into a rolling 3-year cancellation term which is a protection for our Association in case the MNLA decided to back out of their Green Expo commitment.

Larry has had a very rewarding career in the turf management field. He was a superintendent for eleven years, the National Sales Manager for Northrup King for eleven years, the Director of Professional Sales for the Ringer Corporation and was the owner/operator of his own company for eleven years. He was the Executive Director of the Minnesota Turf and Grounds Foundation for eight years and has been an Adjunct Professor for Turf Management and Culture at North Hennepin Technical College since 1997 and is also currently a Territory Sales Manager with Twin City Seed Company in Edina, Minnesota.

Larry has been a Conference Speaker and Seminar presenter in over 19 states with many presentations to a variety of turf groups. He has written numerous articles for trade magazines and various association newsletters.

He is also a very good golfer having won the MGCSA championship at least four times and played in numerous GCSAA tournaments, bringing home a

number of trophies. On one of those southern state golf events, the Minnesota group didn't bring along enough warm clothes and after the first day on the course they realized that they needed to dress better. After much deliberation and, I might add, speculation, they decided that if panty hose could keep the ladies warm it should work for them. And it did, but there was one small problem. After drinking hot coffee there came a time when it became necessary to make room for more liquid. Being equipped differently than the ladies, a problem ensued. To remedy the situation a small hole was cut in the front of the panty hose without taking into account the amount stretch built into panty hose. You may visualize the gaping hole that appeared when the hose was stretch into place!

With all of the accomplishments Larry has had over his career, he feels, and I agree with him, his greatest success and his most rewarding accomplishment was winning the love of his life, his beautiful wife Carol. Larry and Carol were married on July 3, 1981 and between them they have four children, four grandchildren and one great grandchild, enough to warm their hearts for many years to come.

Early on Larry learned a great lesson from a Will Rogers quote! "There are two theories to arguing with a woman and neither works!"

Larry, you have been a mentor and an example for many of us as well as a gifted leader and dear friend. We have talked about some of your accomplishments here tonight. What we don't have time to do is to go into detail on all of the behind-the-scene accomplishments you have provided for our Association and its individual members. But we can again say "thank you" and present you with the Distinguished Service Award for your many years of above and beyond service to your Association and profession.

Larry Vetter's Distinguished Service Award Acceptance

2008 has been an eventful year for me, most good with some bad.

- 27th wedding anniversary with Carol (not bad for having to start over once)
- 50-year high school class reunion
- Celebrated the 90th birthdays of both parents along with their 69th wedding anniversary

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• Changed employment from MTGF to Twin City Seed Company (still trying to decide what I want to be when I grow up! Better hurry up 'cause I'm probably running out of time!

• 42 years of MGCSA & GCSAA membership

• Along with many of you, I watched 401 K's and IRA's delay retirement

• Saw the highest number ever show up on a gas pump when filling the tank

And then back to the good, getting a call from Scottie Hines telling me that I was the 2008 recipient of this great award from an Association that I'm extremely proud to be a member of.

Thank you, Doug Mahal, for nominating me for this very special award and the MGCSA BOD for approving it. And of course Murph, who is one of the greatest friends that anyone, especially a skinny old sodbuster, could ever have, for his willingness to share those kind words with us tonight.

I know that a lot of "old people" may bore the younger set with stories about walking miles to school, uphill both ways in snow knee deep when it was 20 below, but I can't help but share a few comments along that line. As we all know the world has changed. Managing golf courses has changed. And many of us know that the MGCSA has changed tremendously over the years.

The world has changed. When I first started working on a golf course in small-town Iowa (incidentally, I've lived in the Twin Cities long enough now that most people have forgiven me for being born in Iowa), a buck's worth of gas could set you up for several days of driving. Many people, even those with big appetites like me, couldn't possibly eat a dollar's worth of food at McDonalds and you could understand the words of almost every song that you heard on the radio or played on your 45 rpm record player - and they all had melodies and lyrics!

Managing golf courses has changed. Some of this was certainly different here at the major clubs, but when I started working on a golf course the stimp meter had not been dreamed of, tournaments weren't on TV and golfers and club members weren't pseudo agronomists. Triplexes hadn't been invented and we mowed greens with walk-behinds at 5/16th inch and changed cups twice a week whether they needed it or not. In mid-to-late summer the only thing green on fairways most years was crabgrass. Tees weren't watered

because there was no grass left to irrigate plus there were no water lines run to them. Some players even carried small hammers in their bags to get their tees into the ground. Mowing around bunkers and green and tee surrounds was with a hand push reel mower that was transported from one location to the next by pushing it. We didn't have a utility vehicle. Watering was only on greens with just enough pressure and supply to do a couple at a time with a hose and sprinkler coiled in a box by each green. There were many surprises reaching into those boxes in the middle of the night! Fungicides were used on greens if we had some to prevent death and fertilizer for only greens was whatever happened to be cheapest at the time.

All greens were vegetatively planted with Old Orchard or one of the other "C"s that the USGA had released. We were really excited when we were finally able to get 5 lbs. of Penncross when Dr. Duich released it from Penn State. As I recall, we were on a waiting list and paid \$11 or \$12 per pound for it. We treated it like gold!

Cutting sod was done with a spade in about 1 sq. ft. pieces. Spiking greens was one of the worst jobs as it was done with a hand push/pull drum spiker with concrete blocks weighing it down.

Imagine how I felt coming from this type of a maintenance program directly to The Minikahda Club in 1966.

MGCSA has changed. I was coming to Minnesota to be the Assistant Superintendent at Minikahda to learn under Jack Kolb who was the Superintendent at that time. My primary interviewer that fall in 1965 was Dr. James Watson of Toro, beginning at his office and concluding with a walking tour of the course with him and the Green Committee. I was one scared skinny kid realizing that I was being quizzed during that tour by one of the foremost turf authorities in the world. Following the interviewing process, Jim took me for a ride to Mendota Heights where we climbed a fence behind the 4th green at Somerset CC to visit with Jerry Murphy. Little did I know that this was the beginning of one of the best friendships that I would ever have.

My first MGCSA meeting was in February, 1966 in the "barn" at Woodhill CC. Some of the "old-timers" there like Emil Picha, Carl Anderson, Harold Stodola, John Fuller, George Ostler and Kurt Erdman, among others, gratuitously welcomed me but also had me feeling like the young, inexperienced whippersnapper that I in fact was at the time. That meeting was the beginning of one of the things

that I'm most proud of. A record of almost 11 years of never missing an MGCSA monthly meeting, a GCSAA Conference or an MGCSA Board meeting while serving on the Board.

Around that time the average age of the superintendents in this area dropped maybe more than at any other period either before or after. Bill Johnson started the invasion coming from Superior, Wis. in 1956. Jerry Murphy came to Somerset from the Dakotas in 1960. Jim Lindblad joined in 1962 as did Russ Adams. Dean Sime came to Interlachen that same year. Rich Rannells came to Braemar and then to Golden Valley CC and Larry Mueller came to MN Valley in 1964, Roger Kisch joined in 1965, I came to Minikahda in 1966 the same year that Joe Morris and Orly Maenke joined. Ron Helming went to Hazeltine in 1968, the same year that Dick Grundstrom joined. John Queensland joined in 1969 as did George Jennrich and Keith Scott, who was kind enough to be my Best Man when Carol and I were married in 1981. There were undoubtedly others that came on board during that time. What made it unique is that there wasn't as much turnover in those days as there seems to be now and most of these individuals replaced superintendents who had been at their clubs for many years.

The annual meeting was held at the Normandy Inn in downtown Minneapolis. Remembering some of the things that took place during those conferences, which I won't detail here because of mixed company, but you can probably imagine when I say that one evening was "Stag Night," still make me wonder why we didn't all end up in the slammer. Outgrowing the Normandy the conference was moved to the Sheraton NW and then to the Northland Inn. With the addition of other groups, the annual conference, now the Minnesota Green Expo, fills the two largest domes in the Minneapolis Convention Center featuring over 1,000 exhibits, fills several major hotels and offers over 100 educational sessions over the course of three days.

Digressing, in the early 1970s it became obvious to some of us that the MGCSA needed to upgrade our professional image for more reasons than just "Stag Night". Everything that MGCSA did up until then was done by members who were volunteers, including the newsletter, conference arrangements, monthly meetings, etc. Many of my records from that time period have been purged. Consequently, I can't

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be certain of specific dates. I've donated a rather large stack of old *Hole Notes* dating back to the early '70s to MGCSA and much of this can probably be reconstructed from those newsletters. However, one item that sticks in my mind is that the newsletter was the responsibility of whoever was the Secretary of the Association. This was a really thankless and time-consuming job as word processors and copy machines had not been invented yet or were too expensive for MGCSA to own. The newsletter consisted of a single page that required a stencil to be cut and then run through a mimeograph machine. I'm sure very few in this room even know what that machine was. Each one was then addressed and stamped by hand for mailing. It mainly contained "newsy" items, like "a healthy baby girl was born to..Everyone is doing fine. Tom bought a new tractor at ABC course. Our last meeting was at XYZ course where Joe had the course in fine shape. The kitchen staff did a great job cooking brats, mashed potatoes and corn, with home-made pie for dessert. Our next meeting will be at ... on ..."

Receiving one of these one time I decided to circle every typo, spelling and punctuation mistake in red. When finished there was almost as much red on the page as there was black from the type. This is what was being sent to our members and around the country. It was the "face" of MGCSA. I sent this to Murph with a notation that I probably shouldn't repeat here.

Shortly after that we had a meeting with some of our major suppliers to explore the possibility of advertising in *Hole Notes* and to see if that could support an upgraded newsletter along with hiring a person to assemble and publish it. Fortunately they agreed completely. We then were able to hire Al Wareham who had recently retired as the Executive Director of the MGA and asked him to help us conduct some of the business of the Association including the publication of our newsletter. That was the foundation of the publication that exists today which we can all be proud of and was a monumental step toward upgrading the professionalism of this Association.

One of the most exciting things I experienced was being the local committee chair when the GCSAA Conference was held here in 1976. Our Board tried very

hard well in advance to convince GCSAA to not come here because of our winter weather. I can't tell you how many hours was spent gathering frost-bite information and other weather-related items knowing that people were coming from many areas that almost never even get close to freezing. We lucked out, however, and had a very mild stretch during conference week. A few years ago I wrote a brief history of MGCSA as I knew it which was published in *Hole Notes*.

I've always said that two of the greatest things about being in the turf industry is the satisfaction you get from seeing a golf course in great condition and knowing that you had a hand in making that happen, and the other is making friendships and having peers such as the people in this room and others who make up the membership, both today and in the past. Certainly the world, managing golf courses and the MGCSA has changed. One thing that hasn't changed, however, is the dedication, perseverance and integrity of the members of the MGCSA. That is a huge tribute to the MGCSA membership and I am really proud to be a member of that group.

Thank you for this great award!



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