

# DOC'S DUGOUT - An Inning From Our Past

By Dr. Kent Kurtz - STMA Historian

## John Souter - A True Friend, Colleague & Sports Turf Professional

### The Early Years

John Souter was born and raised in the little village of Bannockburn on the outskirts of Stirling, Scotland. This area is steeped in history as Bannockburn was the site of the famous battle in which William Wallace and his men defeated England and this was made into the recent movie, "Brave Heart". Nearby Stirling Castle, high above Stirling and the surrounding area, was the home of "Mary, Queen of Scots". Growing up in Bannockburn, under modest means along with his mother and father and his sister, Norma, young John attended Stirling High School and did all the things young boys do, including rugby. While in school he had no inkling that someday he would be called by many of his friends, professionals and colleagues, the "Wizard of Turf". In the 1950's and 60's this was a title reserved for aspiring soccer players, like his own father, Johnny Souter, who played professionally for Dumbarton and Hibs. But more than likely the impressions and images of poor sports fields that he saw through his father and later when he played on such fields himself remained dormant in his mind until much later in his life. But the passion and talent for solving sports turf problems was latent during these early years, since other things occupied his mind like rugby, girls and school. After high school, John went to the West of Scotland College of Agriculture where he completed a diploma in horticulture. John always wanted to be a gardener when he was a young lad. He used to get up at 5:30 AM and spend an hour in his greenhouse before he went to school.

His father's sudden death in 1963 brought him back to Bannockburn where he found a job to financially assist his family. He went to work for Scottish Agricultural Industries, a division of Imperial Chemical Industries, as a technical fertilizer representative and became the first turf representative in Britain. According to John, "we advised people on bowling greens, golf courses and soccer fields and I began to see problems of drainage where there had been bad specifications. Six months later there would be just as much muck on the surface as before."

John began to investigate and formulate solutions to the soil problems he observed on the sports fields and bowling greens he encountered in his travels around Scotland. In 1967, at the age of 27, he formed his own company, Souter of Stirling and worked from a small shed on the side of his family's house in Bannockburn. John started his company with only \$400. The early work was mainly dedicated to lawn care and maintenance and renovation of bowling greens. For this early work he purchased two pieces of equipment - a sod cutter and a vertical mower to de-thatch lawns. Soon his first job with a soccer pitch (field) came along. He was employed to lay and re-level the turf in the goal areas at Hampden Park, the stadium for the Scottish National team. This

was his start and the opportunity he needed to launch his successful career in sports turf. Once he out-grew his shed, he and his first employee moved the business to an old brewery in Stirling where the rain came through the roof and the office was protected by an umbrella. Finally, in 1971, he moved to the Springkerse industrial estate which was the home of Souter of Stirling until John retired in 2000. From this point on it was upward and onward for John Souter and Souter of Stirling.



Souter recipient of the Harry C. Gill Memorial Award

### The Later Years

John branched out his business to include a myriad of horticultural specialties that included golf courses, sports fields, bowling greens, racetracks, and polo fields. He was one of the premier sports field contractors in the United Kingdom and also specialized in sports turf maintenance. In addition, he founded a consultancy arm of the company called Grass Technology. Souter of Stirling also offered design services to golf course and sports field clients. He had a composting company and was the founder of a soil laboratory. With all these services Souter of Stirling could offer almost every facet of turfgrass construction and management to his clients in Scotland and other clients in England, Ireland, Portugal, France, Spain, and Malta among others.

### Contributions to Sports Turf

John has never backed down from a problem or a challenge. He has been a forerunner and an innovator in his many years as a sports turf contractor and manager. He has the gift and ability to combine theory with practical experience, knowledge and current ideas. He has made numerous contributions to the field of sports turf.

#### 1. Sand/Slit Drainage Systems

John was the first practitioner to install sand/slit drainage systems in Britain. His first installation was at Hampden Park in Glasgow and this was followed by installations in Aberdeen, Dundee, and Liverpool. Many more stadiums in the UK have benefited from John's knowledge and expertise with sand/slitting technology.

#### 2. Soil Heating

John mastered soil-warming technology and was the first to install soil heating in soccer fields in Britain. This technique maintains a uniform temperature in the turf root-zone and

*continued on page 10*

## DOC'S DUGOUT - An Inning From Our Past

continued from page 7

prevents the turf surface from freezing during inclement weather. He pioneered this technique for the Rangers at Ibrox Stadium in Glasgow. Two boilers heat water, which is then circulated by pumps through miles of pipe, and are placed in the root-zone beneath the turf in the stadium. As the water completes its journey throughout the system it is then re-heated and sent back once again. Other installations by Souter of Stirling include the Celtic Football Club and Hampden Park in Glasgow and the rugby field in Edinburgh, Murrayfield. Many more stadiums and fields in the UK were installed with soil warming by John.

### 3. Sand Root-Zone Construction of Fields

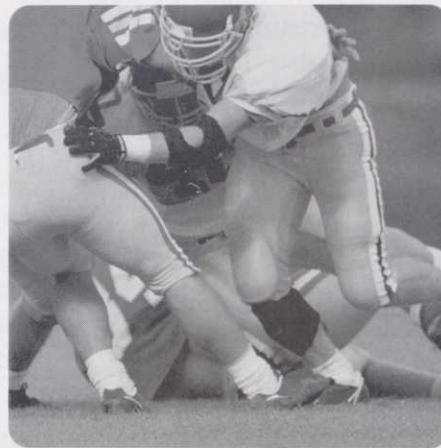
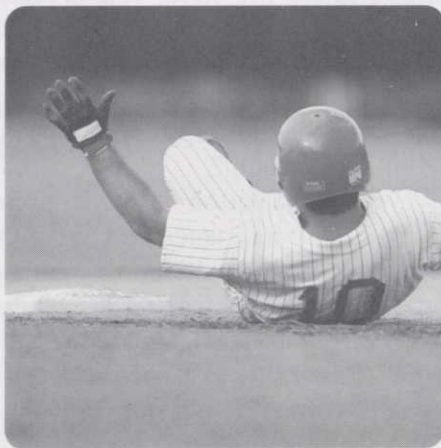
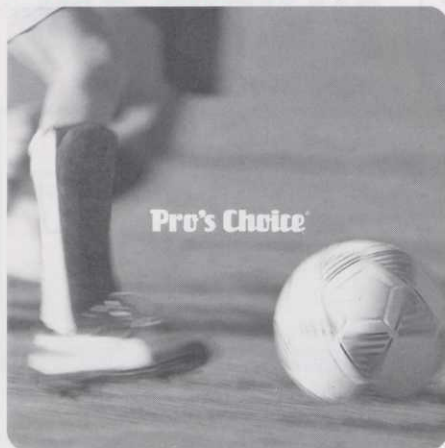
John's company was the first to install all sand root-zones in the UK. He was a close friend of the late Dr. William H. Daniel of Purdue University, where he frequently lectured and discussed sand construction of sports fields. John installed many sand fields in the UK, Europe and the Mediterranean. Probably his most prestigious client has been Manchester United, Old Trafford. He also installed many practice fields for the Manchester United Football Club.

John has been a strong supporter of STMA and its goals and objectives for nearly 20 years. He was named an Honorary Life member of STMA in 1987 along with turf legends Tom Mascaro and Dr. Fred Grau. He was also awarded the Harry C.

Gill Memorial Award in 1998 - this is the STMA's highest honor. John will be in San Antonio in January at the STMA Conference & Show. He has been a speaker at many of the STMA Conferences & Shows. John retired and sold his company in 2000 but continues to do consulting for a number of golf courses and sports fields. He is the founder and chairman of the European Turfgrass Laboratory, the only USDA approved soil laboratory outside the United States. John has been married to his lovely wife, Christine, for over 30 years and they have two children, John who is in the lawn care business and Kirsty, who along with husband Kenny, have a landscape business. John and Christine live in a wee village outside of Stirling where John has a large putting green, beautiful gardens and a greenhouse where he putters around trying to propagate plants. They both play a lot of golf and keep busy travelling back and forth to their American home located on a golf course in Clermont, Florida. I have known this family for more than 20 years and have never met finer people. John is a unique individual, very intelligent, innovative, witty, and one of those rare people some of us are fortunate to meet in our lifetime- a true, loyal friend.

*Editors Note: Mayo Kooiman, the artist who designed our STMA logo, passed away from cancer in early October after a lengthy illness. We will miss her and thank her for her contribution to our great organization.*

## Pro's Choice® sports field products



### Soilmaster® soil conditioners build strong turf to stand up to tough play.

Soilmaster soil conditioners are ideal for incorporating into aeration holes, to relieve compaction in the high traffic areas on soccer, football and baseball fields. Made from a unique montmorillonite clay, and fired for maximum hardness and stability, each granule quickly wicks water away from the playing surface and promotes drainage. The result - deep rooted, divot resistant turf that recovers more quickly from heavy play.



Call for information and samples of our full line of sports field products, including Rapid Dry® drying agent, Pro Mound® packing clay and baseball accessories.

(800)648-1166

[www.proschoice1.com](http://www.proschoice1.com)

