

Supaturf success backed by a great name

Scott MacCallum meets the Palmers who have guided Supaturf to the Top

In the world of golf there are few names which stir the blood in quite the way Palmer does. It is a name revered throughout the game, conjuring up images of spectacular, swashbuckling success to set beside last gasp and unexpected defeats. It is perhaps the most loved name in 20th century golf.

It is also the name shared by the family who, since the early 60s, has masterminded the success of Supaturf Sports & Amenity Products a company which like Arnie has enjoyed a great deal of success and, also like Arnie, has had to recover from the the odd disappointment.

Supaturf was bought by David Palmer, now Chairman, in 1963, when it was no more than a one man company owned by Mervin Roost and his wife Dorothy and based near Stratford-upon-Avon, in Warwickshire.

"I was selling for our parent company, George A. Palmer Ltd," recalls David, "and asked if we could make the fertiliser for Supaturf and so we began making Supaturf fertiliser in 1957."

A couple of years later David asked Mervin Roost if he would sell the company and was given first refusal.

"He phoned me up one Sunday and asked if I still wanted to buy, adding that the deal would have to be done by the following Wednesday," said David.

"An accountant friend, Mr John Jee, and I went over the books and we bought Supaturf on the Tuesday.

"It was a very small business indeed. You could put the entire stock on the back of an eight



tonne lorry and when we took the stock out of the garage where it was stored the back wall fell over because it had been supported by the stock," remembers David.

So Supaturf became a wholly owned subsidiary of George A. Palmer Ltd.

Marcus Palmer, the Managing Director of Supaturf, and the fourth generation of Palmers in the business fills in the details of George A. Palmer.



David, Marcus and Richard Palmer pose in front of a portrait of George A. Palmer

"George A. Palmer lived about two miles from where Supaturf is now situated. He was a farmer with great interest in livestock and was a pioneer in agriculture. He then founded the company George A. Palmer Ltd."

His sons ran the company after the First World War and expanded the business. In 1940 the company bought four acres of land in Peterborough and manufacturing of all company products was carried out there, and the company continued to expand after the Second World War. David Palmer joined the company in 1947 after service in the army and was mainly involved in a sales capacity. He was always keen on sport, rugby union being the favourite and played for Coventry and Hinckley as a centre. All the Palmers were keen on sport.

"I was keen on buying Supaturf because I felt calling on sports clubs was much more interesting

than calling on farmers," joked David. The next move was to expand Supaturf and we increased our sales force to 14 by 1988 and became a major force in the industry. In 1988 things took a turn for the worse and much of the main business was sold, leaving Supaturf and its parent company, George A. Palmer Ltd. The decision was taken in the family kitchen as to which direction the company should now take and it was decided to reduce the product range and concentrate on the best products. Development of new products has been a major part of the policy of the company since 1988.

The new vibrant Supaturf in the 1990s is increasing its presence in the golf market – the most demanding element of the amenity turf business – and becoming a Golden Key member of BIGGA was a natural progression.

"We have always had a good



relationship with the Association – David has been on the Steering committee since it was formed – and over the years we have made several presentations to groups of the greenkeepers' association," said Marcus, who feels that Supaturf will benefit from the wealth of educational options there are open to greenkeepers.

"The more educated greenkeepers become they are more likely to use the new technology which we will be bringing in. The market as a whole is becoming more sophisticated and we are hopefully going to be at the forefront of bringing in this new technology."

"Our salesmen have to be very knowledgeable on the product range and they are trained significantly more than ever before. All our people calling at golf courses have been to the States for training with the companies with whom we work in close association. This has reaped dividends with regards to providing information for greenkeepers."

Marcus recounts the story of a Frenchman who has been involved in the Turf Industry for many years and who had visited BTME on several occasions in the early days and again this year.

"His comment was that the difference he noticed between the British greenkeeper now and then was that previously the greenkeeper came, looked at the stand, didn't say much or ask many

questions and moved to the next stand. This year he felt they came up, asked questions and were very inquisitive about what was on show," said Marcus.

"People want more information nowadays. They want to know what they are paying for and what they are getting."

It is a situation which Marcus feels can only benefit the golf clubs.

"The products we are introducing will bring commercial benefits to the clubs and if the greenkeepers have an appreciation of what

benefit they can bring, they are more likely to welcome them."

Supaturf is working closely with partners in America on new products and will be introducing these to the British and European markets.

Among them and just about to be launched is Clean Carbon, an activated carbon which cleans greens by deactivating the chemicals in them and, what's more, doesn't dust.

Supaturf is also developing a line marker which is adapted to a sprayer.

"The company has come a long way and we see new technology as our assistant to a bright future. A measure of this is the fact that in the mid 80s we had one PC between 140 staff now everyone working in the company has one."

The company is therefore better placed to move into the year 2000 than it was to go into the 1990s and with the Palmer name behind it... who knows!

● Pictured above, staff at work and below, the well-stocked warehouse.

