

'I enjoy getting back to the roots of the job'

Distinguished Service Award

Every year, the FGCSA shall recognize a deserving FGCSA Superintendent who has performed outstanding achievements as a golf course superintendent and who has given his time unselfishly in promoting golf course management and unification of the Florida Golf Course Superintendent.

- 1985 William Wagner
- 1986 Tim Hiers
- 1987 Dan Jones
- 1988 Mark Jarrell
- 1989 Tom Burrows

When 90 golf pros applied to fill the vacancy at Mount Hawley CC in Peoria, Ill., in the 1950s, young Tom Burrows decided to find some other way to make a living out of the game he loved.

"Obviously, the world didn't need any more golf pros," he recalls. "So I became a superintendent."

Three and a half decades later, Tom Burrows, CGCS, received the Florida GCSA's highest award for service to his profession at the Florida Turfgrass Association's annual awards luncheon in Tampa last October.

"I was very surprised," said Burrows, now a consulting agronomist with the Brookside soil testing laboratories. "I mean I worked very hard for the organization for 10 years, but so did a lot

of other fellows. I think several were more deserving than I.

"There are so many that I would probably forget to mention somebody," he said, declining to name any deserving colleagues.

Burrows' personal career mirrors the evolution of golf course management as a profession.

He began during golf's second great boom which, according to the National Golf Foundation, was fueled by a golf-playing president (Dwight Eisenhower), dominance of the game by a plain-spoken, hard-charging son of a superintendent (Arnold Palmer), and the growing importance of television.

"When Elvy Miller (superintendent at Mount Hawley) offered me a job in 1958, there was a real crying need for superintendents," Burrows says.

He stayed with Miller for a year and then, at his urging, applied for the year-old two-year program in turfgrass management at Penn State University.

"It was a wonderful experience," says Burrows. "I studied under Dr. Burton Musser, who had written the only modern textbook for golf course superintendents in existence at that time, and under Dr. Joe Duich."

Duich, who was instrumental in

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Tom Burrows, left, who served two terms as president of the Florida GCSA, received the Distinguished Service Award from Cecil Johnston, immediate past president, at the Florida Turfgrass Association's Awards Luncheon in Tampa last October.



the development of several of the "Penn" varieties of bentgrass, is recognized today as one of the world's foremost turfgrass authorities.

"Joe and I stay in touch," Burrows says. "I have had him down here five times — three FTGA shows and the two South Florida bentgrass conferences."

Burrows also is a director of the Musser International Turfgrass Foundation, whose sole purpose is to fund scholarships for turfgrass researchers to complete their graduate degrees.

While attending Penn State, Burrows spent three summer OJTs under former GCSAA President Robert Williams at Bob O' Link GC on Chicago's North Shore.

Following graduation with an A.S. in turfgrass management, Burrows went to Glencoe (Ill.) GC as superintendent of grounds, greens and buildings, where he oversaw the complete redevelopment of the semi-private golf course.

In 1967, he became director of properties for the Playboy Club Hotel and Resort, building and maintaining four golf courses at Lake Geneva, Wis., and Great Gorge, N.J.

"One of the great things about being a superintendent is that, if you are diligent, you can work anywhere in the world that you want," Burrows said. "By 1970, I had become tired of the northern climate."

In 1972, he landed the job of building, growing in and maintaining Mariner Sands GC in Stuart. Two years later, he moved to the Turtle Creek Club in Tequesta, where he stayed as golf course superintendent for 16 years.

"It used to be that an ambitious young man could start out on the crew at a golf course and retire there as superintendent 50 years later," Burrows said. "But when I left Turtle Creek after 16 years, I knew of only one or two other superintendents who had been at the same place that long."

"It really is tough these days," says Bill Sterling, who was greens chairman at Turtle Creek from 1986 through 1988.

"Tom worked very hard — I mean VERY hard — to please all the members, but it's an impossible situation when you have to work with a bunch of retirees who think they know everything and have enough time on their hands to try to prove it."

"For the last five or six years," Burrows says, "I have been telling myself that if I worked as hard for myself as I did for the club, I would have to be a success."

So when the opportunity arose, instead of accepting any of the job offers that came his way once news of his availability leaked out, Burrows decided to go into business for himself.

"I miss being a superintendent," he says, "but I certainly enjoy what I am doing right now."

"I am still involved in golf. I am able to go around and see other superintendents — which I wasn't able to do before — and I am getting to see some of the most beautiful golf courses in existence."

"And I am back to the roots of the job as a soils consultant, helping to make the superintendent's job easier."

Making the superintendent's job easier has become a habit with Tom Burrows. He served two terms as president of the FGCSA (1984-86) and four as education chairman.

"It's hard to judge one leader over another," says Mark Jarrell, CGCS, superintendent at Palm Beach National

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GC and national columnist on golf course management, "but Tom Burrows certainly was the right man at the time he was president of the FGCSA.

"He was the first president to really delegate a lot of work and it just so happened that the organization had become big enough to get a lot of things done. He's the only reason I am writing articles for *Golfweek*.

"They asked him if he could find somebody and he immediately saw that it was a great public relations opportunity for the profession. So he told me that it needed to be done and he asked me to do it."

Public relations and continuing education are the two subjects that Burrows brings up whenever asked to comment on the skills needed to become a successful superintendent.

"Having trained more than 90 OJT students, I think I have the experience to comment on turf education programs," Burrows said. "The one area in which students could use more training is in public relations.

"I am not sure how much of it they can teach in the classroom, but it doesn't make a bit of difference how good you

are on the technical side if you don't know how to deal with the public.

"You can be the best turf manager in the world, but if you can't work with golfers, you aren't going to make it as a superintendent. And I don't see too many trainees today who really understand that."

He also advises trainees to "work for as many different superintendents as you can. If you have the chance to work with five different ones, do it. That way, when you are on your own, you will have been exposed to a broad range of problem-solving techniques."

As for continuing education, Burrows, who has seen golf course management grow into a high-tech profession, says it is the second key to success.

"I can't say enough about the GCSAA certification program," he adds. "Twenty years from now, if you are not certified, you are not even going to be considered for any of the top jobs.

"The important thing to learn in school is principles, because one thing you can be sure of: the technology will change.

"And keeping up with the technology is one of the greatest challenges we

face. For me, it's the most fun."

The greatest challenge facing technology today, Burrows says, is finding a better putting surface for the South.

"I don't know whether it will be a bentgrass or a bermudagrass, but what we have today is not acceptable," says Burrows, who plays about once a week and breaks 80 when his game is on.

"The bentgrass we oversee with is fine for four months out of the year, but just about the time it's really established, the members are going back north.

"It's possible to grow bentgrass year-around down here, but it is very, very expensive and it can't stand up to traffic during the summer."

Burrows says he does not miss the political battles of trying to convince willful members of scientific facts they don't want to hear. But some things he does miss.

"When I was a superintendent, my favorite time was early in the morning, when I toured the golf course. You can actually see what you have accomplished and, in Florida, you can do that 12 months out of the year.

"I miss that."

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