

Wayne Otto, a 'maverick' proven a pioneer

By Vern Putney

"Bring back the good old days, when greens held better and putted faster."

This golfer lament doesn't ring true for Wayne Otto, course superintendent at Ozaukee Country Club in Mequon, Wis., though he recognizes that golf course conditions and playability have changed.

"Unfortunately," noted Otto, "greens then held poorly struck shots. And I am certain they were not better and not faster 10 to 15 years ago."

The current player craze is for putting surfaces that roll extremely fast. What was considered fast 10 years ago is not even close to fast enough today, Otto observed. Players will not accept slower greens, he added. They feel speed is the ultimate criteria for judging the best greens.

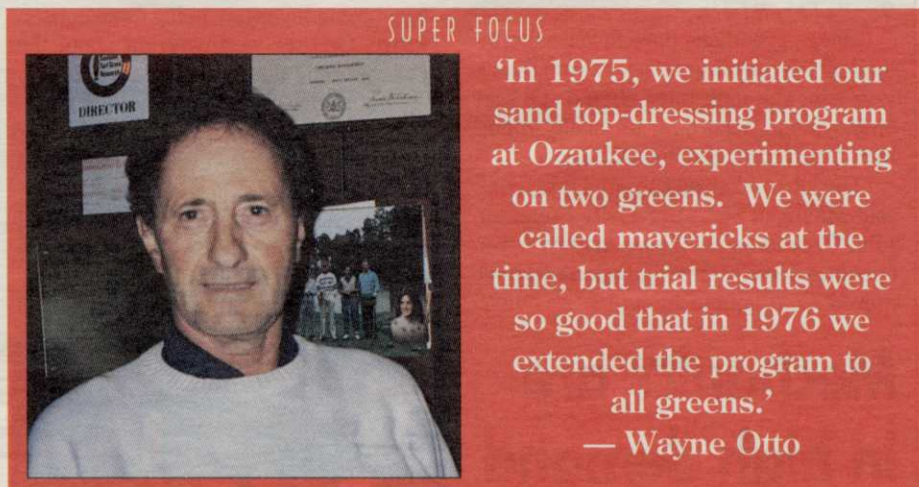
The problems associated with providing these conditions, Otto said, are algae and moss, difficult recovery from wear and tear, such as on yesterday's hole location, coping with much less usable cupping area on highly contoured greens, etc. Because of this, superintendents continually get complaints of "Who in the world put the hole there?"

Backed by 30 years in the field, Otto declared, "The finest putting surface must be firm and not soft and spongy. In 1974, I heard of the practice of using 100-percent sand top-dressing from Dr. John Madison of California-Davis University. Only a few courses were attempting this.

"In 1975, we initiated our sand top-dressing program at Ozaukee, experimenting on two greens. We were called mavericks at the time, but trial results were so good that in 1976 we extended the program to all greens.

"I firmly believe that with the right sand, with good quality control (consistent particle size distribution), frequent applications (8 to 10 times per year) at one to two cubic feet per thousand square feet, the finest possible putting conditions will result.

"It is very important that the sand be applied lightly and frequently throughout the growing season. Where this procedure has not



SUPER FOCUS

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been followed scrupulously, layers of organic matter have developed, causing spongy putting surfaces. Sand top-dressing now is an accepted practice."

Otto's criteria for judging putting surface quality are uniformity, smoothness, firmness, speed, upright growth habit of the turf, and a tight and dense turf.

To produce the desired greens speed, Otto in June, July and August uses less nitrogen fertilizer.

"Our height of cut is below one-eighth inch and we double-mow on occasion," said Otto. "In the fall, the mowing height is raised and nitrogen fertilizer applied so that the carbohydrates build up in the grass plant to prepare for winter. With the grasses we have to work with, it is not possible to maintain U.S. Open conditions for the entire golf season."

Another major improvement to playability, Otto pointed out, is the fairway playing surface. "Many players have commented that our fairways today are better than putting greens once were. This is due largely to the use of lightweight mowing equipment and clipping removal, less use of water, less nitrogen filter and lower heights of cut.

"Back in the early 1970s, Bob Brue, our golf professional at Ozaukee, was watching one of my staff mowing the approach to the 18th green with a Jacobsen Greensking with

grass catchers. Brue remarked to me that 'someday, all fairways at better golf courses will be mowed with a triplex greensmower, with baskets to catch the clippings.'

"I replied that he was 'crazy as hell' and, because of manpower and extra expense, that would not be practical. Boy, was I ever wrong!"

Otto said that in the early 1970s, he started mowing par-3 holes and approaches with the greensmower. "After seven or eight years, we could see that these areas were predominantly bentgrass. Soon, a few prominent golf courses in Ohio began mowing all fairways with triplex greensmowers. Results were fantastic in a very short time.

"The triplex greensmower used had solid rollers and baskets to collect clippings, which allowed the bentgrass literally to crawl over the top of the poa annua. We have improved a few areas where there wasn't much bentgrass population with Verti-drain cultivation and overseeding with bentgrass. In some areas, bentgrass populations exploded. Much aerification had to be done to keep the bentgrass close to the soil.

"Late in the decade, we began mowing swales on some fairways with the Greensking. The larger tractor-pulled mowers did not cut the grass very well down in these crucial areas where the better player hit the tee shot.

The smaller cutting units on the greensmower did a far superior job of cutting grass — especially in depressions commonly found on older courses."

Otto said that for the better player, improved playability — more ball roll and better shot control — has resulted. There have been a few complaints from the higher-handicapped players of tight lies, 'not enough grass to hit wood shots.'

Irrigation and drainage are of prime concern to Otto.

"I have learned," he said, "that if we are to keep our course in top condition, irrigation water must be applied very discriminately to avoid wet spots and soggy situations. The large pop-up sprinklers now are run much less, and we do more watering by hand or spot watering with hoses and sprinklers. This may seem a step backward but, despite our antiquated irrigation system, the heavy clay/silt 'Mequon Gold' soil we must work with, and the undulations, we still have provided much-improved playing conditions with good water management.

"Hopefully, we soon will install a new state-of-the-art irrigation system that will give us much better control of water."

As with many superintendents, Otto has found significant drainage progress from installation of gravel silt trenches with drain tubing put in the ground over the years. This work will continue and, perhaps, the problem will disappear. "Ha," added Otto lightly but realistically.

He summarized: "My goal is to produce the best possible playing conditions for our members and their guests in a cost-effective manner, to preserve and enhance both natural and man-made beauty, which is the substance of the golf course."

What of the future? "We must use pesticides safely and discriminately. New grasses must be developed that will be disease-resistant, drought-tolerant, need little or no supplemental fertilizer and yet provide an acceptable playing surface."

Otto, a Milwaukee native, is a 1960 graduate of the Pennsylvania University Turf Program. He spent 1959-1960 in placement training with Harold Glissmann in Omaha, Neb., and from 1960 to 1963 designed, constructed and established the turf and maintained the golf course at Sunset Valley Country Club in Omaha.

From 1963 to 1967, Otto was superintendent at Pioneer Park and Holmes Park Golf Course in Lincoln, Neb., then switched to Ozaukee.

Otto didn't confine his drive and talents to daily course activities. He's been helpful away from the links as member of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, past president of Nebraska and Wisconsin GCSAs and the Midwest Regional Turf Foundation, vice president of the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association, and board member of the O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research Foundation.

Besides his wife JoAnn, Otto cited several persons as very influential and helpful in his golf turf management career.

"Professor H.B. Musser and Dr. Joseph Duich taught turf program students not only how to 'grow grass' but how to deal with the real world. Dr. Duich had a better handle on what's happening in the field than anyone I've ever seen from academia. Maybe that's why he is in demand all over the world.

"I met Glissmann at the Penn State turf conference through Professor Musser. Glissmann hired me, and I did my internship with him. He was known as 'Mr. Turf' in Nebraska. It was indeed an education!"

CHAPTER I

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