

# Sommerfeld, other supers find innovation on Jones Trail

By HAL PHILLIPS

**B**IRMINGHAM, Ala. — Nothing is written in stone at Oxmoor Valley Golf Club, where Marty Sommerfeld tends to 54 holes on the Robert Trent Jones Trail.

Sommerfeld is one of seven head superintendents looking after what will ultimately become an 18-course golf complex bestriding the Alabama landscape. Run by Sunbelt Golf Co., the venture originally gained notoriety for its innovative financing source: Alabama state pension funds. But its maintenance operation is equally unique and ever-changing.

"We really try to pool our ideas and resources to make the best business and agronomic decisions," Sommerfeld explained. "I think it's really a team concept here at Sunbelt Golf. We have very open lines of communication."

Of course, there are economies of scale. Buying 200 rakes and splitting them 18 ways, for example, is cheaper

than outfitting each course one by one. But the cooperation goes further than group buying.

When there's a drainage problem at Oxmoor, Sommerfeld picks up the phone and calls Ricky Huey down at the Jones Trail course in Mobile. Furthermore, Sommerfeld can't say enough about the

bentgrass knowledge of his Sunbelt colleagues. Everyone, he said, has benefitted from the healthy exchange of ideas on overseeding, aerifying and syringing techniques.

"We put lights on the aerifiers this year and did 36 holes in two days without interrupting play," Sommerfeld said. "We also share aerifiers. If I have a good idea in Birmingham, I pass it on. Most people are shocked to hear that."

Isn't there any rivalry at all?  
"There really isn't. You have peer pressure — there's no doubt about it. But we know that if one site loses, we all lose. We're all on the same song sheet."

"The thing that can be tough sometimes is that no one has ever done what Sunbelt is doing. There's no textbook out there, so you almost have to pull everyone together to discuss the problems. Sometimes you have to learn by trial and error."

According to Oxmoor Director of Golf Kim Worrel, there is very little error. Further, Worrel appreciates Sommerfeld's in-house capabilities.

"Marty is so knowledgeable," said Worrel. "Not just from an agronomy standpoint, but from a construction standpoint, as well. He's seen it all."

"We just rebuilt the second green on the Valley course and Marty did the whole thing himself. That's quite a luxury."

Sommerfeld's familiarity with construction practices didn't happen by accident. His first job out of Michigan State's Turf Management Program was

with the Robert Trent Jones Sr.'s construction unit in Florida. When the Jones Trail needed superintendents, he was an obvious choice.

His route to the world of turf management, however, was a bit more circuitous.

Sommerfeld was raised in the northern Michigan town of Alpena, about 100 miles southeast of the bridge to the Upper Peninsula. Michiganders will appreciate the native description: "At the index finger of the right hand, laid flat," he said.

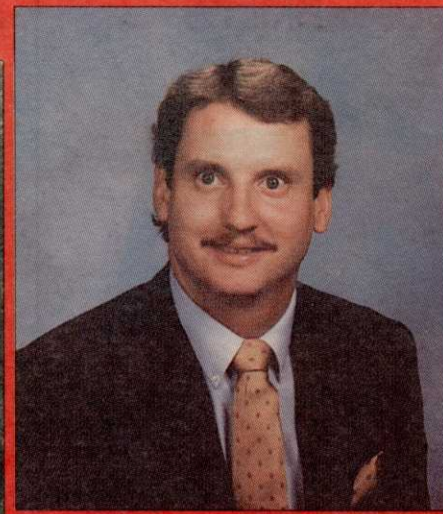
While earning his undergraduate degree in political science at the University of Michigan, Sommerfeld did some hand watering at a little nine-hole facility in Alpena. A friend at Grand Traverse Resort helped light the fire, and soon Sommerfeld was enrolled at MSU — though his football allegiance remains with Ann Arbor: "I was born with maize and blue in my blood," he said.

With his Spartan degree, he joined the Jones outfit in Florida. He eventually left to build and oversee the grow-in at the Country Club of the Legends in St. Louis.

When it looked as though the 18-course project would become a reality, the Jones people looked for one of their own.

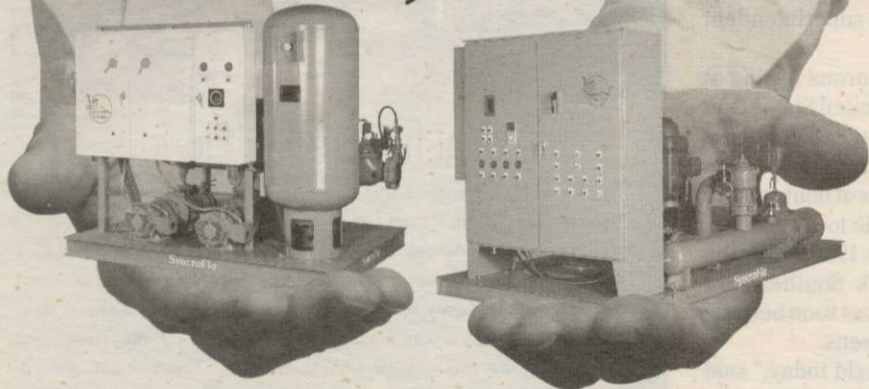
"It's really sort of a brotherhood with the Jones people, and that appealed to me," said Sommerfeld. "But what really sold me on this project was the motto: Golf for golf's sake. There are so many golf courses being built today, only for the real-estate value. Not here."

## SUPER FOCUS



Marty Sommerfeld, above, is part of 16-course team on Alabama's Jones Trail. His charge is to maintain Oxmoor Valley Golf Club, left.

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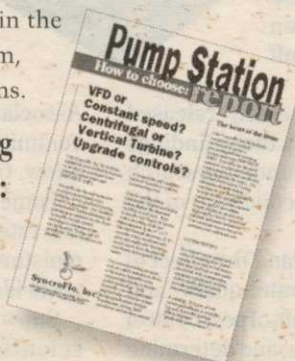
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## Ohio turf show lines up speakers

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A lineup of leaders in the golf course industry will speak at the Ohio Turfgrass Foundation Conference and Show here, Dec. 6-9.

Following a full day of workshops on Monday, Dec. 6, the trade show will open Tuesday morning. Dr. James Watson, recently retired from the Toro Co., will kick off three full days of educational sessions at 1:15 p.m. on "Turfgrass in the Year 2000," followed by Richard Undersood of Space Panorama, a retired NSA official, speaking on "The Environment and Weather — Earth from Space."

Among the speakers will be Drs. Karl

Danneberger, Dave Shetlar, Ed McCoy, Bill Pound, Harry Niemczyk, Joe Rimelspach and Tom Stockdale of Ohio State University; Dr. Hank Wilkinson of University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana.

Also, Drs. Trey Rogers and Bruce Branham of Michigan State University; Dr. Peter Dernoeden of the University of Maryland; Dr. Peter Landschoot of Penn State University; and Dr. Michael Hurdzan of Hurdzan Design Group in Columbus.

More information is available from Ohio Turfgrass Foundation at 2021 Coffed Road, Columbus, OH 43210.