

BY PAT JONES

THE GRASS WHISPERER

COMMON SENSE SEEMS TO BE AN ONGOING
THEME IN THE LIFE AND CAREER OF A
RETIRED SUPERINTENDENT

As a teenager, Doug Petersan had the common sense to realize life on a farm in rural Nebraska was a helluva lot of work. He went off to school at the University of Nebraska – long before they had a turf program – to study business. After his freshman year in 1960, he came home and knew he wanted something different.

“I wasn’t going to go back to the farm and throw hay bales all summer,” Petersan says.

So, at his sister’s suggestion, he got a job at a local golf course that paid \$1 an hour. By the end of the summer, he was the assistant superintendent, earning the lordly sum of \$1.75 an hour. The farm was officially in his rear-view mirror.

Even though majored in business at Nebraska, he stuck with golf. Pioneer Golf Course, one of the municipal courses in the Lincoln area, had a terrible winter and hired him as the superintendent.

“They had no grass but did 60,000 rounds a year,” Petersan says. “This was before preemergents and overseeding equipment, so I took an old aerifier and a disc (cultivator) out on the fairways just to get some seed/soil contact. It was common sense to me, but by the end of the first day, they had the mayor and the city council out to see what this crazy kid was doing.”

The crazy kid’s plan worked, and he stayed at Pioneer for four years.

From there, he kept moving up the ladder with a stint at Wedgewood Golf Course in Plainfield, Ill. (where he learned much from legendary course builder Brent Wadsworth, who lived nearby). Then, it was back to Nebraska at Fremont Golf Club, where he spent seven years and shook things up once again.

“That was one of the most significant times of my career,” he says. “We started topdressing greens with sand in

maybe ’76. That was, at the time, pretty radical. I read about it somewhere and saw it done in California. I was always looking for a way to provide a smooth putting surface without doing crazy things.”

In 1980, Petersan moved to the fabled Prairie Dunes Golf Club in Hutchinson, Kan. The course, a Perry Maxwell classic design, rates high among the best kept secrets in American golf. It’s a gem featuring links-style gorse, sand and tight fairways laid across the stark western Kansas landscape.

“We had dunes full of sand, so we did a lot of topdressing,” he says. “It drove the members crazy, so they started calling me ‘Doug Peter-sand.’”

During his 12 years at Prairie Dunes, Petersan hosted four USGA championships (two Women’s Amateurs, a Mid-Am and the Curtis Cup) and began to gain a national reputation for his minimalist, environmentally friendly practices. He also met and began to work a bit with architect Bill Coore and pro Ben Crenshaw.

In 1991, he took his skills to Baltimore Country Club, another classic where he worked with architect Brian Silva to restore the greens. But in 1999, he was lured to Texas by Coore and Crenshaw to build and manage the course at Austin Golf Club. He’s been ensconced happily there ever since. It’s also where he got his nickname.

“Our golf pro started calling me the ‘Grass Whisperer’ after I started here at Austin, so I used it as the name of my column in the club newsletter,” he says. “I kind of adapted it for the name of my consulting business as well.”

Now, after almost 50 years of bringing a common-sense vision to a succession of great golf courses, he has “retired” as a superintendent. He might be the Grass Whisperer, but he speaks loud and clear on his career,



Even though Doug Petersan isn't a superintendent any more, he still spends a lot of time on the golf course because of his and his wife's consulting company.

consulting, working with Coore and Crenshaw, and the challenges facing the industry in the future.

WHY DID YOU RETIRE?

I didn't retire so much, rather I changed my position in life. I'm no longer a superintendent, but my wife and I formed a company, and I have a consulting contract with Austin Golf Club. So, I'm still at the course a lot, but I'm essentially self-employed. We have a really good friend down here who's a financial planner, and he suggested we could do this, still keep active and defer some income to later in life.

I've also been doing some outside consulting

around Texas, including working with Nutramax Laboratories, a biostimulant company, and working with a few other courses throughout the country. I love to look at other courses, especially great golf courses.

ISN'T "CONSULTANT" A DIRTY WORD FOR SOME OF YOUR PEERS?

It can be. Consultants have brought some of that on themselves. I like to help people if I can. The last thing I want to be is one of those "job killer" consultants you hear about.

ARE YOU ENJOYING THE BENEFITS OF THE PRIVATE SIDE OR JUST WORKING HARDER

IN A DIFFERENT WAY?

I haven't changed my routine much. I try to go to church more often on Sunday now, but otherwise the schedule's about the same, and I'm at the course just about as much. I'm actually a member at Austin Golf Club, and we're building a house out here, so I enjoy being here, obviously. My wife also works at the golf course. She's been my administrative assistant for years. Her mission in life is to keep me out of the office. She handles all the details so I can spend more time on the course.

TYPICALLY, WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO HELP YOUR CLIENTS WITH?

I look at this business in a different light. The hardest part of being a superintendent is the blending of good agronomic practices and good playing conditions. Push either envelope too far either way, and it doesn't work well. If there's one mistake I see as I visit different courses is that people push the envelope too far to make a manager or a green committee happy. They water too much or double- or triple-cut. They overcompensate, and it becomes a big see-saw. It doesn't work well. I'm fortunate here at Austin Golf Club because the last thing we judge something by is what color it is.

I developed my philosophy of working with people from my mother. She was a school teacher for 45 years, and she used to come home frustrated and say, "I don't care if I teach these kids anything if I can teach them how to think." That's what I try to do with my staff and even the courses I work with.

WHAT MISCONCEPTIONS DO SUPERINTENDENTS HAVE ABOUT SALESPEOPLE?

I'm working with Nutramax, but it's not as much in sales as trying to spread the word about the technical aspects of the product. I'm a resource for superintendents and distributors. I spend time with them and answer questions. Nutramax is one of the tools I've used for a long time, so I'm comfortable working with them.

My philosophy always has been not to use a lot of nitrogen fertilizer – less than two pounds per thousand square feet on bentgrass greens for a 12-month season at Austin – or irrigation. I always try to use soil tests to determine what is needed for nutrients. We're not trying to influence color, just turf quality and playability.

One of the things that helped me, starting at Baltimore County Club, is that products like Nutramax help you out by enhancing leaf tissue. That carried over here. We rarely double-cut – maybe three or four times per year – but we'll have healthy bentgrass greens that roll at 11 all summer long.

WHAT SHOULD PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT PRAIRIE DUNES THEY PROBABLY DON'T?

How great of a course it is. Perry Maxwell did the first nine. For years, it was known as the best nine-hole course in the country. They opened a second nine in the early '60s. It's a small-town club. Hutchinson's population is only about 40,000. It was a secret paradise for years.

YOU WERE IDENTIFIED EARLY ON AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL SUPERINTENDENT. DO YOU AGREE WITH THAT CHARACTERIZATION?

I've absolutely tried to be one. Tom Athy, who's now the superintendent at Omaha Country Club, was one of my assistants years ago. He called a while back and reminded me of what I always told him: If you don't know what it is, don't spray it, aerify it. I've always tried to do things culturally – anything I could do to make the plant healthier. Plus, I've been fortunate to be at clubs that allowed me to do it. It's easy to put band-aids on stuff, but you don't want to put a band-aid on a broken arm. It's common sense.

WHAT OTHER COMMON-SENSE ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUR COLLEAGUES?

One thing I've done for a long time is maintain a nursery and experiment with different things. We were the first club in this part of Texas to go with zoysiagrass fairways and bentgrass greens. I had no preconceived notions. We had to sprig the zoysiagrass because there wasn't enough of that sod in the world. I was told repeatedly I couldn't do it. We did have some problems – it was a hundred degrees, after all. But, as far as I'm concerned, it's the finest playing surface you can get with the least maintenance and inputs. I always push the envelope a little further than most people do. Grass is pretty self-sufficient if you let it be. If you dump things on it, you'll kill it faster than letting be healthy. You have to keep watching it and try different things. If I've learned anything throughout the years, it's been patience.

WHAT DID YOU TRY TO TEACH THE YOUNG FOLKS WHO YOU'VE MENTORED WHO ARE NOW LEADERS IN THE BUSINESS?

One thing I've never done is try to push my ideas on young people. I try to give them the big picture and let them figure it out. If you send a guy out and tell them exactly what to do, he'll do it. But, if you tell them what you want done and let them figure it out, they'll learn more. Many people are good at doing a specific job but don't know what the mission is. They won't be as successful on their own unless you challenge them to solve problems themselves.

HOW DID YOU HOOK UP WITH CRENSHAW AND COORE?

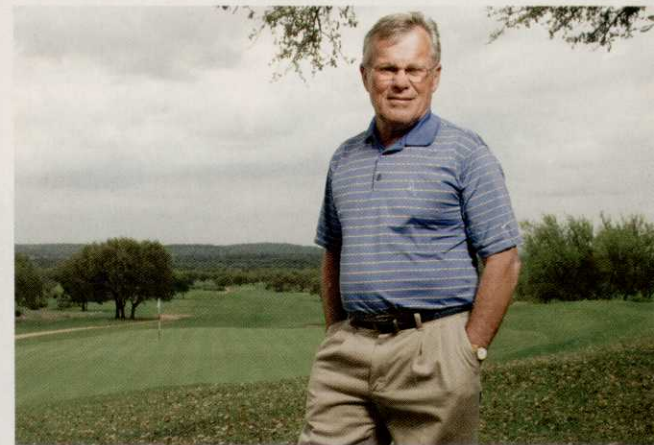
I'd used Bill Coore as a consulting architect at Prairie Dunes. I liked to run ideas by him because he has a great eye. He and Ben already were talking about getting together. In 1987, Bill helped me redo the first and second holes at Prairie Dunes to get surface water off greens. Ben visited when we did that job, and they started working together after that. Since then, I've been involved with many of their projects throughout the country. They appreciate how I try to do things, and I appreciate their philosophy about golf course architecture.

Later on, I was working with Dick Youngscap at Firethorn Golf Club in Lincoln, Neb. I spent one day a month with him. He wanted to do this project in the middle of nowhere in the Sand Hills of Nebraska. I told him, "Hell, Dick, there's no people out there!" But, he stuck with it, and it evolved. He asked me who I'd hire to do the (design) job, and I immediately said Crenshaw and Coore. That's how Sand Hills got going.

It really turned out to be a fantastic course. My assistant (Kyle Hegland) just left to go up there to be the superintendent. He'll do a great job up there for them. He's so passionate about this business it's incredible.

WHAT SHOULD READERS KNOW ABOUT BEN CRENSHAW THEY MIGHT NOT BE AWARE OF?

He makes it a point to learn what we go through daily to maintain golf courses. He understands grass doesn't have to be green to be a good surface. He was out of town a couple of weeks one time we'd had some rain. He got back to the course and said, "Doug, it turned green on us! That's just awful!"



HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF THE BUSINESS AND PROFESSION CHANGING DURING THE NEXT 20 YEARS?

The energy crunch is big right now but, 20 years from now, water will be the issue. T. Boone Pickens made a zillion dollars in the oil business. Know what he's doing now? Buying up water rights.

You better learn to live with less water. We've never used more than 50 million gallons on 75 acres. That's about 24 inches of irrigation for the season. Our annual rainfall is only 30 inches, which usually comes in a few big falls. We keep it dry and typically water greens once a week. And they're pretty healthy. They have a good root system.

We need to teach people that green isn't always good. I'm so fortunate because Ben is my leader down here, and he completely agrees with that concept.

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST THING YOU'VE LEARNED THROUGHOUT THE YEARS?

The main lesson I would pass along is enjoy what you do. If you don't, do something else. If you enjoy this business, it's absolutely the best line of work in the world. There's nothing like being out there on the course by yourself in the morning. It's the closest thing you can get to heaven on earth.

DO YOU REALLY TALK TO THE GRASS?

No, but sometimes if you listen real close, it'll talk to you. GCI

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