

Practical about **BEING GREEN**



Dan Dinelli improves North Shore Country Club's environmental standing

BY PAT JONES

In the Chicago area, the name Dinelli primarily is associated with three storied generations of successful superintendents. The name makes you think of great courses, perfect greens and satisfied members at some of the best clubs in the nation.

The name doesn't necessarily make you think of peregrine falcons ... but it should.

Dan Dinelli, CGCS, is a branch of one of the profession's most remarkable family trees and a guy who sometimes wakes up thinking about peregrine falcons ... and bluebirds ... and water conservation ... and native areas.

As the next in an illustrious line of folks who've won the GCSAA's President's Award for Environmental Leadership, Dinelli is humbled by the honor but still pragmatic in his approach.

"It's a double-edged sword," he says. "It motivates and drives me, but it also creates expectations and responsibilities. It puts a bull's-eye on your back to meet those demands."

Dinelli was born into the business as the son and grandson of well-known superintendents in the Windy City. Uncles and cousins have tended the turf at area courses as well. His career path has been simple by most standards. Turf was already flowing through his veins from birth, so after earning associate's degrees in parks and ground management and horticulture from William Rainey Harper College and studying turf-grass management at Michigan State, he joined the staff at North Shore Country Club in 1978, became superintendent in 1993 and never left.

When Dinelli arrived at North Shore, the course was typical of most parkland-style facilities in the Midwest. Throughout three decades, he's slowly helped transform it into a showplace for eco-friendly golf and created a reputation as having a bright, scientific mind. Thanks to him, North Shore is nothing less than a living laboratory for techniques, products and ideas that help golf prove high-end playability and practical environmentalism can coexist.

How did it feel to win the GCSAA's environmental award?

I was shocked. There are so many people in our industry who've done wonderful things and have been instrumental in our evolution. I'd

just never considered being one of them. There's still much more I can and want to do to further our efforts. Besides, success includes others, my family, support from North Shore membership and the dedicated staff, including my cousin Jerry Dinelli.

What led you to this?

I've loved being on the GCSAA's Environmental Programs Committee for the past five years, but I've always been interested in ecology and wildlife. Before my two girls came along, my wife and I traveled a lot and studied environmental habitats. We spent time in the Philippines to learn about the Philippine eagle - there are only 300 in the world - and went bird watching in Costa Rica and other tropical forests. I love the diversity of our planet and the opportunity to constantly learn more about it. We've also been volunteers in the peregrine falcon release in Chicago (which reestablished the rare birds into the city).

All that background spilled over to the way we try to manage North Shore - constantly trying to improve the habitat and the facility's diversity.

What are the three most important steps a superintendent can take to make a facility more environmentally friendly?

First, it takes planning. We couldn't have done what we've done without a long-range plan and a great support system within the club. You have to sell the need, and that stems from planning.

Second, you have to recognize it needs to be a complete approach. Improved playability, aesthetics and environment - it all needs to integrate into one package. The three things are inseparable in our business. The superintendent has to orchestrate that by formulating a plan and selling it to the membership. That's one of the reasons we do so much research here. Yes, it helps others, but it also demonstrates ideas to our membership that helps them accept what we think we need to do.

Finally, you have to be open-minded and continue to grow and learn. If you commit yourself to this path, you'll reach your goals.

You know, 170 acres of open green space in the middle of a city is a powerful thing from an environmental standpoint. There aren't many

landscapes like these in urban areas that can contribute so positively to the community. That's a big responsibility and big opportunity.

When you visit other courses, what things make you cringe and think, "Boy, they should fix that"?

What pops into my head aren't so much the problems but the opportunities. Like many courses, we used to be mowed fenceline to fenceline. We implemented our first wildflower garden in 1981 and have been diversifying the property since. When I visit other courses, I usually notice things that are there that would be fun to enhance, such as places that could be tweaked to attract more birds and butterflies and diversity in habitat.

I'm envious of other courses sometimes because we're flat. It would be awesome to have the opportunity to play around with a property that has elevation changes and different microclimates. Often, there's so much that can be done for little money.

Are most golf courses making the grade these days?

I want to believe we're all environmentally friendly - it's just a question of to what degree. There are always more things to do, even simple things such as adding birdhouses, which you can make yourself for practically nothing during the off-season. How can you naturalize out-of-play areas and save money at the same time?

But I talk to superintendents who still believe Audubon and environmental programs cost a lot of money.

The bottom line is that it needs to be a program you implement over time. You don't have to jump into it with both feet and go hog-wild. Take your time, plan, spread it out and budget a little bit every year. I'll argue it'll save you money in the long run.

Tell us about CITYgreen.

We were updating our 2,000-plus tree inventory with help from Chris Bechtel from the Morton Arboretum. I asked to collect the data needed to complete the model CITYgreen, which I found while surfing the Internet researching environmental benefits from landscapes. CITYgreen



was developed by American Forests to help communities quantify the value of their tree expenses in terms of dollars and environmental benefits. It helps to justify and further develop their tree programs. Chris collected data from

our trees, and we fed it into the program. It tells you how much the trees contribute to the environment. It would be great to have an expanded model that includes turf. We already have done the research about what turf contributes to the

environment. It just needs to be written into a model like CITYgreen.

From that experience, I came up with an environmental balance sheet – an itemized list of how the golf course affects carbon dioxide and contributes positively in other ways versus the inputs we use and energy we consume. It could be a great management tool. My gut tells me we still consume too much, but at least we'd know where our strengths and weaknesses are and where we can make the greatest improvements.

Why isn't that being done?

It's on the GCSAA's radar and a matter of priority. I can say with certainty that we stand favorably compared to many other land-use activities and sports. Think about NASCAR, one of our nation's biggest spectator sports, for example. But, we can still do more. I'm concerned about our use of nitrogen. Nitrous oxide, a byproduct of fertilization, is hundreds of times more powerful than CO₂ and long-lived. It may not be as prevalent as CO₂, but it will be on the government's radar soon. Our perspective about how we fertilize may be impacted.

What else keeps you up at night?

Water is still No. 1. The GCSAA is updating the (1988) Stuart Cohen study of water quality on Cape Cod golf courses to see what's changed. They're also creating IPM templates so all superintendents can have a plant health care plan and a tool to help us better understand how to best use inputs compatible with our site. The GCSAA is engaged in many great things to improve our industry, the environment and golf, but it still boils down to each superintendent pitching in.

What do you tell those who don't understand golf and assume it's full of polluters?

There are always people who act on emotions and fear. You need to welcome them, have them visit your facility and take a look. Whenever I've done that, I've yet to have someone leave with the same concerns. They begin to understand these plants need to be viable, healthy and active to offer the immense benefits they're capable of. You can't beat an on-site visit to win someone over.

How do you sell the club on your actions?

You have to use a shotgun approach to communicate environmental benefits. Use your green chairman. Their interest is golf, so you have to

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And the winners are ...

In addition to awarding Dan Dinelli the President's Award for Environmental Stewardship, the GCSAA will honor others at its Education Conference Opening Session in New Orleans Feb. 5. They include:

- Mark Esoda, CGCS, Atlanta Country Club – Col. John Morley Distinguished Service Award
- Monroe Miller, Blackhawk Country Club, Madison, Wis. – Col. John Morley Distinguished Service Award
- George Hamilton, Ph.D. (deceased), Penn State – Col. John Morley Distinguished Service Award
- Thomas Lavrenz, retired superintendent – Leo Feser Award
- Col. John Morley (deceased), GCSAA founder – Old Tom Morris Award

Winners of the Environmental Leaders in Golf Award and Excellence in Government Relations Awards have yet to be announced. To read GCI profiles on Esoda and Miller from earlier this year, visit www.golfcourseindustry.com/09awardwinners.

emphasize the benefits for playability and economy as well. Use your Web site, newsletters, open houses – every resource you have. It needs to be somewhat subliminal. You can't force-feed them because they're busy, successful people who want to relax and play the game. You just put it out there and hope it takes and they find a comfort level with the idea.

Do you preach the "brown is beautiful" message?

It irks me that people say "green is bad." I argue a healthy, active growing plant offers the most ecological benefits. Then, there's playability – sustainable golf is best on healthy turf – and that's usually green turf. Dead turf costs money to fix. We need to be responsible and green.

Who inspires you?

Frank Rossi of Cornell's turf program can sing like a bird in front of a crowd. I called him a few years ago and asked how I could be more like him as a speaker.

Obviously, my grandfather Frank Dinelli and dad Joe Dinelli were inspirations. Some people might argue there are too many Dinellis in this business, but I love 'em all.

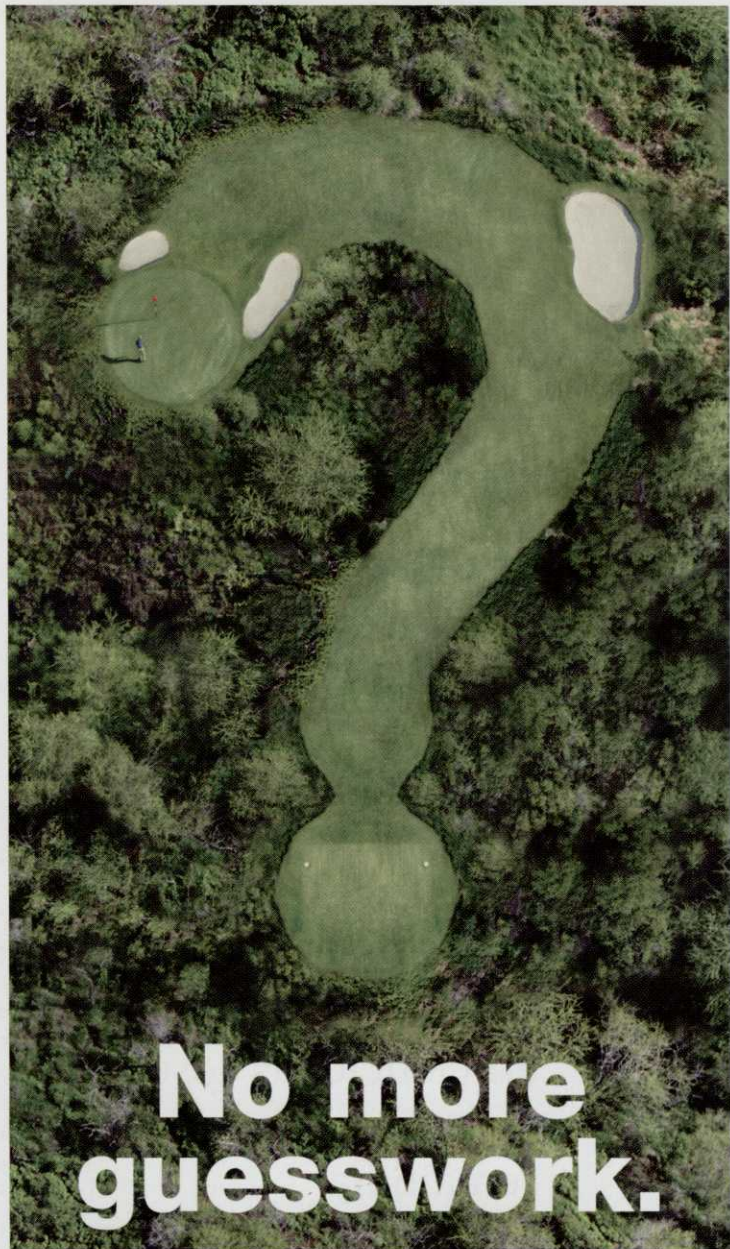
From an academic standpoint, I admire Mike Boehm at Ohio State. He's a great teacher, person and scientist. Eric Nelson from Cornell also is on that list. I'd add my professor from William Rainey Harper, Dr. Metcalf, and Paul Rieke, Joe Vargas and the late Ken Payne from Michigan State.

Do you think golf will be affected by the new presidential administration led by another Chicago guy?

No matter who's in the job, if the economy doesn't turn around it'll continue to impact us. There are a few things that worry me. Taxes and unions are potential threats. Union shops discourage efficiencies, often raising the cost of doing business, and open voting on unions could lead to many more courses becoming unionized. It would be difficult to see any benefit in that.

Let's face it, the overall model is that wealthy people help drive our economy, support venture capital and contribute to industry. More tax-

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SUPERINTENDENT PROFILE

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tion and a down economy hurt them as well as the rest of us. We do so much that benefits the community economically. We have a wonderful caddy program, for example. That's a huge contribution to the community. I hope we get the ear of the politicians, and the golf industry can continue to thrive.

How do you balance your environmental reputation with the real world?

We often want to fantasize about being "organic," but for now it's a bit of a pipe dream. Some green things work, some don't. To go completely organic, managing a highly manicured monoculture such as turf, in a disease-prone area like Chicago isn't realistic. Snake oils and witches' brews are way too common. We've tried most of them, and it's discouraging. But, at least you learn what doesn't work. With some, their effectiveness relies on integration with other inputs and cultural practices supporting the holistic approach. But there are no silver bullets.

Your name comes up a lot when companies talk about who's testing their products.

When someone approaches me to test something, I ask who's already done the university research. We're not researchers, we conduct on-site evaluations. That's a different standard. We've learned to be cautious because we've learned the hard way about how people position what we do and say. Now, whenever I want to do



Dinelli implemented North Shore Country Club's first wildflower garden in 1981.

a formal study, I try to pull in local researchers to be part of it. People like Derek Settle, Ph.D., at Chicago District Golf Association, Tom Voigt, Ph.D., and Bruce Branham, Ph.D., at University of Illinois and other professionals. It gives us a much higher comfort level.

How do you want to be remembered?

As someone who was approachable, helpful and hopefully open-minded but driven by science.

Final thoughts?

Despite everything, the environmental move-

ment is alive and well. Water, climate change and energy will drive much public concern. As a society, we've been lulled to sleep for the past few years. It's like the energy crisis. We had an early warning in the 1970s and then kind of forgot when gas got cheap again. This is chapter two of the environmental movement, and golf will occupy some people's concerns. Our job is to get them to listen to science. It needs to be part of every superintendent's job. Short-term solutions are out. We need to think long term and about the big picture if we're going to sustain the great business we're in. **GCI**