

# STRAIGHT-TALKING STAN

The USGA's longest-tenured employee reflects on his career, turf consultants and the advice he gives most frequently.

By Pat Jones

I'm pretty sure the first time I met Stan Zontek was in the bar of the Nittany Lion Inn, the great old on-campus hotel that's been home to the Penn State Golf Turf Conference for a zillion years. I was just an idiot kid working for GCSAA, but he took me under his wing that night and proceeded to introduce me to damn near every important PSU turf alum and faculty member. I'm pretty sure he also initiated me into the joys of drinking black-and-tans that evening although my memory is a wee bit fuzzy 20 years later.

What I do remember quite lucidly is that Zontek blew me away with his knowledge of the business, his keen ability to pinpoint nearly every agronomic trend going on east of the Mississippi and a wicked sense of humor that I learned nearly every successful USGA agronomist develops as a defense mechanism against the pounding hours, grueling travel and byzantine politics the job sometimes entails.

After 38 years of getting up every morning and donning

a crested blue blazer and red striped rep tie, Zontek is the longest tenured employee of the USGA and a legend within the Green Section. He's garnered his share of honors, including the 2006 GCSAA Distinguished Service Award, the 2007 Distinguished Alumni Award from Penn State University (only the second turf person to receive it, the other being Dr. Joe Duich), the 1997 GCBAA Don Rossi Award and numerous local kudos, but it's the people and the friendships he's earned that he seems to value most.

"The great thing about this business is it's not as much about growing grass than it is about getting along with the people," he says. "I absolutely love the people."

Zontek grew up on grass clippings and gas fumes as the son of a Pennsylvania superintendent. ("I've never forgotten my roots. If I do, kick me in the ass.")

He mowed his first green at the age of 12 and was essentially predestined to be a turfhead – and to attend Penn State. He graduated

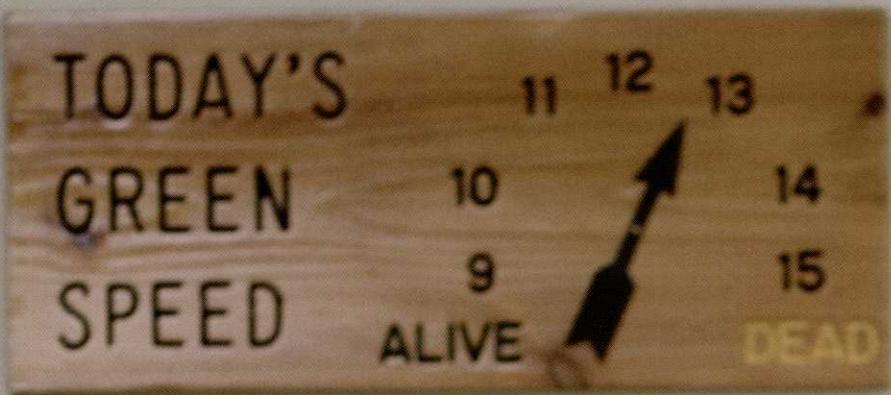
in 1971 and, rather than take one of the assistant superintendent jobs he was offered, decided to go with a suggestion that he give the Green Section a shot for a while.

"A while" turned into four decades as he worked his way up and through the ranks from a novice agronomist working under the legendary Al Radko to his current position as director of the Mid-Atlantic Region. Zontek isn't sure how many courses he's visited over the years ("No clue... thousands," he says) but he's made his mark with hundreds and hundreds of formal Turf Advisory Service visits, informal consultations and countless speeches, articles and typically candid advice offered over a beer after hours.

When I caught up with Stan, he was – predictably – driving for a few hours from one Turf Advisory Service visit to another.

I asked him about his experiences, his favorite superintendents and his future, as the rumor mill has him pondering retirement in a few years.





When Stan Zontek, director of the Mid-Atlantic region for the USGA Green Section, retires, he's likely to pursue a consulting practice that's an extension of what he's been doing for 38 years: giving superintendents the support they need.





**How much time do you spend behind the wheel of your car every year?**

(Laughs.) I wouldn't even want to guess. I usually put about 35,000 miles on the car and fly way too much. I'm on the road about 100 nights a year.

**How did you get started with USGA?**

Ah... The saga begins in the summer of 1970. I was completing my undergrad at Penn State under Dr. Joe Duich and was thinking about staying in research and doing a five-year plan they had that allowed you to skip your master's and move right on to a Ph.D. But, Dr. Duich and (famed superintendent) Billy Buchanan encouraged me to get out in the real world and suggested looking at the USGA. They just happened to have a job open. Al Radko hired me in 1971 for the princely sum of \$11,000 a year.

**What was Radko like?**

He doesn't get the credit he deserved, not just for what he did at the Green Section,

but also when he was in the Army in 1946. He was the man who basically rebuilt all the golf courses in Japan after World War II. He and a guy named Pete Nakamura really sort of started the whole golf movement over there. He never gets credit for that.

**OK, what about retirement? We keep hearing those rumors.**

I am thinking about it. Technically, I can retire in 2014. It would kind of bookend things since my first U.S. Open was at Merion [Golf Club in Ardmore, Pa.] in 1971 and the 2013 Open is back at Merion again.

I'll tell you one thing: When I do retire, I won't be a volunteer at the Y. This is my life. I'll definitely be involved some how, some way with golf course turfgrass management. I'll be doing what I'm doing right now, but working for myself. I'd truly like to be an independent consultant. I love to travel and be involved.

**Wait, I know for a fact that you've butted heads with a few consultants in the****past. Isn't "consulting" kind of a dirty word in this business?**

It seems like there are two predominant types of consultants in golf: positive and negative. The first kind comes in and says, "Your superintendent's done a great job," and takes their fee and bolts. The second one says, "You were right, Mr. Green Chairman, this guy stinks and you should get rid of him." I don't want to do either one of those. I'll tell them what I honestly think, how to solve their problems and make their golf course better. I want to be more of an advisor than a consultant and help people do it right. No commercial tie-ins...that's another problem with some consultants out there today. I want it to be an extension of what I've been doing for years: giving the superintendent the support that he or she needs.

**Years ago, some superintendents shied away from using the TAS because they were suspicious about having anyone else come onto "their" course and**



**Stops esQapes dead.**



**undermine them or even steal their job. Still true?**

I haven't heard the "steal a job" thing in a long time. I would have been gone from the USGA a long time ago if there were a perfect job out there, but I haven't seen one yet that would tempt me that much.

Like I said earlier, any consultant can be accused of costing superintendents their jobs. But, there's no question that we [the USGA] have saved more guys' jobs than anyone can imagine. You know, more times than not, when somebody gets fired, it's because somebody at the club just doesn't like them. Then, they bring in somebody else and that new guy gets all the new stuff that really would have helped the other guy. Unfortunately, that's kind of the cycle.

**How about some who say the TAS is only for big-budget courses that really don't need that much help?**

I did a visit at a course last week that has a total budget of under \$400,000. We're helping

them maximize every dollar they spend. You have to concentrate your focus and be the best you can be with the money you have to spend. Small course or big course, the question is what kind of golf course do you want? I still think the first thing you do is ask, "Why am I here?" You can't have an agenda.

Also, remember that even though we may not visit a high percentage of the smaller courses, we touch a lot of people through the speeches and e-mails and newsletters. We're an information source for everyone, regardless of funds.

**How often is your advice based on the business of golf vs. agronomics?**

All the time – particularly lately. Everybody is asking, "Where are the economies? How can we cut our maintenance budget?" I like to remind them that 88 percent of golfers say playing on good grass is very important to them. You can't compromise on the condition of your course. You can't save your way out of that. Also, I remind them that golfers like new

things. That's what drives renovations. You've always got to be doing something new.

**Has the economy affected TAS participation?**

We see a few dropping out in this region. Hey, a couple of thousand bucks is still a couple of thousand bucks. We absolutely have to sell what we do to keep people involved. You have to justify your existence every day.

**You've met thousands of superintendents through the years. Who are some of the guys you were really impressed by?**

Well, first, there are the old timers with amazing staying power. The longer I've been in this business the more I respect the old timers. Maybe because I am one now. You have to marvel at guys like (the late) Eb Steiniger and Terry Bonar who stay at the same course for over 40 years. Think about it – just to be able to survive all those different club presidents, green committee chairmen and committees is incredible.

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Then there's the new breed: John Zimmers, Matt Shafer, Mike Giuffre at Congressional... these guys who come to work every day and get it done. And don't forget someone like Ben Abel at Glenrochie Country Club in Abingdon, Va. – he gets it done on \$400,000 per year. Those are the guys who are really impressive – not necessarily the ones with unlimited budgets.

#### What are you most proud of?

Mentoring, without a doubt. You get to watch people grow whether they are superintendents or Ph.D.s. You've had some positive influence on their lives.

#### Favorite championship you've been involved with?

I don't think I've had it yet. Maybe one when I was just a junior agronomist at the Walker Cup at Shinnecock, just because it was so beautiful with the sun setting and a bagpiper was piping the sun down. That was cool. I also have great memories of the 1980 Open

at Baltusrol. Watching that crew was like watching a ballet or an orchestra. It really showed me what a great team can do.

Championship golf just kicks everything up a notch. If we don't have fun at a championship, somebody's not doing his job.

It's crazy, but it's an absolute ball.

#### You have access to some of the greatest clubs in the world. Where do you sneak off to play just for fun?

I actually have golf privileges at Bidermann Golf Club in Wilmington, Del. – which no one's ever heard of – but it has a great membership and staff and only does about 9,000 rounds a year. And no, I don't whine about green speeds or much else there. It's a great course in excellent condition.

#### What are high-end clubs looking for when hiring superintendents?

They're not going to be asked questions about agronomy. They're going to assume they can grow grass. The agronomy is a

given. They want the superintendent that can do the job and they can trust with their grass and their money. They don't want to ask questions about agronomy. They're begrudging volunteers. It's all about charisma. They just like you. It's intuitive. It's how you look, dress and speak and it's a beauty contest based on your resume and where you were before. Right or wrong, that's the way it is. There are always exceptions, but...

#### Agronomically, what piece of advice do you give most often?

Don't forget the basics. Aerification, water management, enough sunlight and fertilizer, soil management, drainage, irrigation – things that never change. Nothing replaces these things. The corollary to that is, if it sounds too good to be true it probably is.

#### Speaking of which, you've been pretty vocal about some of the supplemental products out there and the claims they make.

Yes, I have, but you've gotta be a skeptic. All these manufacturers say, "We have something that's better than you have now." OK, how? Why? What's in it?

I have problems with biostimulant companies when they don't list what's in their products on their labels. It's like buying cold medicine with no ingredients on the package. They're just saying, "Hey, trust me!"

We've tested a lot of this stuff and know what it will or won't do, but we still don't necessarily know what's in it. Curiously, in Sweden, which has a "right to know" law, at least some of these products were forced to disclose their ingredients – surprise! – urea was in them.

Look, the ultimate biostimulant is nitrogen. That's why I'm skeptical of these materials. Compare them to urea and iron. I don't tell anyone not to use them...but if they ask me what I think, I tell them to test and compare to the industry standard, which remains urea.

#### When you go to that great maintenance facility in the sky, how do you want to be remembered?

Here's what I want on my tombstone: "He left the world a better place with better golf courses and better people." How can you beat that? GCI

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