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THE MONROE DOCTRINE

A FRIEND YOU MAY NOT HAVE KNOWN

One of the great pleasures of my career as a golf course superintendent was the fraternal feeling among us. I always felt that if I was a long way from home and had some kind of trouble or problem, help was as close as one of my colleagues was. All it would take would be a phone call.

That extended to Green Section agronomists I knew, land grant faculty whose paths I may have crossed, and some guys who ran the turf equipment manufacturing companies. These warm relationships gave me a sense of security and were a very rewarding part of my working life.

One of those industry men whose friendship was a treasure to me, and to other superintendents all across the country as well, was Ralph Nicotera. He joined the ranks of the retired after the GIS in San Diego last month.

Ralph spent his entire career with Jacobsen, going back to when the company was in Racine, Wis. Jake was founded by a Danish immigrant to Racine, Knud F. Jacobsen, in 1920. It remained in the family for 49 years until Allegheny Ludlum acquired it in 1969. The company was under this ownership when Ralph was hired in the mid-1970s. Ralph was raised in Racine and his parents still live there. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, returned to his hometown and started his career in turf equipment manufacturing.

Like most new hires, he started his career on the bottom rung of the corporate ladder, not unlike the way most golf course superintendents learn all of the practical aspects of golf course management – mowing greens and tees, raking bunkers, mowing around trees, repairing irrigation leaks and all the rest. What this gives you, and gave Ralph, is up-close knowledge about how things really work. We grow up

in the business. He knew all the basics of manufacturing and marketing, and by the time of his retirement he was Jacobsen's vice president of sales.

I first got to know Ralph in the 1970s when I would drive from Madison to Racine to participate in the annual college student seminars in early June. He wasn't directly involved, but I quickly figured out that if I needed to use a phone, park a vehicle or whatever, he would help me out. He was friendly, helpful and reliable; he built trust, and after those early years anytime I needed help or information, Ralph was only a call away. As one of his longtime distributors said to me, "His word was golden."

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Textron bought Jacobsen in 1978, and Ralph worked for lots of different executives over his corporate career. Some may have been excellent bean counters or engineers, but had less than full knowledge about golf turf. I have been told that educating them about our world was a responsibility that fell heavily on Ralph Nicotera.

The most important thing people learned from Ralph was that the customer – you and me – was all important, and his career is replete with instances of his going the extra mile to help out superintendents who

may have needed a critical repair part in an emergency or early delivery of a machine or any of hundreds of other circumstances. Distributors absolutely depended on him. When the company moved from Racine to Charlotte their biggest concern was that the hometown Racine guy wouldn't make the move. There was a collective sigh of relief when he moved, too.

Jacobsen President Dan Wilkinson also knows why so many people respect Ralph. Dan relied on him heavily when he assumed the reins of Jacobsen and was on a steep learning curve. Dan's an early bird and was relieved to see that Ralph was also; when Dan needed him, he was already there. Ralph's unofficial role as company historian was useful, too. Like so many who have worked with Ralph, Dan respected his humility and his complete dedication to golf course superintendents because they were his customers, and has been impressed with his willingness to work behind the scenes and pass credit due on to others.

Conversations I've had with sales staff reporting directly to him were the same – a tough taskmaster who was eminently fair, a total team player who was a professional's professional. His appeal went beyond respect for his skills; he was genuinely well liked and appreciated.

Ralph has seen a lot of change in our business – dramatic change, actually – and he has survived it all with his great attitude and dedication in tact. We are in a period in our country when there is a lot of suspicion about corporate America. I think we have been lucky in the golf/turf business to have avoided much of that suspicion because there are so many quality people managing the companies we do business with. Ralph Nicotera is one of the best of them. GCI