

COVER STORY

A man with glasses is sitting on a dark brown couch, looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a grey t-shirt with "PENN STATE" printed on it and blue striped pajama pants. He is holding a tablet computer in his lap. To his left, a smartphone is lying on the couch. In the foreground, a laptop is open on the floor, and a yellow plush toy is visible. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

THE SOCIAL NETWORKER

DR. JOHN KAMINSKI IS TAKING TURF EDUCATION IN NEW DIRECTIONS WITH A DIGITAL FRENZY OF POSTS, TWEETS, BLOGS AND WHATEVER'S COMING DOWN THE SOCIAL MEDIA PIKE NEXT.

BY PAT JONES

WE

can thank the miserable curse of insomnia for a breakthrough in the way we're all learning new things about turfgrass management these days "For years I would wake up at 2 a.m. and not be able to go back to sleep," says Dr. John Kaminski, "so I used the time to learn all this stuff."

The "stuff" he refers to is the nuts and bolts of the communications technology that's quickly starting to dominate life and learning for many in our industry. Web micro-sites, Facebook, Twitter, blogs and an endless stream of apps now allow one person with a compulsive need to communicate to reach around the globe. And, within our happy little golf/turf community, Kaminski is the unrivaled master of social media.

On paper, Kaminski is an assistant professor of turfgrass management at Penn State and director of the school's noted two-year golf course turfgrass management program. Like most, he teaches, he researches, he consults with courses and he organizes programs. But, what sets him apart from the many

other talented, hardworking younger Ph.D.s out there is his commitment to using social media to share timely and useful turf information.

Turf Diseases, the blog he co-founded with four other plant pathologists around the nation, is arguably the most useful and visited science-driven site in the market. When the blog was linked to Facebook, it quickly attracted more than 1,000 superintendents and other turfheads who "liked" the site. By my unofficial research, that makes it easily the most popular turf-related site on the world's most popular social network.

A native of the suburban D.C. area, Kaminski took a circuitous path into both golf and agronomic science. "I missed the bus to school one day and my dad said he'd give me a ride. We drove right past the school, went to a golf shop, bought me some clubs and played. I played hookey, and I was hooked on golf."

He played competitively in high school and headed toward a career in architecture – specifically landscape architecture – with an eye toward becoming a golf course designer.

He had a family connection to Penn State, so in 1993 he headed off to State College to major in landscape contracting to get some hands-on education. There, he discovered the world of turf. In 1996, he did an internship at Desert Mountain in Scottsdale

under Scott Krause and fell in love with the maintenance side. He returned to PSU, met with Dr. Tom Watschke and added turf management as a second major. The next year, he did his final internship with Paul R. Latshaw at Congressional CC the summer they hosted the U.S. Open. When Kaminski expressed an interest in grad school, Latshaw put him in touch with Dr. Pete Dernoeden at the University of Maryland and his career in academia was launched. "Pete put me through the ringer but I loved it so I stayed for both my MS and PhD."

Going through the ringer paid off. His work at Maryland earned him both a Watson Fellowship from GCSAA and the prestigious Musser Foundation Award of Excellence. He moved to the University of Connecticut as an assistant professor from 2005-2008 before the lure of Mount Nittany brought him back home to run the two-year program, continue his research and, in his spare time, reinvent the way information is shared among superintendents, scientists and the industry.

Do you ever question your choice to stay in the classroom and the lab instead of practicing what you preach?

Sometimes I do think about what it would be like to work on a golf course again. I get back to work at some of the (pro) tournaments. I stimped greens and such for the recent Women's Open and the Memorial – and I miss (being out there) to some degree, but I'm

We found Dr. John Kaminski wide awake and communicating turf topics to the masses.

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– Dr. John Kaminski

happy in the university setting. It fits me well. I probably work as many hours as many superintendents – maybe 70-100 hours a week – and that doesn’t make for a good home life sometimes. But I enjoy what I do.

On the flip side, I see the big problems supers face and try to help out, but sometimes that makes me realize I’m glad that I’m not sweating out the weather or whatever other disaster awaits them.

Why Penn State?

I wasn’t into turf when I applied... it was more of a family thing. My mom and sister went here so it was an easy choice. Kind of a lazy choice, come to think of it. But I did know they had a decent landscape architecture program. But it was five years and seemed like a lot of work. (*Laughs*)

I never seriously thought I’d end up here and in academia. I thought I’d get a master’s degree and end up back in the industry, but six years later I was starting the turf pathology program at UConn. Now at Penn State, my focus is on preparing future golf course superintendents through the two-year program and expanding my research.

Tell us about your research.

My main focus has gone from a strictly turf pathology programs to overall golf course management. Most of it is on diseases on putting greens and fairways,

Poa management, chemical and cultural. A lot of it comes back to *Poa*. We’re in Pennsylvania... in Pittsburgh *Poa* is king and in Philly they want to get rid of it. We’re also looking at different hot-button management practices – low nitrogen, high iron sulfates, PGRs... mainly practical, applied science. I still do a little basic research, but in the end I want my program to generate results that directly and immediately benefit the superintendent. I can’t justify it otherwise. I have to be able to give them answers.

And teaching?

The two-year program is definitely different. I was a four-year guy and it’s very different, but it’s awesome. This program is not a place for them to grow up like my undergraduate years were for me. The students are great... they’re focused and they’re hard-working. Some of the things I’ve had a chance to do, like walking the course with students during their extended internship – we don’t play golf or screw around – really help me to know them better. One of the things we’re working on is a more formalized package for internships. It takes a lot of effort to run a good intern program from the super’s standpoint, so it would be great if we could create some guidelines to make that simpler. We had hundreds of requests for interns last year and I’d often throw it back (at the super) to find out what

was in it for the student. A lot of them do have good formalized programs, but not all of them. We try to handpick students for the right place. My students are only permitted to apply to two places and they nearly always get their first choice.

Spending a full six months on the course is attractive to the superintendent. Once they’re done, they have a very formal internship report of 60 to 70 pages outlining the entire experience. It’s a serious process.

A lot of people think interns are just grunts. Too many of them think the student’s job should be to shut up and work hard. The goal of the superintendent should be to train and teach them. It’s those extra things that the students remember. Going above and beyond a little is special.

What’s your teaching style?

I’m kind of multidimensional in my learning so I apply that to what I do.

My philosophy is that you have to see it, hear it and write it down to know it. To me, if a student can do that they’ll get the concept. I like to interact with the students. There’s only 30 of them and I know them all within a week. I get to visit them during their internships and see them daily on campus. That makes it fun beyond the classroom. Because of that, I feel like I have a bigger impact.

I really stress communications. We’ve had a communica-

tions class for a long time, but there was a big deficiency in their abilities. So, we broke it up into written and oral communications. In writing, we constantly work on their skills, practice and give them legitimate feedback. I can actually go through all their work and give them that feedback because it’s a small group. Pretty soon, they start critiquing and editing each other! They get it.

On oral communications, we stress a lot about remaining calm, being concise and not letting your emotions get involved. We do role playing and put them into stressful situations. For one of their big final projects, we bring in some top supers from all around and the students have to present a full renovation plan. The superintendents put the students into a real pressure situation, distract them, etc., and see how they handle it. It’s essentially their first real board meeting.

How was your passion for social media born?

I fought it for a long time. I used to preach to students at UConn how Facebook could only hurt them, get them in trouble and the like. But, Andy McNitt (of PSU’s sports turf program) posted a picture of me on there so I signed up and joined. All the sudden I was hooked. I couldn’t get off of it. I sort of went over the top and then abandoned it for a while. As I came to Penn State, I realized I could integrate blogs and Facebook and Twitter.

I found that by integrating all of them I could make it useful and productive.

It's funny, I just gave a talk about this at Auburn and told them it came out of me being an insomniac. For years I would wake up at 2 a.m. and not be able to go back to sleep so I used the time to learn all this stuff. I taught myself video editing, html code, etc. You don't really need to know that stuff now, but I feel like I know how to integrate everything because of that.

How did you come to get the Turf Diseases blog going?

I was surfing a lot of YouTube channels and found one where five people posted vlogs about their lives – each did one a particular day of the week – and thought it would be cool to do it for turf and regionalize it. I recruited four other plant pathologists and launched it last year, but we decided to take it slow. But this year it definitely took off. We got great feedback and a lot of press. That gave me motivation to do other stuff. A lot of people follow me on Twitter, but I always warn them I don't just talk about turf. Some posts are about photography, travel, Penn State football or whatever personal stuff. It's fun, but for the "official" turf and university stuff, it's a great way to get info out in a fast way.

Why did it take off?

When I was staying up all those insomniac nights, I learned how to create shortcuts between the different platforms and automate it so everything comes at once in a bunch of places. That's one of the things I found most useful in terms of really making social media work. I can Tweet something and it automatically goes out to the blogs, Facebook and other places. Not everyone uses all the different (media), so I can give them the update in whatever format they do like.

A lot of times, even if it's a terrible summer like this year, they want to hear what others are going through and seeing in the field or what may be coming their way. The feedback has been awesome. Early in the season, we posted photos showing the extent of snow mold damage, early dollar spot reports, etc. It was amazing. But I have to say that when a new post hits the blog, I'm just as interested in reading it as any super. I'm constantly learning from the interaction. It's very cool.

I read a lot of superintendent's blogs and they put info on there that I'm surprised about. It's very honest stuff. But they're giving their golfers bad news fast... it helps to eliminate surprises. That's a big benefit.

How are the different platforms, well, different?

The Facebook page seems more accessible to people than the blog. But the blog is somehow perceived as more "official" than the Facebook page. Same information, but a different perception. It's fascinating.

On Twitter, I have about 920 followers but only 20 percent are turfheads. A lot are friends from outside the business or people who just share a common interest. I follow a lot of people who are associated with Penn State, golf, tour players, photography, etc., and some of them follow me back. It's also my news source. I get Tweets from CNN, ESPN and a bunch of other sites. It's been pretty useful.

Where will all of this be five years from now?

Most turf managers will be caught up to where the ground breakers are today. I think because they're outside so much and they're really stressed about Mother Nature and such, I feel like most are usually a little behind in terms of this kind of technology. There are still guys

out there who don't even use e-mail. In five years, as the industry continues to get younger, they'll be an explosion in how they use it to communicate with members. Social media evolves on a daily or weekly basis. Who knows what the technology will be like, but we'll be using it.

What's the downside?

My concern with social media is that the communication style may become such the norm that you forget the formalities of grammar and spelling.

For a younger guy who's aspiring to a big job, that may not go over so well with a baby boomer who's interviewing you. You still have to have the formal communication skills to deliver information via new media and the common sense to know what's appropriate for the audience. When I had all the students set up a blog last year, they had to write eight articles – one on their internship, one on their local association, etc. When they started off, many of them wrote in a very informal and text-like style because they'd never had to write in a professional way. We broke it down for them and they started to get it. It takes practice, but you have to be a good communicator.

Which superintendent blogs do you like?

Well, not to blow smoke, but I start with the GCI blogroll on your website because they're organized so nicely. One thing for sure: the blog needs to be updated routinely or I'll just stop reading. You have to like Justin Ruiz's blog – he's obviously far ahead of the pack – but Bill Brown at Hartefeld National, who's a young energetic Penn State guy, also teaches me quite a bit about what's new. The other one that I like is iaTURF. There's a grad student who works with Nick Christians on that blog and it's very well done.

How has being the king of all social media in the turf business impacted you? Is their risk to it?

Well, I assume one of the reasons I'm talking to you right now is because of that, so that's not a bad thing. Am I overexposed? I try to filter a little bit and not be too obnoxious. But, if people don't like it they don't have to follow me. I don't let my personal life out there that much, but one of the reasons I read all these blogs is to get to know people personally. When supers start talking about how the difficulties they face affect them and their crews, that makes it interesting. I was really careful and kind of serious at the beginning, but when we started Turf Diseases we wanted to make it light and quick and funny. There are also times when you're talking about sensitive stuff and people might not agree. Controversy isn't always a good thing, but it gets people talking and that can result in good things.

What's the rest of the faculty think about it?

When I got on to Twitter I immediately found our College's Dean (@medflygenes) all over Twitter. He tells the story of what's going on with him from a business and personal perspective. He does a great job of telling our story and promoting the faculty. The college in general has really embraced it. All the social media outlets are listed on the college's homepage. There are something like 25 different people that tweet or blog, including our dean. If he's doing it, I can't get in too much hot water.

When this article is published, what scary high-tech things will you do with it?

I'll send it everywhere – with one push of the send key. That's the beauty of social networking. GCI

Pat Jones is GCI's publisher and executive editor.