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who play
your course
DON'T
have such an
EFFECTIVE
WAY
to cope with
STRESS.



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CIRCLE NO. 112

Off The Fringe

Independents Day

REPORTS OF THE INDEPENDENT TURF DISTRIBUTOR'S DEATH HAVE BEEN GROSSLY EXAGGERATED

By Mike Fisher

There is nothing certain in life except death and taxes — and that someone will write another article about the inevitable disappearance of the independent turf distributor. Fortunately, nothing could be further from the truth.

Though the challenges facing the independent distributor mount, they also dictate a work ethic and creativity for the distributor to overcome. The winners are the distributor's customers: superintendents.

The history of the independent turf distributor goes back as far as the game itself. Everything from high interest rates to regulatory issues conspired to eliminate distributors who couldn't reduce their debt in the face of competition to operate profitably. The recent consolidation of turf companies has seen good regional independent distributors purchased by larger entities to form national distribution companies.

For example, AgriBioTech purchased one such independent, George W. Hill Co. of Florence, Ky., in its failed bid to corner the seed market. After ABT declared bankruptcy, Doug Hill, a minority owner of the George W. Hill Co., formed a new small, independent distribution company called Turfgrass South LLC. "The big corporations think they can be everything to everyone," Hill says. "I don't think they can."

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— DOUG HILL

Competition from agricultural distribution companies with new turf divisions faltered because the agricultural companies assumed the

professional turf market wasn't much different from its other businesses. It took superintendents, of course, to remind them that their needs are far different from those who grow row crops.

In contrast, the independents typically focus exclusively on the turf and ornamental industry, to the advantage of their customers. Hill believes being small and independent enhances his ability to service his customers. "We provide service, and we make it easy for our customers to do business," he says.

The changing faces on the manufacturing side of the business offer a new set of challenges to the independent distributor. There are fewer chemical manufacturers today because of recent merger-and-acquisition activity. These new pressures force the distributor to exceed previous years' sales.

Despite the old challenges and new ones, such as e-commerce, many independent companies continue to grow. They provide superior service for their customers in the form of technical support, competitive prices and just-in-time delivery.

The expertise of the independent distributor allows superintendents to improve inventory management. It also provides them with a resource for unbiased advice about how to deal with common golf course problems. Independents will support superintendents as long as superintendents see value in the relationship and, in turn, support the independent distributors.

Mike Fisher is president of the Independent Turf and Ornamental Distributors Association and owner of Fisher & Son Co., an independent turf distributor in Malvern, Pa.