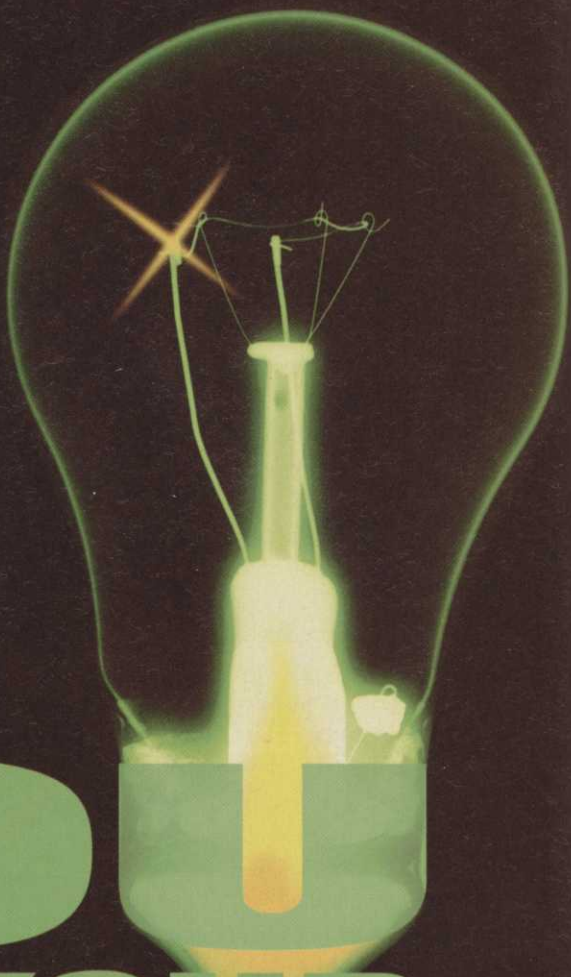


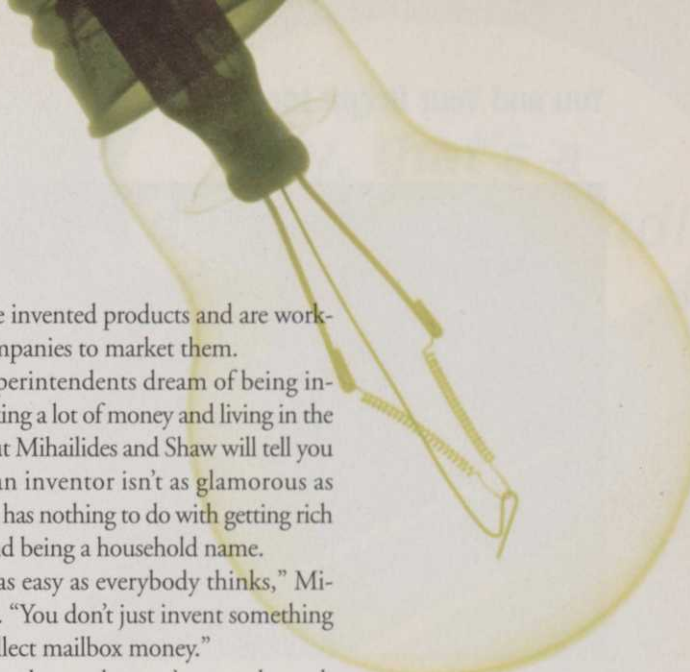
Being an inventor is  
fun and exciting,  
but not as glamorous  
(or lucrative) as you think

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR



**YOU  
AND YOUR  
BRIGHT  
IDEAS**





**D**avid G. Mihailides is cheerful and confident. Then, like a gusty storm suddenly infringing on a calm and sunny day, Mihailides turns dejected and discouraged. “My life is a roller coaster,” the former superintendent says softly.

One minute, Mihailides is ecstatic about the golf course maintenance product he invented — a syringing hose system that’s stored underground near greens — because it will be used during this month’s U.S. Open at Bethpage State Park’s Black Course. But the next minute, Mihailides is worried that his invention, named the DGM System (for Direct underGround Maintenance and his initials), will fail. “I’m experiencing huge growing pains,” the Wyoming, R.I., resident says.

Mihailides is learning what it’s like to be an inventor in the industry. He has teamed with Reelcraft Industries, a Columbia City, Ind.-based hose reel producer, to manufacture and market his product. Mihailides quit his job as regional facilities manager for Bernard Golf and Asset Management last year to pursue his dream of being a successful inventor full-time. The fear of the unknown that comes with the territory can be unnerving, but Mihailides is hoping to hit pay dirt with his product and purchase that winter home in Tahiti.

Certified superintendent John Shaw is also an inventor of a golf course maintenance product called the Dew Draggin’, an item designed to drag dew on golf courses. But Shaw’s involvement in selling his product is like a drive through the pancake-flat roads of Kansas compared to Mihailides’ up-and-down trek.

Shaw signed a contract with Miltona (Minn.) Turf Products, which manufactures golf course tools and accessories, to market the Dew Draggin’ through its widely distributed catalog. But Shaw did not quit his job as superintendent of Rolling Hills CC in McMurray, Pa., because he views his job as an inventor as secondary to his job as a superintendent.

Like many superintendents, Mihailides and Shaw possess resourceful minds. They’re the kind of guys who lie awake at night dreaming up new gizmos to help them and their crews perform tasks quicker and easier. Mihailides and Shaw, however, are two of the few superinten-

dents who’ve invented products and are working with companies to market them.

Some superintendents dream of being inventors, making a lot of money and living in the spotlight. But Mihailides and Shaw will tell you that being an inventor isn’t as glamorous as you think. It has nothing to do with getting rich overnight and being a household name.

“It’s not as easy as everybody thinks,” Mihailides says. “You don’t just invent something and then collect mailbox money.”

How do you know when you’ve created a product that could benefit other superintendents? Often times, it’s through unsolicited feedback.

When superintendent Travis Jantzer first invented a tool to properly set sprinkler heads and valve boxes, he says most of his peers were wowed by the invention. When Jantzer, superintendent of Cedar Links GC in Medford, Ore., exhibited his Ground Zero Leveler under the new exhibitor’s pavilion at the GCSAA show two years ago, he was approached by Miltona, which wanted to feature the product in its catalog. “I just caught Miltona’s eye,” he says.

Shaw didn’t think about marketing the Dew Draggin’ until USGA agronomist Keith Happ visited his course last year and remarked how impressed he was with Shaw’s invention. Then Shaw sent photos of his invention to Miltona, which jumped on the idea.

Nobody knows for sure how a new product will perform in the industry. A superintendent who’s an inventor could hit the jackpot with the right ingredients — a distinctive product, perfect timing, great marketing and a little luck.

### Road to riches?

Rick Tegtmeier didn’t expect to get rich when he invented the Divot Master, a portable mixing system that blends and colors divot mix and then distributes the material directly onto damaged turf areas. Tegtmeier knew his invention was targeted to a small audience.

“This business is too limited because there’s only about 16,000 customers,” says Tegtmeier, certified superintendent of Elmcrest CC in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, referring to the number of U.S. golf courses. “[To get rich], you have to invent something that has a broad base, or invent a dis-

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## You and Your Bright Ideas



**David G. Mihailides is ecstatic that his DGM System is installed at Bethpage State Park's Black Course, site of this month's U.S. Open.**

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posable item that you're constantly reselling."

About five years ago, Tegtmeier teamed with Marion Mixers, an Iowa-based company that specializes in commercial mixers, to manufacture and market the Divot Master. Tegtmeier has sold about 30 Divot Masters, which retail for \$7,500, mostly to high-end courses.

Tegtmeier, who owns a patent on the tilting feature of the product, won't say how much money he invested in the Divot Master. "But what we put into it, we got out of it," he says, adding that patent costs drove up the expenses.

Not having a distribution network has hurt sales of the product, Tegtmeier says. "Marketing is the hard part unless you have a distribution network," he notes, adding that superintendents want to see an item like the Divot Master and try it out before they buy it.

Mihailides realizes distribution is integral to the DGM System's success. The reason he joined Reelcraft was to secure distributors to sell the product. Since April 2001, Mihailides has traveled the country and the world to sign up 30 distributors. Mihailides has also formed a company to be the exclusive distribu-

tor of the DGM System in New England.

"Sales are starting to come," he says. "We're doing aggressive marketing."

Mihailides says he's invested about \$50,000 of his own money in the DGM System, which he hasn't recouped. But he says his distributors are confident the product will take off in time.

"There's a big picture," Mihailides says. "When the product is up and running, I could have a complete life change. My income could skyrocket."

Jantzer, however, downplays the importance of having several distributors. He's content with having only Miltona distribute the Ground Zero Leveler. Nearly 400 have sold since early 2000, and Jantzer expects to make money on his invention when he pays off bills to obtain a patent. Jantzer also plans to market the Ground Zero Leveler to U.S. federal and state parks, which he says could spark more business.

In addition to Miltona, Jantzer discovered the industry grapevine is a wonderful tool for marketing. Superintendents tell each other about the Ground Zero Leveler.

"Everybody that has it likes it," Jantzer says. "The best advertising has been word of mouth."

### Two roads traveled

Mihailides and Shaw have taken two contrasting roads to promote their products. Mihailides' invention is a major part of his life. Shaw's invention is important to him, but it's not driving his life. Mihailides is also marketing his product on a much larger scale and stands to make more money if it takes off.

It took weeks for Mihailides to build his prototype, and it took Shaw about 30 minutes to build his. Mihailides spent thousands on creating and promoting his product and pursuing a patent. Shaw has spent virtually nothing.

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**Rick Tegtmeier has sold about 30 Divot Masters, mostly to high-end courses.**





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Mihailides and his wife cried over his decision to quit his job as a superintendent to work for Reelcraft. He's on the road constantly and away from his family for up to seven days a trip. "I have a wife and kids at home, and I need to succeed for their sake," he says.

Shaw, who has a wife and two children, has little to do with the marketing of the Dew Draggin', which is promoted exclusively through Miltona's catalog. That's fine by him because he says he's too busy with his job and his family life.

Mihailides earns a salary from Reelcraft in addition to a royalty fee on each sale of the DGM System, which retails for about \$1,450. Shaw receives a percentage on each sale of the Dew Draggin', which retails for \$169. He received no payment up-front.

Shaw admits he would rather "sit back and let someone else do all the work and collect the royalty fees they're willing to give me."

Mihailides, however, is the driving force behind the marketing of his product. "We anticipate that sales this year will be OK," he says. "But we expect sales next year to be spectacular."

Mihailides didn't expect the life of an inventor to be such a pressure-packed adventure.

"I had no clue about what this could be," he says. "But you get to a point where there's no turning back. I'm not one to fail."

Shaw is hardly stressed over the success of the Dew Draggin'. About 20 of Shaw's products had sold in mid-April. "I'd like to see more sales, but it's nothing I'm concerned about," he says.

### Tell Us About Your Contraption

*Golfdom* wants to know about your invention. If you've created a product that has helped your course's maintenance team perform a job better and/or more efficiently, we want to hear about it. Send your idea to Larry Aylward at [larryward@advanstar.com](mailto:larryward@advanstar.com).

### Taking it to another level

A problem with being a superintendent who's an inventor is that your peers see your invention and think they can duplicate it, Tegtmeier says. So they try to build their own versions before they ever spend the money to purchase your product. "Superintendents are touchy, feely and see-if-I-can-built-it type of guys," Tegtmeier says.

At the GCSAA show in February, Shaw spent time at the Miltona booth talking about the Dew Draggin'. He says a lot of superintendents told him how they get rid of dew on their courses. "Everybody has their own way of doing it," Shaw says, admitting other superintendents could build their own versions of the Dew Draggin'.

Mihailides jokes he'll be the person "credited" with inventing the DGM System upon receiving a patent.

### Pursuing a Patent

So you have an invention you think warrants a patent – that is, the exclusive commercial use and development of your invention. Beware. Obtaining a patent isn't cheap. There's a fee to apply for a patent, there's a fee to get the patent issued, there's a . . . You get the picture.

Check out these Web sites for more information on patents:

[www.frompatenttoprofit.com](http://www.frompatenttoprofit.com)

[www.patent-faq.com](http://www.patent-faq.com)

[www.inventnet.com](http://www.inventnet.com)

[www.lib.umich.edu/ummu/pattm/whatis](http://www.lib.umich.edu/ummu/pattm/whatis)

[www.patentcribsheet.com](http://www.patentcribsheet.com)

"Literally 1,000 superintendents have told me that at one time or another they thought about this exact same product," Mihailides says. "We're all inventors at one time or another."

Well, not really. The *real* inventors are guys like Mihailides, Shaw, Jantzer and Tegtmeier who have taken their innovations to another level.

Obtaining a patent on a product, which isn't cheap, attests to a superintendent's inventive skills and persistence. Jantzer expects his product to be patented later this year, but he's been waiting more than two years and will have spent around \$7,000 to obtain it.

"Seventy-five percent of superintendents are inventors in one way or another," Jantzer says. "Most must come up with new ways to get jobs done, but few take it this far."

Those few, however, must be prepared to take the bad with the good.

"There's a lot of failure," Tegtmeier says. "You must be willing to accept failure and know when to cut your losses."

Those few must also be realistic.

"There's the element of surprise," Mihailides says. "Someone could invent something similar to my product and sell it a lot cheaper. Then I'd be out of business tomorrow."

Those few must also have fun, whether their inventions are selling well or not.

"I've been on some of the nicest golf courses in the world where I've met some of the premier superintendents in the world," Mihailides says. "It has been exciting for me." ■

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