

# Down *on the* FarmLinks

## Pursell on a 'Passionate Pursuit of Perfection' to make PTI's 'Experience' even better

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

### It's good. It's darn good.

It is doesn't-get-much-better-than-this good. But it can be better. Much better.

And David Pursell, the CEO of Pursell Technologies Inc. (PTI) and the maestro of the company's Experience at FarmLinks educational/entertainment program for golf course superintendents and green industry professionals, will be the first person to tell you that.

"Even though we've got a great thing going, we can always do better," Pursell says.

PTI has been conducting its program, formerly known as the PTI Tour at Pursell Farms, for superintendents and green industry professionals for several years now at its headquarters in Sylacauga, Ala. The program took a giant leap in 2003

when PTI opened the FarmLinks Golf Club, an 18-hole golf course located on the company's 3,500-acre property, that serves as a research and demonstration ground for the training program.

Around that time, PTI recruited three industry partners — The Toro Co., Syngenta Professional Products and Club Car — to help fund and operate the training program and to participate in golf course research. PTI also opened the Parker Lodge, a rustic and cozy inn that sleeps, feeds and entertains its guests, who arrive in two separate groups weekly.


The Experience at FarmLinks is unlike anything else in the golf course maintenance industry. It's not a hotel-in-the-suburbs-for-a-few-days-of-tedious-training program. A superintendent might never admit it to his general manager or club president, but the Experience at FarmLinks is kind of like taking a holiday. Let's just say the PTI folks know how to roll out the red carpet for superintendents and

### WELCOME TO PURSELL FARMS

*Great are the works of the Lord.  
He has made His wonders to be remembered.*

PSALMS 111:2,4





David Pursell says superintendents deserve to be treated like kings and queens at FarmLinks.

other guests to make them feel like kings and queens.

And that's precisely the point, stresses Pursell, noting that most superintendents aren't accustomed to that kind of treatment. It's Southern hospitality at its finest, but the spiritual Pursell says such treatment is in accord with the golden rule. "Do unto others as you would have them do to you," he cites.

The educational programs are enriching, but what helps set the program apart from others is the recess. In between the learning stuff, attendees can go have fun. They can play the golf course, a Mike Hurdzan-Dana Fry design carved from idyllic farmland, and go bass fishing in several lakes on the property, among other things. Ferris Bueller wouldn't think of taking a day off from this place.

The educational programs are out of the ordinary, which is refreshing. One

program, taught by PTI Executive Director of Business Development Jeff Higgins, takes place in the PTI-Max Theater, which features 15 leather recliner chairs and, yes, popcorn and candy in a small movie theater-type setting. Higgins, who speaks on fertilizer technology, lets his keen sense of humor get in the way of his talk just enough, which adds some lightness to a technical topic.

One of the best things about the educational programs is that guests can go one on one with representatives from PTI, Syngenta and Toro and discuss and see the realities of new technology at work on the golf course. One can sit and listen intently to Dana Lonn, director of Toro's center for advanced turf technology, wax about robotics and fuel cells and golf course maintenance of the future.

Lonn will also listen to superintendents' concerns in a group discussion and

address them as best he can. In fact, Lonn says getting such face time with superintendents is invaluable.

"Our product development process starts with meetings like that," he says.

Back to making the Experience at FarmLinks better and even more memorable. Pursell and Dave Heegard, PTI's vice president of sales and marketing, say there are a few wrinkles to be ironed out on the red carpet. When asked about taking the Experience at FarmLinks to another level, Pursell begins to talk about the marketing strategy of an upscale car manufacturer — Lexus.

Pursell happens to drive one, and the only thing he likes better than a Lexus' performance is its mission statement: "The passionate pursuit of perfection."

Those who know him will say Pursell could have written the line. He's all about being down to the last detail.

"I don't think you ever get there," Pursell says of perfection. "You can get above everybody else, but if you rest on your laurels, what happens is everybody is going to find a way to catch up to you or even leapfrog you."

So it's always about going back to the drawing board to make things better at FarmLinks. Pursell's latest vision is a new facility that features two pavilions — one highlighting the "hall of today" and featuring the products and services of FarmLinks major partners; and one highlighting the "hall of tomorrow" and featuring future products and services. Ground-breaking for the facility will occur this summer and it's scheduled to open in 2007.

Mark Langner, the director of agronomy and applied research at FarmLinks Golf Club, formed an advisory group comprised of 12 superintendents to scout the industry for innovative products to showcase at the pavilions.

Pursell and Heegard also want to make the experience even more fun. FarmLinks is as quiet as a cornfield after the sun sets. Guests can watch TV on a big screen in the lodge or play ping-pong, pool and

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The Mike Hurdzan-Dana Fry design is carved from idyllic farmland.

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Texas hold 'em. Or they can turn in early and sleep deeply on the coziest beds known to mankind. But Heegard says some superintendents are bored at night. So there's talk of opening a bowling alley or offering seminars on financial investing or related topics.

In his "passionate pursuit of excellence," Pursell says he's using Epcot Center, Disney World's theme park of international culture and technological innovation, as a model.

Pursell and Heegard have created a stand-alone business entity with the Experience at FarmLinks and recently appointed Erle Fairly as its president. Fairly will seek more partners to showcase their products, all the while pumping more

a year, we'll make sure 1,000 superintendents are exposed to your products."

FarmLinks represents a new way for suppliers to market their products "What we're trying to create is a brand new marketing tool," Heegard adds.

(Incidentally, the three major partners are expected to remain. Pursell welcomes other minor partners, but they can't be competitors of any of the four major partners.)

Joe DiPaola, Syngenta's golf market manager, likes what's going on at FarmLinks and says his company is committed to it. Syngenta recently appointed Matthew Brecht to represent the company and its products, technologies and services at FarmLinks. Brecht holds a doctorate and a master's degree in plant pathology from the University of Florida.

money into the theme.

Says Heegard: "We'll go to different companies with the idea of: We'd like you to consider using FarmLinks. And for X number of dollars

"In a lot of ways, we're still at the beginning of this," DiPaola says. "It's still very much about where this thing can go in the future. That will take some time."

Mike Read, Club Car's director of marketing, says FarmLinks is the place to allow Club Car to test its equipment in a "real" working environment. "FarmLinks is now a standard part of our research, development and product testing process," he adds.

Read says Club Car partly measures its return on its investment "in the quality of the experience for the superintendents and the other customers who see and evaluate our products there."

"Because the FarmLinks staff often has had weeks and months of experience with the products, customers get solid feedback that they can trust," Read adds.

When FarmLinks Golf Club was dedicated in June 2003, Pursell said, "We progressed from a wish, to a dream, to a vision, to reality... all over about a 10 year span."

He's wishing and dreaming again. And it's probably only a matter of time before Pursell's latest vision becomes reality. ■

## Mark Langner Lives in the Future at Research and Demonstration Golf Course

By Larry Aylward, Editor in Chief

If anybody can tell you what the future holds for golf course maintenance, it's Mark Langner, the director of agronomy and applied research at FarmLinks Golf Club, the research and demonstration golf course owned by Pursell Technologies Inc. (PTI) in Sylacauga, Ala.

Langner is living in the future at FarmLinks, which was built to test the latest formulations and gadgets of golf course management, from machinery to chemicals to irrigation practices.

FarmLinks also doubles as an outdoor classroom for the roughly 1,000 superintendents and other green industry professionals who visit the course annually as part of the Experience at FarmLinks, a two-day training program conducted by PTI that's held on the company's 3,500-acre grounds.

Langner frequently tests products and conducts studies on everything from fertilizers to fungicides. He's observing more new grass varieties that can be found on a seed farm, from bluegrass to paspalum to zoysia to bermuda to bent. And he's checking out the latest in mower technology to cut those myriad varieties.

It's on-the-job learning, all right. It's also a cool feeling to be on the cutting edge, which is razor sharp at FarmLinks.

"I like to take chances and risks," Langner says. "What better

way to do that than at a research and demonstration golf course?"

The same turf research that's usually done on test plots at universities and in chemical companies' backyards is done at FarmLinks. But there's one big difference: FarmLinks is a public golf course, which means the research is conducted in a real setting with real golfers that cause real divots.

"It's always something new and challenging," Langner says. "It's never dull."

But want to know the best thing about Langner's job? He won't get in trouble if any of the risks he takes in his outdoor lab end up going awry.

For instance, he can dry out a fairway to allow researchers to conduct a spectroscopy test and not have to worry about answering to members' complaints that the turf is stressed or turning brown.

"At the end of the day, our objective is to show other superintendents what can be beneficial or nonbeneficial to them," Langner says.

