



CAST OF CHARACTERS

JEFF HIGGINS, PH.D., VP of Business Development, Harrell's

MARSHA ELLIS, event coordinator, FarmLinks

MIKE HURDZAN, PH.D., architect

BRENT FUHRMAN, COO, FarmLinks

TOM ALEX, director of golf course maintenance, Grand Cypress GC

MARK LANGNER, director of
agronomy, FarmLinks

JIMMY PURSELL,
Chairman

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF *FarmLinks*



AN ORAL HISTORY OF GOLF'S FIRST AND ONLY RESEARCH AND DEMONSTRATION COURSE

By Seth Jones

The Experience at FarmLinks celebrates its 10th year of existence this year. Not many organizations can boast as far of a reach with superintendents in such a short time as the Experience. Each year the facility sees anywhere from 600 to 1,000 superintendents. Over ten years, that adds up.

In honor of the Experience at FarmLinks' milestone, *Golfdom* has assembled this retrospective, presented in the words of the people behind it.

Experience origins

The company that would become Pursell Technologies was founded in 1904 by David Pursell's great-grandfather, D.A. Parker. In 1989 the company developed and patented a product called Polyon. In 1997 the company sold its consumer business, Pursell Industries. That same year, capitalizing on the Pursell brand name, they created Pursell Technologies Inc., focusing on the professional market...

DAVID PURSELL, FOUNDER/CEO, FARMLINKS: In early 1986, I went from operating an in-house ad agency to running this new Pursell Industries division. That's when the light went off with me. I thought,
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DAVID PURSELL,
founder and
CEO, FarmLinks

PHOTO BY: CHIP HENDERSON

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man we got something here. That was with sulfur-coated urea. It was an archaic technology at the time, compared to Polyon. Polyon was like nuclear fuel compared to gasoline.

JEFF HIGGINS, FORMER DIRECTOR OF MARKETING, FARMLINKS: When I was a professor at Auburn, of course everybody knew of Polyon, knew it was a fertilizer, but the industry didn't understand what Polyon was. I didn't know what it was.

PURSELL: I remember one of my first GCSAA shows. We could set up our entire booth in a matter of minutes.

HIGGINS: The first thing we had to do was educate everyone. They didn't understand the value of it.

PURSELL: It was 1992, in New Orleans. That's when we introduced Polyon, and it was also the first time we handed out the green basketballs. At one time we were probably better known for the green basketballs and my prints than we were for Polyon. *(Editor's note: For 15 years Pursell was commissioned by the GCSAA to make original drawings that were given away at GCSAA's Conference and Show.)*

HIGGINS: Our first idea was to get an 18-wheeler, state of the art, stadium seats in the back with a theater, make it mind-blowing. Go around to all the different superintendent chapters and do meetings. But all that travel won't work.

Early days

A competitor visited Pursell Technologies in Sylacauga, Ala., with little advance notice. They left Alabama as PT's new best customer. That's when David had what he calls his "voila! moment" — getting customers to come to him.

PURSELL: We knew it was impossible at a trade show to really tell the story of Polyon. So (instead) we would promote the Experience at FarmLinks, sign people up to come here so we could do a much better job.

MARSHA ELLIS, EVENT COORDINATOR, FARMLINKS: The Experience used to be one night. Go into Birmingham, go play golf. Then come here, a lot of times go to Mr. (Jimmy) Pursell's house, grill out at their shed. The next morning have breakfast, then go into Sylacauga, go to the PTI-max theater.

HIGGINS: Once we literally did it for one superintendent — only one superintendent showed up!

PURSELL: Now, our strategy was having everyone come to Sylacauga. And this is where we're going to try to influence people.

HIGGINS: Everyone would say, "Where is Sylacauga?" You literally
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PHOTO COURTESY: FARMLINKS



David Welchel and Mike Hurdzan, golf course architects, at the site that would become FarmLinks.

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“The one restriction we had,” says Mike Hurdzan, designer, “was that Mrs. Pursell didn’t want to see (the course) from her window.” (Right) The image of a longhorn steer was used for the logo of FarmLinks. (Below) David and Jimmy Pursell at the future site of No. 5, the most photographed hole on the course.

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ally go to Childersburg, turn right, then go 35 years back in time and you’ll run into it.

TOM ALEX, DIRECTOR OF GC MAINTENANCE, GRAND CYPRESS GC, ORLANDO:

I was in one of the very first groups to ever go on the Experience. We stayed in the old Pursell farmhouse. They took us to the factory, did their presentation, and at the end, they pulled back a curtain. We then watched them make the Polyon.

HIGGINS: Our objective was to sell more Polyon, but it wasn’t a sales pitch. The message was truly educational. By the time they got through the four hours of training, they’d be hard pressed not to realize this is probably the best fertilizer produced.

PURSELL: What we were doing here was so much more valuable than a GCSAA trade show. At a GCSAA trade show, there are so many superintendents, but it’s very hard to engage anybody in a meaningful conversation. All the basketballs that we gave away at shows? Less than 1 percent of the balls we gave away were we able to engage in a meaningful conversation.

HIGGINS: Golf is a relationship business. They had enough foresight to see there was an opportunity to build on customer relations.

PURSELL: It didn’t take long before people were really wanting to come here. We had the right partners — Toro, Club Car and Syngenta (*BASF later replaced Syngenta in 2005.*)



THE CEO: **DAVID PURSELL**

Pursell: My great-grandfather founded the company in 1904. When we sold (Pursell Technologies) in 2006 (to Agrium for \$100 million), that was 102 years in one family — pretty phenomenal. We had survived lots of different changes along the way

Ellis: David is a visionary. He’s just a great guy. From a personal level to a business level, he cares about us. I know that. I know he cares about all of us.

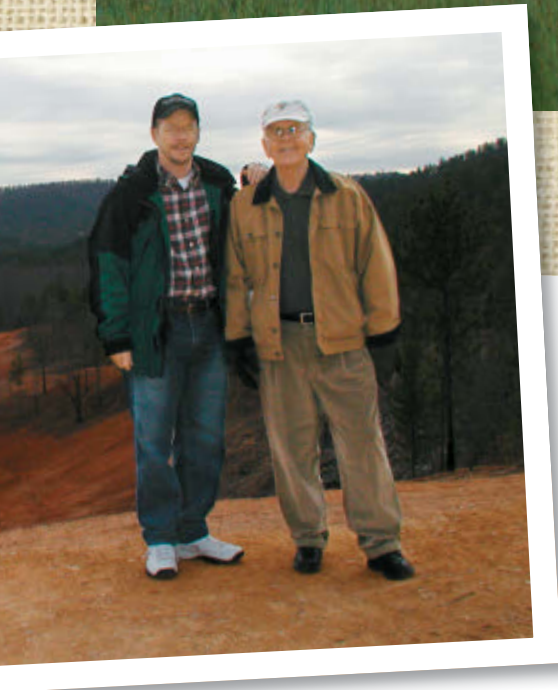
Pursell: My background, I was a commercial art major at Auburn. I didn’t know anything about physiology of plants. I was a marketer, I wanted to design ads.



Adding 18

As the program, which included golf in Birmingham, caught on, there was a bold new addition to the Experience — an 18-hole championship course.

ELLIS: I remember one day somebody said, ‘Hey, they’re going to build a golf course in Fayetteville.’ They brought us out here and I thought, ‘This is going to be beautiful.’ I’ve been fortunate, I’ve got to see it from farmland to what it is today.



THE PH.D.:
JEFF HIGGINS

Higgins: I remember playing in a golf tournament with David. He asked me if I was going to retire as a professor at Auburn. I said, "Probably not." He said, "I need a director of marketing, how about coming over to work for me?" It was as simple as that. I'd known David and my family has known his family for 50 years or longer. My dad worked in the chemical and fertilizer business and used to call David's grandpa and would sell him chemicals and fertilizers.

Ellis: Jeff is one of the people who got me so interested in the Experience. Because he draws people to him. He's funny, he's smart, and he is just crazy. He makes the education fun.

Higgins: I love working with supes, I love educating supes. But I told David one time, I said, "David you don't get it. I'm (teaching at the Experience) twice a week, 30 to 40 weeks a year. It gets old." The analogy I used was you could make love to Gwyneth Paltrow every day. It may take a while, but at some point in time, it's going to get old.

dad were trusting — they weren't real excited about a golf course, but they let him go forward. They loved that land.

PURSELL: Mike was the keynote speaker for GCSAA's Environmental Steward Awards. We were one of four sponsors. If you were a sponsor, you would go backstage and wait until it was time to announce the awards... we were able to spend about an hour with Mike and I thought this whole idea about doing this golf course is beginning to solidify in my mind.

HURDZAN: It was a team effort. The 5th hole, the most photographed hole, was a result of David and his father. They said, "We want a golf hole here." It was a hard hole to build because of the cart path.

Growing up

The Experience was growing, and now it included a golf course to demo on...

HIGGINS: Back then I spent time with every group. Literally I drove the bus, picked them up at the airport, played golf with them, ate dinner with them, had breakfast with them, trained them, took them back to the airport.

ELLIS: I've cooked supper, made lunch, taken people to the airport, to the hospital. I used to cook breakfast, whatever it took. Because we were small.

MARK LANGNER, DIRECTOR OF AGRONOMY, FARMLINKS: In the beginning I'd shy away and just maintain my golf course and not worry about the Experience. Then it evolved into me giving what we call the "On the Course" tour.

BRENT FUHRMAN, COO, FARMLINKS: As the program evolved, we felt like it made a whole lot more sense, when talking about products that are useful to supes, let's get our superintendent talking about it. It was a transition from reps telling stories, to a fair amount of the program being Mark going around the course, looking at projects. Now it's a colleague-to-colleague story.

PURSELL: (Mark was) a great young superintendent with a great reputation at Limestone Springs (GC in Birmingham). He was also great at communication. When he got up to speak, he'd get attention. Mark is one of the premiere superintendents, as far as recognition nationally,

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MIKE HURDZAN, PH.D., ARCHITECT: The land is enormous. You can put a golf course anywhere. But Mrs. Pursell didn't want to see it from her window. That was the one restriction we had.

PURSELL: The house that is right across from the entrance of Pursell Farms, that's where I moved into when I first came back from Auburn in 1980. We had a couple 4-wheelers. We'd take off across the farm when it was just cows. But being the creative person I was and a golfer, I could see these land masses... I could see, man, you could build a pretty nice golf course out here.

HURDZAN: David is a visionary. His mom and

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maybe even in the top five — just because of the seat he's sat in. Imagine having 1,000 of your peers coming in every year to look at your work.

FarmLinks payoff

Pursell Technologies Inc., created in 1997, was sold to Agrium in 2006, for \$100 million...

PURSELL: It was a considerable amount of money that we had to invest; the offices, the lodge, the golf course, the road in. I knew it would work in a lot of respects. It worked out great, but the company was doing well, golf was doing well, GCSAA was doing well, a lot of people were doing well.

HIGGINS: On average, over the ten years (I was with the company), I visited with probably 6,000 superintendents — that's being conservative.

PURSELL: The fortunate thing is *when* we sold out. It's like your 401K. It all depends on *when* you take your chips off the table. When we took our chips off the table (in 2006), it was a very fortunate move for us.

HIGGINS: I don't think I'd be where I'm at in my career today if it wasn't for FarmLinks. The number of superintendents I've gotten to know over the years... It would almost have been worth working for free.

FarmLinks future

Since selling the fertilizer business, the Experience at FarmLinks has evolved into a different business...

LANGNER: The Experience program continues on, and we're growing it. What is changing is, our partners are looking at other businesses — lawn care, sports fields, a heavier look into horticulture, specialty agriculture.

PURSELL: Our objective was to sell more fertilizer. When we sold the fertilizer business, that left us an asset called FarmLinks. Our objective now is to make FarmLinks a viable business, which is different than what we were trying to do. One of the things we have been able to do is get better and better on the hospitality side. *GolfWeek* ranked FarmLinks as No. 1 public resort in Alabama. *Golf Digest* ranked us in the top 40 nationally.



THE SUPER: **MARK LANGNER**

Langner: I was in my fourth year at Limestone Springs, I heard that the Pursells were building a golf course... I knew the Pursells well, from when I was a student at Mississippi State. I came up and visited the golf course. David didn't realize it, but I was trying to get a job. Because I knew their goal and direction and it was a neat project.

Higgins: Mark's a unique superintendent, always open-minded. Most of the things we want to do, most supers pull their hair out. We do crazy stuff. Most superintendents say, "No way in hell am I going to let you do that."

Langner: I knew they were bringing superintendents in. I knew that they had special relationships with vendors. We were able to see things far before any other superintendents. That was really the fun part.

Higgins: That position is critical to do what we want to with superintendents but still have a nice, presentable playable course for the public. I dare say he's had the most challenging job of all of us.

The maintenance facility at FarmLinks was burned to the ground as the result of an overnight lightning strike in March of 2011. FarmLinks unveiled its new state-of-the-art maintenance building this spring. To see the new site and hear director of agronomy Mark Langner talk about the new facility, visit *Golfdom TV* at www.golfdom.com/golfdom-tv.

ALEX: The neat thing is the place has changed, but it hasn't changed. The emphasis is on good ol' Southern hospitality, with education mixed in. It's changed a lot because there's a lot more to do now — golf, fishing, shooting clay — but in my mind it hasn't changed much, because it's still fellowship with people.

PURSELL: One thing that has not changed is sitting across the dinner table, looking them in the eye and shaking their hand.

LANGNER: I think there are a lot of people who would say, I don't want to go, it's a sales deal. It's not. It's a dialogue about issues. I get an opportunity to show them what I'm using here and how it impacts our operation, and how it might impact theirs.

PURSELL: It's still a blank canvas on what can we do. We'll continue to expand on the education side. Being recognized as a top golf resort, both in the state and nationally, is the added benefit. ■