

"From its outset, Penn State's turfgrass program has been committed to research directed at finding solutions to problems encountered in the field."

— Al Turgeon

*The sun never sets on a Penn State turfgrass variety, and the Valentine plots are a key to that success.*

PHOTO BY HOWARD NUERNBERGER, PENN STATE

1,100 represents superintendents, owners/operators of lawncare services, nursery workers, sod growers, athletic field managers and industry representatives. PTC has contributed more than \$2 million to turfgrass research at Penn State and, in turn, professionals in all areas of the turfgrass industry have benefited from the results of Penn State turfgrass research.

Joseph Valentine, known for his early work with the PTC, is also known at Penn State for the unusual relationship he developed with Ralph Hetzel. Every year Valentine would travel to Penn State, and if Hetzel was available they'd have lunch or dinner together. Valentine would tell him about the problems superintendents were facing and the progress they were making. At every turf conference held at Penn State, Valentine gave a report on activities of the Turfgrass Research Advisory Committee.

Others from the turfgrass industry have enriched Penn State's turfgrass program as well.

Tom Mascaro, a mushroom farmer from Philadelphia, took some correspondence courses through Penn State in the 1930s. He also formed an acquaintance with H.B. Musser, Penn State's first faculty member in turfgrass research. In the 1950s Mascaro often accompanied Penn State turfgrass faculty members on travels throughout the country to field days and conferences.

Mascaro, well known as an inventor, formed a lifelong friendship with Eb Steiniger, who was the superintendent at the Pine Valley Country Club in New Jersey. The pair formed a unique relationship, in which Mascaro would create an invention and present it to Steiniger to try out at Pine Valley. "The two of them traveled around together," says Mascaro's son, John. "When my dad had an idea, he'd take it by Eb's course at Pine Valley and show him the equipment. Eb would give him feedback, and from what I understand, he was a pretty good critic."

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In a 1993 interview, Steiniger talked about his collaboration with Mascaro: "Tom was always hanging around our place, bringing some new equipment to try out at Pine Valley. Some of it was really good. We got the whole place aerified, and it didn't cost me a thing because I didn't buy his machine! Tom was very generous with us."

Many versions of Mascaro's inventions are still in use today, including the Aerifier (patented in 1946), the Verticutter (developed in 1952 for removing thatch), and the Vertigroove (designed to remove soil layers on greens and improve drainage). One story goes that when faculty member Joseph Duich asked Mascaro to give a talk to his students in the two-year technical program, Mascaro replied, "Under one condition: For every invention I talk about that worked, I have to talk about two that didn't work." Mascaro, a strong believer in Penn State's education program, provided an Aerifier to James Watson Jr., a graduate student researching soil compaction. In 1950 Watson received the first Ph.D. in turfgrass science at Penn State.

Penn State offers several educational programs in turfgrass. The four-year bachelor's degree program in turfgrass science prepares students for a wide variety of careers in the turfgrass industry, and master's and Ph.D. programs offer opportunities for advanced studies. The two-year Golf Course Turfgrass Management Program, established in 1957, is for those interested in becoming superintendents.

Penn State's online World Campus is another option for students who want to earn credits through distance learning. These programs have graduated thousands of turf managers who can be found in the industry throughout the world.

The highly competitive two-year program is well-known for turning out quality superintendents. From 1992 until 2004, the two-year program ran under the direction of George Hamilton, who passed away in July 2004 after battling cancer. Hamilton also taught courses in cultural turfgrass management and golf course specifications, construction and renovation. He conducted research in turfgrass management and developed and evaluated new technologies for the turf industry.

Most notable among Hamilton's research accomplishments is the invention of PennMulch, a commercially successful mulch made from recycled newspaper that retains moisture and warmth in the soil. Hamilton contributed much to the program and is sorely missed, both in the college and in the turfgrass industry.

"From its outset, Penn State's turfgrass program has been committed to research directed at finding solutions to problems encountered in the field, and to educational efforts to share knowledge with students and constituents in the industry," says Al Turgeon, professor of turfgrass management.

"Today this commitment is as strong as ever and the

program is among the most respected and successful of its type in the world," he concludes.

*Krista M. Weidner is a State College, Pa.-based freelance writer and editor. She received her B.A. in English from Penn State in 1985 and worked for several years as a writer for Penn State's Agricultural Information Services. She recently completed a book on the Penn State turfgrass program, titled "The Grass Keeps Getting Greener: 75 Years of Turfgrass Research and Extension at Penn State." She can be reached at [krista88@adelphia.net](mailto:krista88@adelphia.net).*

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# Brothers *in Arms*



Michael (left) and Vinnie hung out at Metacomet Country Club often when they were kids. This photo was taken in 1967.

*Michael and Vinnie Iacono aren't just siblings — they're bonded in the wonderful world of golf course maintenance*

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

It's not every day that an assistant superintendent gets so mad at his boss that he chases him around the golf course and threatens him with bodily harm. That is, unless they're brothers.

In the mid-1980s, Michael Iacono was the superintendent of Metacomet Country Club and his younger brother Vinnie was his assistant. One summer afternoon, Vinnie got so angry at Michael that he charged after him down the 11th fairway and shouted not-so-nice words at him. It's not known what Michael did to infuriate Vinnie, and it's unclear whether Vinnie was able to catch Michael.

Today the 49-year-old Michael and the 44-year-old Vinnie smile sheepishly about the incident. It's filed in the family archives.

"It was nothing," Vinnie says with his toothy grin and thick New England accent. "It was just one of those brotherly love things."

Most every man who's had a brother will tell you that male siblings tend to tussle, and even Dr. Phil will tell you it's normal. But brothers act as comrades in the long run, not

combatants. Their blood binds them in an unconditional allegiance.

So it goes with the Iacono brothers. They used to battle like Cain and Abel, but a peace plan has long been in place. When asked if they're best friends, the curly-haired Vinnie says with pride: "We're brothers. It goes beyond friends."

Michael and Vinnie are also peers of their profession. They're bonded in the wonderful world of golf course management and maintenance. Michael is the certified superintendent of Pine Brook Country Club in Weston, Mass., and Vinnie is superintendent of Blue Hill Country Club in Canton, Mass. The private clubs, located in the Boston suburbs, are two of the top high-end golf courses in the area.

It's no wonder the Iacono brothers landed in the field. Their father, Vincent, was a superintendent. When growing up in Providence, R.I., Michael and Vinnie were intrigued with their father's career and would tag along with him to the golf course where he worked.



The course, Metacomet Country Club, is a classic Donald Ross design. Michael and Vinnie adored being with their father at Metacomet, where Vincent worked for 16 years. "Right from the beginning, they wanted to be like their dad," says Pat Iacono, the brothers' mother.

The brothers started working on the course when they were teenagers. Not only did they enjoy the work, they were inspired by it because they got to see the results of it, as in a finely groomed golf course.

"We knew it was a hard job from day one, but we loved doing it," Michael says.

Michael and Vinnie say their father was an innovative superintendent for his time and loved to talk shop with other superintendents. He taught Michael and Vinnie that it was integral to keep a golf course neat and clean, no matter how little money was in the maintenance budget.

Michael and Vinnie say the most important thing their father taught them was to have a sense of urgency about their work. Hence, Michael and Vinnie will never put off today what they can do tomorrow.

The brothers took different routes to arrive

at the profession. Michael attended Providence College and graduated with a biology degree. He then went to work as a lab worker in 1977 for the state ... for three days. Around that time, his father's assistant superintendent left Metacomet. Michael felt like a rookie ready to be called up to the big leagues.

"That was my chance," Michael recalls. "My father said, 'Do you want to come and work for me? I said, 'Yes, please.'"

It was the ticket, Michael thought.

"Just to be outside and growing grass," Michael says. "It doesn't get much better than that."

Vinnie's path took another route. He spent some time in the National Guard after graduating from high school. After a stint at a trade school, he enrolled at the University of Massachusetts to study agronomy. He also went to work for his father at Metacomet.

Sadly, their father died suddenly in 1982. The 27-year-old Michael was asked by Metacomet's management to succeed his father as superintendent.

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Michael (left) and Vinnie smile for the camera earlier this year at the New England Regional Turfgrass Conference & Show.





## Superintendents value longer control.

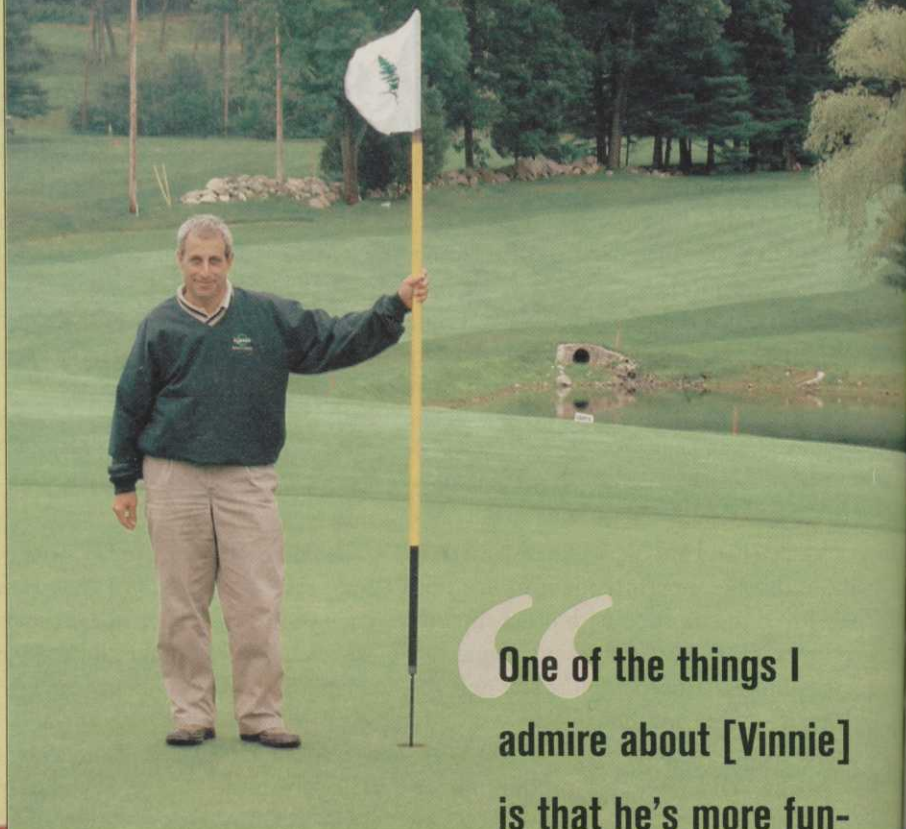
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## Brothers in Arms



**“One of the things I admire about [Vinnie] is that he’s more fun-**

**loving, carefree and gregarious than me.”**

**MICHAEL IACONO**

PINE BROOK COUNTRY CLUB

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“It was scary,” Michael recalls. “I didn’t know what I was doing.”

Vinnie, 21 at the time, became Michael’s assistant. The brothers made a good team but at times got along like ... well ... brothers. They clashed.

Being Vinnie’s boss wasn’t easy, Michael says. He knew he had to be tough on Vinnie if he was going to be tough on the crew. But Michael wondered if he had to be tougher on Vinnie to prove that he wasn’t playing favorites.

“Because we were brothers, he leaned on me a lot,” Vinnie says. “I got frustrated. I probably quit about three times a month.”

Michael says the three years that Vinnie spent as his assistant were tense but productive. He says he missed Vinnie when Vinnie left to be the superintendent at a nine-hole golf course. Despite their brotherly differences, they were a good team.

“It took a couple of years before I found somebody good enough to replace him,” says Michael, who left Metacomet for Pine Brook in 1992.

Pat, who remembers the blowups the

brothers sometimes had when they were kids, admits she was glad when Vinnie moved on.

“I was happy when Vinnie went out on his own,” she says. “They get along much better this way.”

Michael is in his 14th year at Pine Brook, and Vinnie in his 11th season at Blue Hill. Their clubs, located about 12 miles apart, have about six common members.

Vinnie says Pine Brook is a better-designed course. “It’s fun to play and challenging,” he adds. Blue Hill, on the other hand, is designed like a roller coaster. “You have to play it about 10 times to get a feel for it,” Vinnie says. “It’s only 6,300 yards, but it will beat the living daylight out of you the first time you play it because you’re hitting it up and down hills all day.”

Despite the geographic closeness of



their clubs and the fact that they have common members, Michael and Vinnie say their clubs are not competitive of each other. Fact is, the brothers talk on the phone nearly every day during the golf season, discussing various agromonic strategies. They often borrow equipment from each other's courses.

"We drive one another in a good way," Vinnie says. "I don't want to be better than him, but I want to make sure I'm as good as him."

So whose golf course is better?

"The one I'm playing on that day," says Kevin Mendik, who works as an attorney in the area, and is a member of both clubs.

Mendik knows Michael and Vinnie well. He says Pine Brook, where he is a member of the green committee, is known throughout the golfing community for its top-tier conditions

throughout the year. Mendik says Blue Hill is undergoing a renovation that will soon make it one of the top clubs in the Boston area.

"I don't get a sense that they compete against each other," Mendik says of the two clubs and their superintendents. "Some people ask me, 'Which course do you like more, Pine Brook or Blue Hill?' I say, 'I like them both enough to be a member.'"

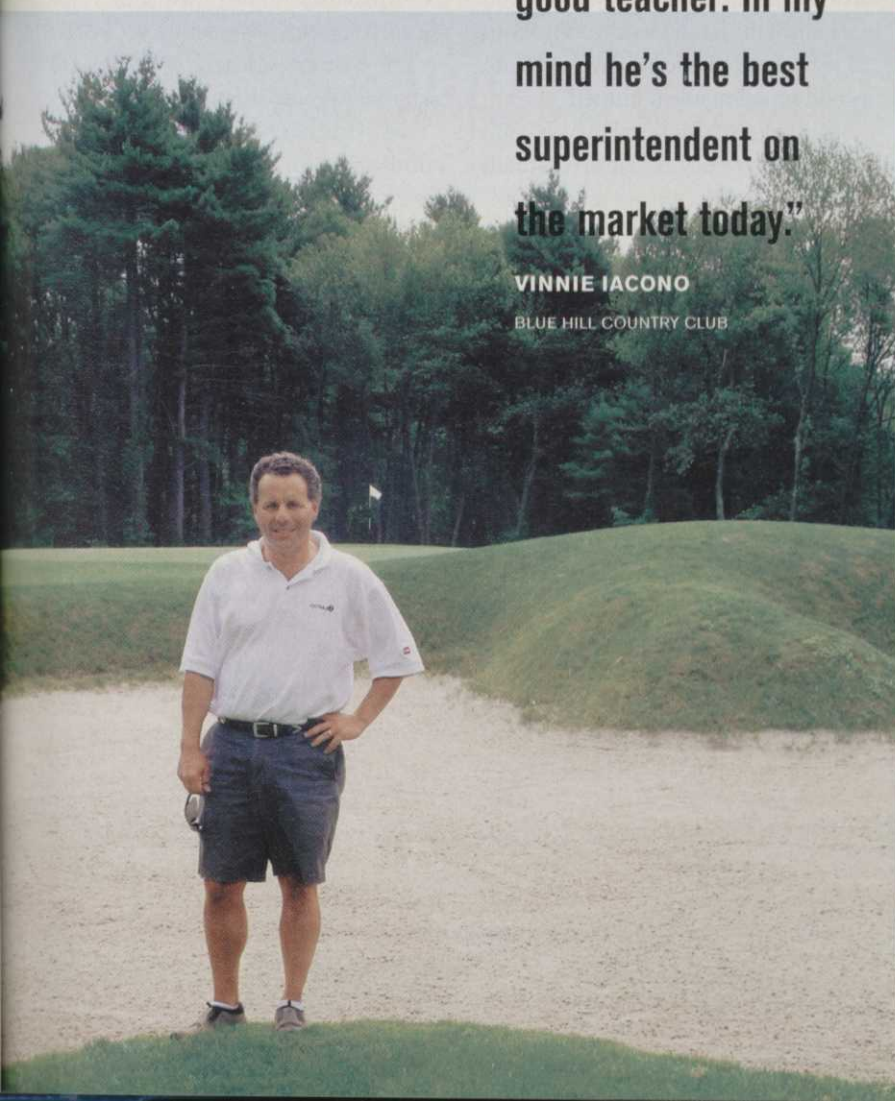
The clubs' common members aren't afraid to give Michael and Vinnie the business when it comes to the golf courses' conditions. Vinnie says he hears it all the time. "I played your brother's place the

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**“My brother was a good teacher. In my mind he’s the best superintendent on the market today.”**

**VINNIE IACONO**

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## Brothers in Arms



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other day," they tell him. "His place is awesome." To which Vinnie says he tells the members, "Michael is the best."

It's not just his brother who thinks that. Michael is highly regarded by his peers.

"Michael has always been considered as one of the best superintendents in the area," says Paul Jamrog, the superintendent of Metacomet Country Club, who has known the Iacono brothers for about 20 years. "And Vinnie has developed into a good superintendent himself."

Michael and Vinnie realize their work is judged every day. What drives them to succeed is perfection — as in providing members with the best playing conditions possible daily.

"It's not about being a trendsetter or anything like that," Vinnie explains of his management philosophy. "We all find ways to do our jobs according to the situation. Not every golf course is an apple and not every golf course is an orange. You have X amount of dollars to work with, and you want to make your golf course as good as you can for that X amount of dollars."

While they've retired from sparring, Michael and Vinnie still jab each with sharp-edged humor. Michael tells a story about when he turned 13 and went to work for his father. Vinnie also wanted to work for his dad but was too young. Michael would walk out the door and tell Vinnie he was going to the store and would be right back. Then his dad would pick him up at the corner in his car and take him to the golf course.

After hearing his brother's tale, Vin-

**Vinnie shares a hug with his mother, Pat, and Michael. The brothers are proud to admit they're mama's boys.**

nie forms a surprised looks on his face.

"I didn't know that went on," he says with a deadpanned look.

"You didn't notice that I didn't

come back from the store right away?" Michael asks incredulously.

"Obviously, I didn't miss you," Vinnie answers with a wry smile.

The banter aside, the brothers are each other's most ardent supporters.

"My brother was a good teacher," Vinnie says. "In my mind he's the best superintendent on the market today."

Vinnie turns his head and looks at Michael. "I tell you that all the time, but you don't believe me."

Asked to describe each other in a few words, Michael says that Vinnie "loves life."

Vinnie says Michael is "argumentative."

Most everyone who knows them will tell you that Michael is "intense," and Vinnie is "laid back." The brothers agree and wish they were more like each other.

"One of the things I admire about him most is that he's more fun-loving, carefree and gregarious than me," Michael says. "I'm more stoic. Sometimes I wish I was more like him."

Vinnie says he sometimes wishes he was more disciplined like Michael.

"But not a helluva lot," he wisecracks.

They look at each other and cackle. It's clear in their faces that they're glad to have each other as brothers — and fellow superintendents. ■





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# Home Turf Advantage

By Thomas Skernivitz  
MANAGING EDITOR

**G**rowing sod is a growing industry, thanks in part to golf courses.

Harold Pirkle, the marketing manager at Pike Creek Turf in Adel, Ga., says new golf course construction and complete golf course renovation now call for an average of about 500,000 square feet of sod per job, as opposed to 50,000 to 100,000 square feet in 1977.

"And these days it's not uncommon to find a 3-million- to 5-million-square-foot job," he adds.

The upswing, Pirkle says, can be attributed to the contour of courses and the fear that rain could wash out seed-specific projects on those slopes. In addition, golf course real estate tends to sell more easily when properties are covered by lush grass rather than dirt.

"The prettier you get the course, and the quicker, the bigger the impact on your lot sales," Pirkle says.

Pirkle and West Coast Turf regional sales manager John Marman offered some insight into what a sod project entails for a superintendent, from beginning to end:

## Sod growers offer advice on how to manage major projects

### Pre-Purchase

► **Know your supplier:** Seek out references. Talk to fellow superintendents. And most importantly, tour each prospective sod farm, especially if the project is a major renovation that covers more than 300,000 square feet.

"Anybody can do a good job of putting stuff in a brochure. Anybody can have a flashy Web site. But the rubber meets the road when you actually tour the facility that's growing the sod," Pirkle says.

A tour is first and foremost, Marman agrees. "The demand for (sod) right now is pretty good, so sometimes you have a sod supplier that's shipping you stuff that's not ready," he says. "It's best to go to the farm and try to actually stake out your area and say, 'Hey, this is going to be my field.'"

If the sod is claimed well in advance of the project's start, Marman recommends selecting a field that will reach maturity concurrent with the job start. Between selection and delivery, he advocates making a few follow-up visits to the farm, especially a final trip a week or two before shipping.

In some cases the sod grower may mandate a maintenance fee if the claimed sod is not delivered by a specific date. "But you're still assured that you're getting what you paid for and it's the best-possible product," Marman says.

► **Buy certified:** Some companies sell only state-certified sod. Others offer nothing of the sort, and still more boast a split inventory. Stick to the growers that sell only state-certified sod, Pirkle says, and beware of those that have mixed inventories.

"In those cases, you just never know," Pirkle says. "It just depends on how honest the company is. They could say, 'Yes, it's certified,' but you might not actually know if you're getting certified."

Some states, such as Georgia, monitor sod farms and compare the square footage of certified sod sold with the acreage of certified sod grown. "They do

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