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# **THE WISCONSIN TURFGRASS ASSOCIATION:**

## **A BRIEF HISTORY**

**by**

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For years many people in the turf industry have been bothered by the nagging question, "Why doesn't this state have a unified turfgrass program like so many other states have?". We had to look no farther than the states that surround us to see active, successful and robust groups that were advancing the interests of turf managers, whatever their specialties. Large sums of money were donated for research, scholarships and research assistantships were common, many of the facilities were outstanding, and conferences sponsored by individual foundations and associations attracted people from far and wide. The common denominator for all of these successful programs was strong support from the private sector.

If one had to search for the answer as to why Wisconsin was seemingly so far behind these other states, it would probably be that independent efforts were going a long way in meeting the demands of the turf industry.

Dr. Jim Love of the Department of Soil Science on the UW-Madison campus developed an excellent curriculum for an undergraduate interested in a B.S. degree in turf and grounds management, and served as a major professor for several graduate students. Dr. Robert Newman instructed hundreds and hundreds of students over the years in the Department of Horticulture and shouldered heavy responsibilities in turf extension across the state. Bob maintained extensive plots at the Arlington Experimental Station to study herbicides used on turf, to evaluate new grass varieties introduced into the marketplace, and to focus on special problems confronting turfgrass managers. Dr. Gayle Worf travelled from one end of the state to the other studying specific disease infections on turfgrasses, and maintained research plots on the many different turfs in Wisconsin. Dr. Charles Koval focused a lot of attention in the early sixties on the numerous insect pests affecting turf, and he has been succeeded by

Dr. Dan Mahr and by Phil Pellitteri. All of these men had University Extension responsibilities and led the annual "Turfgrass Conference" at several sites across the state. Despite all of their efforts and interest, it was obvious there was need for more, and that the need would only be met when turf growers decided to offer some outside help.

The situation in Wisconsin has been unique in yet another way. Nearly two decades ago, Charles Wilson, Jim Latham and Bob Welch of the Milwaukee Sewerage Commission developed "The Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium" in memory of O.J. Noer. This two day conference received widespread acclaim and great acceptance among state golf course superintendents and still is a source of great pride among Wisconsin superintendents. Prior to that, in 1959, they established the O.J. Noer Research Foundation with the purpose of raising monies for turfgrass research. This foundation received a lot of support from the golf course managers in Wisconsin and the organization has performed a very significant and important role in funding research projects. Over \$200,000 has been given to turf research and education since 1959. Some of the projects funded were done here in Wisconsin, but the foundation has a national scope and makes grants to universities and individual scientists across the country.

Eleven individuals with a strong interest in forming a central turfgrass organization for Wisconsin met on October 8, 1980 and discussed at length the possibilities and potential of such an organization, and as a result of that meeting in Johnson Creek the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association was formed. It was not born out of a sense of dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in Wisconsin, but rather with the idea of greatly expanding and enhancing current efforts. Several ideas were fundamental in their approach to such an alliance. In the broadest sense, as stated in Article II of the WTA Constitution, the purpose of the Association is to "promote the turfgrass industry in Wisconsin, in particular, to encourage the further study and research in turfgrasses, to analyze and disseminate information relating thereto". Further, "the

objective of the Association is better turf for all athletic fields, cemeteries, golf courses, lawns, parks, play grounds, roadsides and any other turfgrass areas". From that very first meeting to the present time, the officers and board of directors are dedicated to making all donations to the state's land grant college — the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. The rationale for this policy is that there is a need for research investigations that focus on the specific growing conditions found in Wisconsin. Finally, the group felt that any research initiatives needed to be complemented with appropriate support of education and instruction.

All of the original goals of the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association founders have been abided by. The first year of serious activity of the WTA — 1981 — netted \$5,000 that was invested in projects administered by Dr. Worf. A small amount of money was requested by Dr. Mahr for some work on turf insects. In 1982, income of the WTA nearly doubled to \$9,700 and Dr. Worf received a grant of \$5,800. Again, a very modest \$575 was extended to Dr. Mahr. This year saw the Association begin publication of "The Wisconsin Turfgrass News", which expanded the role of the association in dissemination of information and news relating to Wisconsin's turf industries. One of the aspirations of the founding members came to fruition in January of 1982 when the Association, in conjunction with the CALS, UW-Madison, sponsored a conference called "College Day for Turf Professionals". It was a great success. Finally, in September, the first annual WTA Golf Outing was held and was hosted by Sentry World Golf Course.

This past year — 1983 — was one of continued growth. The Association was given great support and had an income in excess of \$14,000. Support of the Plant Pathology Department was at the \$5,000 level and the contribution to the Entomology Department was increased to over \$1,100. The Association was able to begin to accumulate some "seed" money that could be used for a membership drive and possibly some

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laboratory work during the winter months. A second golf tournament was held in late September at the Nagawaukee Golf Course in Hartland and the attendance at the second annual meeting in Arlington increased dramatically. The year will be important in the history of the WTA as it marked the Association's first "Summer Field Day". The results of this first "hands on" field day exceeded all expectations and drew an attendance of over 150 people. The event will be somewhat unique in its approach in the future in that the site will be moved each year to increase accessibility during the busy month of August.

Although many members of the Board of Directors are infected with impatience, there is a recognition of the importance of steady and measured growth. Immediately, for 1984, the third annual meeting has been held; the field day date and site have been set and the golf tournament will continue. The Board has embarked on a program to greatly increase the membership and is hopeful of an income exceeding \$20,000. Plans for a scholarship award to a deserving student in the University's turf program are well along. Groundwork is being completed on the feasibility of acquiring a vehicle to greatly increase the mobility and visibility of University staff involved in turf research and extension, and to relieve them of the unending hassle of trying to arrange transportation. There is also the hope of a modest increase in project funding. Finally, there will be an effort made to heighten the awareness of University administrators and officials of the importance of the turfgrass industry in Wisconsin and the need for them to try to extend help similar to that provided many of the traditional agricultural disciplines.

What about the years beyond? What kinds of things can the WTA do for the turfgrass industry? What is the realistic potential of the Association? These are all good questions and ones that are constantly being wrestled with by the officers and board members. The most obvious goal is more formidable support of research — money that hopefully can be counted by the tens of thousands. Some directors feel that the WTA needs to

begin a program soon that would provide financial support in the form of research assistantships for graduate students specializing in some particular facet of the turf industry, whether it be plant pathology, soil science horitculture or entomology. There is a strong feeling among board members that a serious effort must be made to provide facilities for turfgrass resarch, whether it be an urban research station, a turf farm, additional equipment, or buildings and facilities on an existing agricultural experiment station. There is some thought that increased staff, in the form of technicians, is needed to assist project leaders. The opportunities for helping are indeed unlimited.

The first few years in the life of this organization have been truly exciting, rewarding and productive. But the task is barely underway. The WTA invites **all** of those people in the state with an interest in turfgrass to join us, to aid in the planning for the future and to relish the enormous satisfaction that is gained when one participates in an endeavor that helps himself. □

## **WISCONSIN TURFGRASS ASSOCIATION EVENTS AND DATES FOR 1984**

**January 17, 1984**

**3rd Annual Membership Meeting**

**August 27, 1984**

**2nd Annual Field Day**

**September 24, 1984**

**3rd Annual Golf Outing**