



New GCSAA president hasn't forgotten his Wisconsin ties

By Lori Ward Bocher

His current address may be the Lockmoor Club of Grosse Pointe Woods, Mich. But Bill Roberts, the new GCSAA president, has a very soft spot in his heart for Wisconsin.

"I have a great deal of affinity and respect for the superintendents in Wisconsin," he says. "They helped me grow up professionally. They committed to helping me get on the national board, and they didn't let up until it happened.

"The guys here in Michigan have been tremendously supportive and I've enjoyed getting to know them," Bill adds. "But the guys in Wisconsin are the ones who got me going professionally. I'll never forget that."

Bill recalls a strange feeling that came over him when he returned to Milwaukee for a meeting last spring. "I flew into Milwaukee and rented a car," he explains. "Then the weirdest thing happened. As I drove out of the parking structure, I felt this real sense of relief being back in Wisconsin. I don't know why. But I actually felt that."

Roberts, who just turned 40, grew up in Chicago's northern suburbs. He attended Northern Illinois University as an English Literature major for a few years before he realized that wasn't the path for him.

"I had worked summers on a golf course (Knollwood Club, Lake Forest, Ill.) for a guy named Jim Bertoni," Bill recalls. "Jim was a young, enthusiastic guy. He got me interested in golf courses and helped me get into Penn State. When he moved to the west coast, I followed and did my internship with him."

In 1975, Bill received a 2-year degree in turf management from Penn State. His first job was with Bob Williams at Bob-O-Link, a Chicago-area course where he spent a year. Then came his first move to Wisconsin—three years at Stevens Point Country Club. In 1979 he moved back to Illinois as superintendent at Knollwood for two years. Then he came back to Wisconsin during the construction phase of SentryWorld at



Bill Roberts, GCSAA President

Stevens Point. He remained at SentryWorld from 1981 to 1988.

Bill was quick to get involved with the WGCSA. "The first time I was in Wisconsin I was newsletter editor for a while," he recalls. "It was nothing like Monroe has accomplished. The newsletter at that time was basically a way to announce meetings. During my second time in Wisconsin I was on the board and went through all the chairs and was president in 1986 and 1987."

What was Bill's impact on WGCSA? "To be honest with you, the impact that the organization had on me was probably much greater than any impact I had on it," he answers. "I was brought up in the business that you need to be involved. My time on the Wisconsin board helped me galvanize that desire. It taught me a lot about working with people. It taught me a lot about what a committed group can accomplish."

Without taking credit for himself, Bill believes that WGCSA saw good membership growth and gains in terms of recognition during his years in Wisconsin. "The association just got stronger. I really enjoyed working with that group of people," he adds.

While still in Wisconsin, Bill decided to become involved with the national

group. He ran unsuccessfully for the GCSAA board in 1985, but was elected the next year at the San Francisco meeting.

He credits others with his desire to become involved at the national level. "The guys I worked with early in my career—Jim Bertoni, Bob Williams, Joe Duich at Penn State—taught me that one of the great things about this business is the opportunity to become involved," he says. "They showed me how networking could be a positive thing and that the responsible thing for me to do professionally was to get involved. It was in my upbringing that one owed it to one's profession to give something back."

Bill was a GCSAA director for four years, secretary-treasurer for a year, and vice president for a year before being elected president this spring. While he was a director, in 1988, he moved from SentryWorld to Lockmoor Club in Grosse Pointe Woods, Mich. Lockmoor is a 250-member, family oriented, private club with an 18-hole course (35,000 rounds per year) plus good tennis and swimming programs, according to Bill.

"When I interviewed at Lockmoor I told them that I had an opportunity to see my GCSAA commitment through to the end," he recalls. "If that fit in with their plans, great. But if it didn't, I'd go back to Wisconsin. They agreed to it and they've been very supportive ever since."

GCSAA business has kept Bill on the road much of the time—75 days in 1991 and even more days planned for 1992. "You can't be gone that much without a terrific staff," he emphasizes. "I have a terrific assistant, equipment manager, irrigation foreman and pesticide manager. I've also got a terrific seasonal staff."

Some of his time on the road has been spent in Washington testifying before a Senate subcommittee on pesticide issues. "We tried to supply them with golf's perspective," Bill recalls.

"We told them that if, through proper
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administration, pesticides can be used effectively without adversely impacting the environment, we wanted to continue to use them. But if, through golf support of research, we document problems, we're committed to changing our management.

"And I think they were relieved to hear that we're not out there indiscriminately ignoring our environmental responsibility," he continues. "We've known that for a long time. But I don't know if anybody ever sat down and told this group, or others, that that's the way we approach pesticide use."

Educating people about the role of golf course superintendents in what GCSAA is all about, Bill believes. "We want to continue to gain recognition for the superintendent. You can never do enough of that. We've already made phenomenal progress.

"I just picked up an issue of *Golf Digest* that said John Schilling, our executive director, is among the top 35 most powerful people in the game," Bill continues. "And, in the same article, superintendents are described as the key on-course employee. That's terrific recognition. And it's about time."

GCSAA must also tell the superintendent's story when it comes to environmental issues and regulatory considerations. "Our ability to maintain a very high degree of credibility with legislators and regulators can't be understated," Bill emphasizes. "We can go to Washington and sit down with these people. They ask us our perspective and they trust us. We've worked very, very hard in order to establish and maintain that credibility."

It's also important to communicate with those who hire and work directly with golf course superintendents, Bill believes. "Increasingly, GCSAA is going to communicate not only with superintendents, but with managers, owners, officials, green committee chairmen, golf pros and others.

"We're putting on a greens chairman session at the conference in New Orleans this year," he points out. "We've started a new publication, called the Leader Board, that will be available directly to club officials, owners, those types. It's not going to talk about turf management, but rather some broader management issues that they need to be aware of and that they may want to discuss with the superintendent."

There's also a need to communicate about hiring decisions. "We want to educate them about what they need to look for in a superintendent, about the ad-



Bill Roberts with some of his people at the irrigation computer.

vantages of hiring a qualified superintendent," Bill explains. "Hiring an unqualified person just to save \$4,000 in salary is short sighted and ultimately hurts the whole industry."

In addition to these communication challenges, Bill believes GCSAA faces some organizational challenges in the near future. Most are due to the association's tremendous growth. "Our membership has doubled in the past five years," he points out. "We're now an \$8.5 million organization with 11,000 members in 45 countries. It has really become an international organization."

How did it become international in scope? "Because golf course superintendents in this country—in particular, those who have taken advantage of GCSAA education and communication opportunities—have set the standards for golf playing conditions around the world," Bill answers.

"With today's ease of communicating and traveling around the world, foreigners are coming over here and seeing that American golf courses have outstanding playing conditions," he continues. "They're taking ideas back with them and asking, 'Why don't we have the same conditions?' We've got people coming to us from all over the world to find out how to bring their standards up to ours.

"So I think we have some opportunities to provide them with the information and/or those superintendents to help them meet those goals," he adds. "Job opportunities internationally are going through the roof. Guys are going to the Pacific Rim, to Europe—either as superintendents, as consultants or in construction."

As GCSAA grows, it needs to change the way it does business, Bill believes. "GCSAA is a very well-founded, well-

respected business with a committed membership and a very professional staff," he says. "But this year we need to have a very serious and mature discussion about the organizational aspects of the association. We've got to resolve some issues if we're going to continue to enjoy the kind of growth that we have in the past.

"This is a business, and we need to work in a business-like climate," Bill says. "There needs to be some bylaw changes that would empower the board to make decisions more quickly so we can respond efficiently to changing business conditions. Things like the ability to set dues, to determine requirements for membership classifications and to put paid GCSAA representatives out in the field. Those field reps could interact more closely not only with superintendents, but also with other segments of the industry.

"If I had to state an agenda for the coming year, that would be it—to get things positioned organizationally so that we can operate in a business-like sense in the next decade," he stresses.

On a personal level, Bill faces this decade with more energy because he made some life-style changes in the '80's "I started taking better care of myself," he explains. "Six years ago I quit smoking and started running. I've run in eight marathons now, and I like to run 10K's and half marathons, too.

"I still run five to six days a week, and I eat right," he continues. "It's not something that I have to find time for any more—it's just a part of my day. As a result, I've accrued all the benefits that go with it. I feel better, I work better, I look better."

Bill's wife, Patricia, is a hospital nursing supervisor. They have three daughters, aged 13, 11 and 9.