



## First UW Turf Graduate Found Greener Grass With O.M. Scott

By Lori Ward Bocher

He tried. He really did try. Three different times in his life Jerry O'Donnell chose to live in Wisconsin. But the opportunities at O.M. Scott and Sons Co. were too great to pass up, so Wisconsin never became his permanent home.

"I liked it in Wisconsin," said the Vice President of Sales for the Professional Business Group at O.M. Scott. "I still do. I get back two or three times a year to visit in-laws and friends and for my annual deer hunting trip."

He also likes the golf courses in Wisconsin. "I think they rank right at the top—from a design standpoint, but particularly from the maintenance standpoint," Jerry said. "That's due to the quality of superintendents in Wisconsin. They care about their courses and they do an excellent job of presenting a well-manicured and playable golf course."

Even though he didn't stay in Wisconsin, O'Donnell was part of its turf industry for several years. In fact, he was the first to receive both B.S. and M.S. degrees in soil science with a turf emphasis from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

But it was turf of a different kind—the gridiron—that brought this Illinois native to Wisconsin in the first place. After graduating from Riverdale High School



in Port Byron, Illinois in 1959, O'Donnell was offered a full scholarship to play football at the UW. At 6'3" and 208 pounds, he was a tackle and a place kicker. But he saw very little play.

One of the stories going around about Jerry is that, during a televised game, his kickoff went out of bounds. "That's true," he confirmed. "That was against the University of Illinois. They didn't have such a hot team that year, which meant we got pretty far down on the scrub list. I was fortunate enough to get in to do the kickoff."

Even though Jerry was at Wisconsin during the Rose Bowl years (teams of 1959 and 1963), he was never really a part of the Rose Bowl teams. "My freshman year was a Rose Bowl year, but freshmen were not eligible at that time," he explained. "And then what would have been my senior year, the year I didn't play, they went to the Rose Bowl again."

Off the football field, Jerry was a typical student who wasn't sure what his major would be. "When I originally started looking for a major my interests were in conservation, wildlife management, forestry or something of that nature," he recalled. "But the university didn't have a degree in that area at the time."

"So they assigned me to Dr. Love in the soils department as a soils major," he continued. "That was one of the most fortunate things that ever happened to me. He was a great influence on my education and on me personally."

Dr. Love's value as an advisor became especially apparent after Jerry left the soils department to try an education major for a year. "I had another advisor who, for the most part, didn't know me from Adam and didn't seem to want to know me," Jerry recalled. "Dr. Love cared about us as students and as people—not just as students who would bother him."

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Jim Love steered him toward taking the course work that he needed—not just the courses that were easy. And he eventually steered Jerry into the turf program. “It was a very new program at that time, not really official,” Jerry said.

“In the spring of 1963, Dr. Love got me involved with Roger Larson, the superintendent at Maple Bluff, to work for the summer just to get a feel for whether I was interested,” he recalled. “That’s where I got started in turf.”

After getting his B.S. degree, Jerry immediately went to work on his masters. “I was fortunate to have a fellowship from the O.J. Noer Research Foundation,” he said. “That helped a lot. I worked two years—one as a teaching assistant and the other as a research assistant.” His thesis was a rooting study using radioactive phosphorus on bluegrass.

“I guess I had a good time all through college,” Jerry said. “I enjoyed the experience totally. But the people I got to know were the most special. Roger Larson, Bill Eckert, Pete Miller and some of the other fellows who were involved in the program became life-long friends.”

(Roger Larson went from Maple Bluff to Pebble Beach. Bill Eckert was at Maple Bluff after Larson and before Tom Harrison. And Pete Miller was superintendent at Nakoma before moving to Firestone in Akron, Ohio.)

When he finished his thesis in the fall of 1966, it was time to look for a job. “I wanted to be a golf course superintendent, but at that time I was more interested in getting a job,” Jerry recalled. “I was contacted by O.M. Scott Co. Reluctantly, I flew to Ohio to interview. I say reluctantly because my image of Scotts was negative at the time. I viewed them as producing that high-priced turf fertilizer that home owners were forced to buy.

“But I was willing to listen to what they had to say,” he continued. “Needless to say, I was impressed with the organization and with what they were doing. It was early in the development of their professional sales division.”

So O’Donnell left Wisconsin for the first of three times to accept the position of technical representative for O.M. Scott in northeastern Ohio. For the next year and a half he sold fertilizer and chemicals for golf courses and parks.

“Then I got a call from Pete Miller asking me if I was interested in becoming the superintendent at Nakoma in Madison. He had just accepted the job at Firestone,” Jerry explained. “I left Scotts for three reasons.

“One, I was frustrated, not sure if I was doing the job as effectively as I could. Two, I had wanted to be a superintendent and here was the opportunity. Three, my wife’s family was in Madison, our second child was on the way, and we had a lot of friends in Madison. So moving back held a lot of interest.”

That was early in 1968, and O’Donnell was Nakoma superintendent for the next five years. “For three or four years during that period I had a secondary responsibility of taking care of Blackhawk, too,” Jerry pointed out. “It was a unique arrangement between the two clubs. I worked for Nakoma, but they sold my services to Blackhawk.”

While at Nakoma, O’Donnell was an active member of WGCSA and served as vice president for a brief term. “My heart has always stayed with the guys in Wisconsin even though I’ve been moving around,” he said. “It’s always great to get a chance to meet and visit with them. I appreciate the support they’ve given me.”

Early in 1973, Jerry returned to O.M. Scott as a technical sales representative covering the state of Wisconsin. “In

the five years I was at Nakoma, Scotts made a lot of changes,” he explained. “The Professional Business Group became an official part of the company and grew very rapidly. The products improved significantly, met the needs of the market better.

“Plus, they gave me a chance to come back to the company and stay living where I was,” Jerry continued. “It was very tempting because I had enjoyed the part of the job that involved visiting lots of golf courses. I enjoyed working with people and trying to help them solve their problems.

“It was not an easy decision to leave Nakoma, but I looked at it as a new opportunity,” he added.

Jerry spent five years as the technical rep in Wisconsin. “There was a lot of learning and training along the way, which was one of the things that had been missing the first time I worked for

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Scotts," he said. "With the training, I became much more comfortable with the job of selling."

It also helped that he had been a golf course superintendent himself. "It gave me a good understanding of what their jobs were," Jerry said. "And, having worked in Wisconsin, I was familiar with a lot of the superintendents and they knew me. I didn't have to come in and prove who I was."

In 1978, O'Donnell was offered a position as Scott's Regional Sales Manager for New England and New York. "That also was a hard decision because I liked it in Wisconsin," he recalled. "But I felt I knew my job very well, and I was ready for a new challenge."

After two years away from Wisconsin, O'Donnell had a chance to return as Regional Sales Manager for 10 states in Midwest. "Again, it was hard to resist, so I accepted."

But his return to Wisconsin was short lived. Two years later, in 1982, his boss asked him to move to the home office in Marysville, Ohio, and take his position as National Sales Manager. "It was a real struggle because the position he was offering me was two levels above where I was," Jerry recalled. "It meant

that my former boss (area manager) would then be working for me."

Never one to turn down a new opportunity, O'Donnell accepted the position. Later he was promoted to Vice President of Sales for the Professional Business Group which sells directly to parks, lawn care companies, schools, golf courses—any professional user of turf products.

The job involves about 30 percent travel time—meeting with the sales force, working with major customers and calling on other customers. "We want to understand what's going on in the marketplace, to get a feeling for what all of our customers are interested in and how we're meeting those needs," Jerry said.

The turf industry as a whole is healthy, O'Donnell believes. "The major challenge is coping with and working with environmental issues," he said. "Working with people so they understand the value of turf to the environment, so they understand healthy turf isn't a detriment, so they understand that the vast majority of fertilizers and chemicals are safe when used responsibly."

Since about 60 percent of the O.M. Scott professional market is with golf

courses, Jerry still has a close tie to the golf industry. And he believes growth is here to stay. "When you look at 300 to 350 golf courses being added nationally each year, the net growth rate has been around 1 percent," he pointed out.

"That rate of growth has to continue or be greater," Jerry added. "The demographic situation shows baby boomers as a bulge in the population, and they're approaching the stage in their lives when they have the time and money for golf. The golf population appears to be growing at a rate faster than the number of courses."

Jerry himself plays golf when he gets a chance—every other week, or so. He also enjoys taking care of the house and lawn. And he looks forward to his annual deer hunting trips to Wisconsin.

His wife, Joanne, is also a UW graduate. They have two grown children: Jon, an electrical engineer; and Joni, a recent mathematics graduate who works at Price Waterhouse in St. Louis.

"We built a new house this past summer on a small lake. We're looking forward to finishing up the lawn and yard work so we can get a boat and spend some time on the water," Jerry concluded.

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