



He's Always Wanted To Work In The Golf Industry

by Lori Ward Bocher

Ed Devinger, turf division manager for Reinders, was still a boy when he decided that he wanted to work on golf courses for the rest of his life. "I took up golf at an early age as a caddie for my dad," he explains. "Then I started to play on my own and liked the game. So I decided to stay in the golf field."

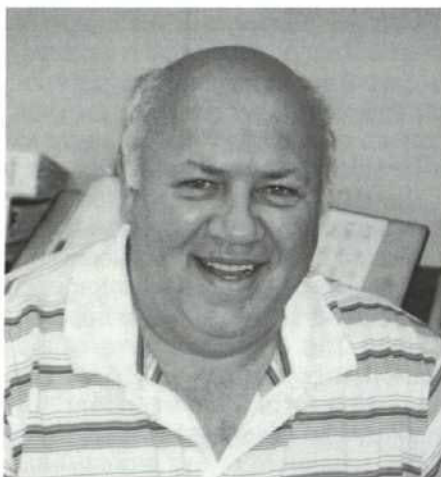
But playing golf wasn't all he did. "I started working on a golf course when I was 12 years old. I decided then that that was what I wanted to do," he continues. "I was actually head of a golf course at the age of 15—a small nine-hole course in Iowa. I was in charge of keeping the grass cut, making sure everything was done. I didn't know much about it at the time, but I was the one who was in charge."

Ed was born in Chicago but raised in Mount Pleasant in southeastern Iowa. He graduated from Wentworth Military Academy in Missouri in 1960. Then he studied liberal arts for one and one half years at the University of Iowa followed by one and one half years at Iowa Wesleyan in his home town.

"But I never formally finished college," he recalls. "I decided that college wasn't really going to help me. And I had an opportunity to get a job in golf course maintenance in another town. So I took it."

"I had my first head superintendent job in 1965 in Pekin, Ill.," he continues, adding that he was there for only one year. "In 1966 a sales opportunity opened up—working for Armour Fertilizer Co. in Chicago. At Armour, I sold fertilizer mostly to golf courses, but also to some municipalities."

Why did he give up a job as a golf course superintendent for a job in sales? "I felt it was a career advancement, and there was more money involved," he explains. "I guess the reason I got out of the superintendent business is because it didn't take me long to realize how tough of a job it is, especially when you're dealing with a membership. It's hard to keep everyone happy. It seemed like that was



always going to be a problem, so I tried sales."

And he's been in sales ever since. He lived in Chicago and worked at Armour for five and one half years. Then, in 1971, he accepted a job as a sales representative with Reinders in Elm Grove, Wis. Why the switch? "At Armour, I was selling only fertilizer products," he recalls. "I wanted to sell a complete line of products to golf courses. That's what Reinders does—not only fertilizer, but pesticides, grass seed, equipment. I said, 'That's what I would really like to do.'"

Ed was a sales rep for three years before being promoted to sales manager in 1974. Later, the title was changed to turf division manager. "I'm in charge of six salesmen on the road, all the ordering, purchasing of supplies, sales incentive programs, budgeting, implementing manufacturer's programs, inventory control, shipping, product set-up," he explains.

Reinders is an old, family-owned company, according to Ed. "It started more than 125 years ago as a feed mill in the rural part of Waukesha County," he points out. "Since then, of course, the city of Milwaukee has grown out to us and Waukesha has grown into us. So now we're land locked."

"Reinders has always looked for ways to expand its business," he continues. "It got into the turf business in

1959 selling Jacobsen equipment." But its Jacobsen territory was small—only five Wisconsin counties. So in 1971 Reinders switched major suppliers to Toro.

"Toro gave Reinders the territory we have now, which is most of the state of Wisconsin and the UP of Michigan," Ed explains. "Quite honestly, I've been here 21 years and it took us 10 or 12 years just to build up to where we could service that large of a geographic area. It's taken a long time to work out the logistics of making deliveries that far." One answer was to open a service center in Appleton in 1990.

In addition to Toro, Reinders represents Cushman, Ryan, all of the major pesticide lines, Pickseed West and Par Ex fertilizer. About one-third of the company's business is with golf courses, and the rest is with lawn care service companies, landscapers, cemeteries, schools, municipalities, parks (city, county, state and national) and airports. Reinders Irrigation Supply is a separate division of the company.

Even though the business world is competitive, Ed has always put competition aside to work for the good of the turf industry as a whole. "As this industry gets tougher due to more regulations, we have to become a stronger, single voice in order to be heard," he believes. "If we're splintered into too many segments, we'll never be heard. The more people you have working together, the more the politicians are going to listen to you. That's ultracritical today more than ever."

That's one reason Ed has been a director or honorary director of the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association ever since its inception in 1980. He was also involved in fund raising for the O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research and Education Facility. "Our company has been a leader in that," he points out. "We've donated in excess of \$25,000 over the past five years through a promotion of our products (portion of sales price would go to Noer Center).

"I always laugh...when we first started WTA, we didn't know if we had enough money to buy a pickup," Ed recalls. "Now look at this facility that we've built. It's a dream come true and quite an accomplishment for 12 years. It shows the dedication of our industry. It's incredible. You wouldn't be in this line of work if you didn't love it."

Now that the research facility is complete, Ed thinks it's time for WTA to start focusing on widening its base so that it has more political clout with legislators and regulators. "We need to get more of the park people, the school people, the lawn care people into our organization to increase our membership. Then I think we can become a more effective voice for the industry," he says.

Over-regulation, especially with pesticides, is one of the biggest challenges facing the Wisconsin turfgrass industry right now, Ed believes. "It's one regulation after another," he says. "For example, they're licensing each lawn care operator in each county, even down to each city where they do business. It's like another tax.

"I guess that's part of the handicap of being organized," he continues. "It's very easy to get to us as a group of people, whether it's the golf course superintendents, the landscapers or the lawn care operators. Like we constantly say, the worst offenders of pesticide misuse are the homeowners. They use 100 times more pesticides than we do. But they can't be regulated because there's no way to police it."

Wisconsin is also an expensive place for manufacturers to sell pesticides, according to Ed. "This year Wisconsin passed a law that increases manufacturer registration from \$150 per product to \$1,100 per product," he explains. "Some of the suppliers that we buy from are saying, 'We don't sell enough of this product in Wisconsin. We're not going to register it here.' If things continue this way, we won't have the tools to do our job."

In spite of the challenges, Ed loves the turf business. "I love being outside and growing grass," he says. "Unfortunately, I don't have to do that anymore. But I empathize with the people who do it—the jobs they have to do, the hours they work. Again, if they didn't like it, they'd be in some other line of work because it's a lot of pressure. Don't give up!"

Ed also likes his work because it gives him a chance to serve people. "I like to help people—to make their jobs

better, easier," he says. "Even when I'm playing golf, for pleasure or with a customer, if I see any way I can help the superintendent or make a suggestion, I usually do. I always look for opportunities to be able to help people."

Ed's job has taken him to numerous golf courses in Wisconsin. "Wisconsin people are spoiled. As a whole, there are no finer golf courses in the country," he believes. "The combination of the type of grass we grow and the climate makes it the best that there is."

Ironically, his job limits his time for playing golf—only 10 or 12 games a year, he estimates. What are some of his favorite courses? "Now you're going to get me in trouble," he jokes. "I played the Waupaca Country Club, a small nine-hole course, for the first time this year. It was one of the nicest nine-hole courses I'd ever seen.

"Naga-Waukee Golf Club in Waukesha County is an awful nice public course," he continues. "But I'm going to stay away from mentioning country clubs. There are just too many of them that are nice. And they're all incredibly tough. I'd be in trouble if I singled out any one course!"

Fishing is another hobby for which Ed can never find enough time. "I like to fish. But I'm in the wrong business for that," he says, adding that he isn't interested in ice fishing even though he'd have more time to fish in the winter. "When I fish, I like it to be nice and warm so I can have a cold beer in my hand," he adds.

Ed and his wife, Jane, have three grown children—two sons and a daughter. They still have a family in Iowa and they get back for a visit two or three times a year. But Wisconsin is home now. "I moved from Iowa when I was 21, was in Illinois for five years, and now I've been in Wisconsin for 21 years. So I feel I'm a Wisconsinite," Ed admits. "I love the Badgers, the hockey team especially. I'm an avid hockey fan.

"And I've been here long enough to know most of the people in the Wisconsin turf industry. They're all great people. They're all fun to work with and to talk to," he concludes.

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