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THE GRASS ROOTS

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Here We Go! Rossi Joins UW Turf Team

By Monroe S. Miller

Dr. Francesco Salvatore Rossi (a.k.a. Frank Rossi) has arrived in Wisconsin. He assumed his duties on the faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the Department of Horticulture on August 10th.

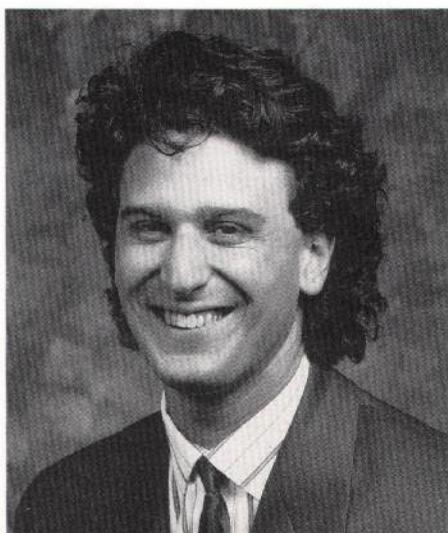
The following interview with Dr. Rossi took place while he was vacationing with his family in the finger lakes region of central New York state.

You'll know him a lot better once you've read our conversation. One thing is clear to this editor: Frank Rossi is **very** happy to be on the UW-Madison turf team. His enthusiasm will prove a valuable asset.

I predict all WGCSA members are going to like this young man. We'll be happy, in short order, that he came to Wisconsin!

GR: Tell us a little bit about yourself—you know, things like your age, where you're from originally, something about your family, colleges you've attended, etc. And is it true, as the rumor mill has it, that you are a former assistant golf course superintendent and served as a superintendent for a short period?

FR: I was born Francesco Rossi in the fall of 1962 (the official end of the Baby Boom) into an Italian family, the son of a Locomotive Engineer in New York City (Fordham Hospital, Bronx, NY). I have 2 older sisters, both married with children. I have always been vivacious and enthusiastic about life whether I was playing in the streets and hanging out on the stoop, working at the Italian Delicatessen at the



Professor Frank S. Rossi

corner, or pushing a lawnmower during my youth.

I started in the turf industry at the age of 12, mowing (postage stamp) lawns around the neighborhood. By the age of 13, I was a partner in my brother-in-laws' company, Salvatore Cognetta Landscaping. We went out of business when I was 15 and I went to work for a landscaper in Westchester County (an affluent suburb of NYC). A year later they scaled back their operation and the owner got me a job at Leewood Golf Club in my hometown, Eastchester, pushing a rotary mower up and down the fairway. I always say I came into this business through the maintenance shop, not the pro-shop, I have never caddied.

During high school, I lettered in track (100 & 200 m) and baseball all

4 years and worked at the golf course on weekends. Two memorable events of my youth were not the most pleasant; when I was 15 my next door neighbor and best friend died of Reyes Syndrome and when I was 17 my mother suffered a cerebral aneurysm and had a seizure right in front of me. She always says I saved her life, but, I just did what had to be done. My mom fully recovered and is your typical loving Italian mother and a great cook.

I started out in a 2-year Junior College in Cobleskill, NY majoring in Dairy Farm Management. I can't entirely explain why, seeing as I only saw cows on TV. I feel I have always longed to be in the wide-open spaces working with the land. Needless to say, once I began barn duty and taking classes, I realized I was the only student who wasn't from a farm and was encouraged by my instructors to pursue another major.

In the Fall of 1980, I met Bob Emmons and I knew what was going to do, I wanted to be a golf course superintendent. Bob served as a mentor and friend both during my early education and 8 years later during my graduate work at Cornell. I was never a straight A student, but I always worked hard. I received my Associates degree (AAS) in Agronomy from Cobleskill and went on to the University of Rhode Island (URI) where I met my next mentor and friend, Dr. Dick Skogley. I should mention that the summer between Cobleskill and URI I was fired from Leewood Golf

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Rossi Joins UW Turf Team

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Club for wanting my second weekend off in 3 seasons.

I finished my BS at URI and became the assistant golf course superintendent at The Greenwich Country Club in Greenwich, CT. I lived in a trailer behind the maintenance shop and worked 80 hours a week for two years and really loved it.

However, something was missing. I applied for superintendent jobs in the area and to graduate school at URI. My superintendent was clearly on the rocks at Greenwich and there was potential for staying on, however, I decided to take a huge payout and go back to URI for my MS.

I finished my MS at URI and went to Cornell University to pursue a PhD in turfgrass weed science. During my graduate studies (5 years) I continued to work on local golf courses. In Rhode Island I was the superintendent for a privately owned 9-hole course in Narragansett. In New York I worked weekends on the Robert Trent Jones course at Cornell with Bob Vavrek (USGA Green Section). I believe there is no place in the world more peaceful than a golf course in the morning (before the players are let loose—of course).

I interviewed for the National Director of the Royal Canadian Golf Association Green Section position in the summer of 1990 and just missed being hired. Subsequently, I was hired at Michigan State University in January of 1991 as the Environmental Education Specialist to provide

advanced environmental information to the turfgrass industry. I love working with the industry and really enjoyed the people in Michigan. I will miss them, but I am looking forward to cultivating new friendships and building relationships with the industry and the people of the Wisconsin; even you Monroe!

GR: *I heard lots of favorable comments about the seminar you presented on campus during the interview process. Faculty not only learned from the lecture but were entertained by your 'Westward Ho' slide. Share details about both, please.*

FR: My interview in Wisconsin was rigorous and I spent about 2 weeks preparing. Paul Rieke told me all along I was a strong candidate, but, I wasn't as sure. When I presented my seminar, it was the 1st time I gave it. I never practice what I'm going to say; I just make sure I understand the information I am presenting and be myself.

GR: *The Michigan State turf program is well known and respected in our circles. Why would you leave it?*

FR: Leaving MSU was hard. It is in my mind the #1 turf program in the world. They have graduated over 1200 students in turf! This is a major reason the program is so strong, as well as the distinguished professionals on the staff. I have come to UW for several personal and professional reasons. I want to be involved and to conduct research, and I have a vision for building a great turf program. I was really impressed with the UW

faculty, especially Larry Binning and Gayle Worf as well as the Noer Center.

GR: *Did the NOER facility affect your decision to accept the Wisconsin job? If so, how?*

FR: At the time, I thought that any industry that could spearhead the building of the NOER Center is the kind of group I could work with. My perception of the Wisconsin turf industry is that you have a no-nonsense, straightforward approach to matters of importance—a "do what has to be done" attitude. I am here because I believe we can do some great things TOGETHER.

GR: *What is the official title of your position? What's the percentage breakdown of how you'll be spending your time—research, extension, teaching?*

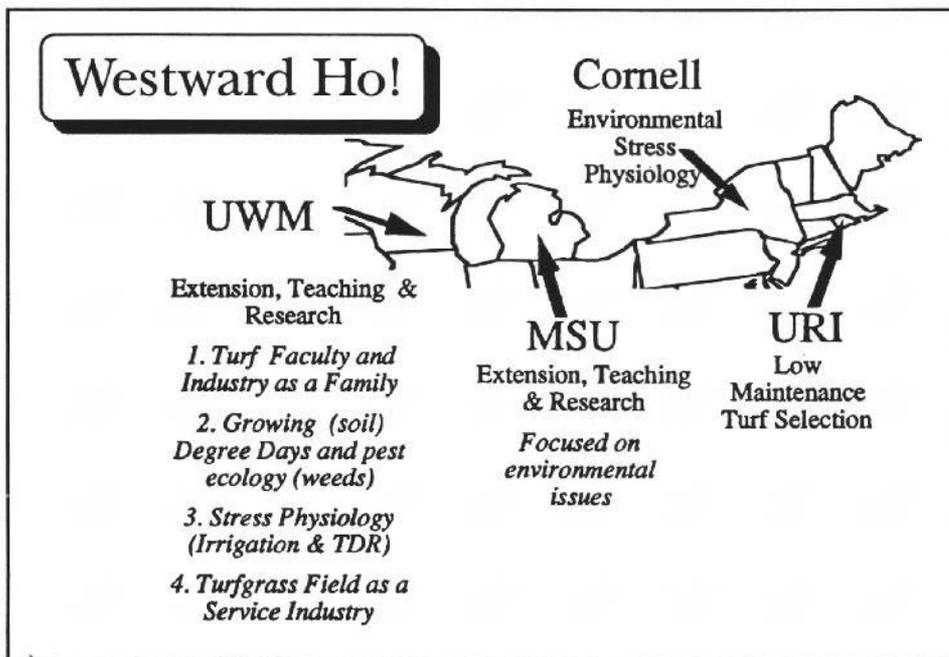
FR: I was hired as an Assistant Professor of Turfgrass Environmental Management. My time is split 3 ways—75% Extension, 15% Research, 10% teaching. This will demand exceptional time management skills!

GR: *Often we hear that professors dread teaching at the undergraduate level. How do you feel about time in the classroom?*

I have several turf and grounds management students on my staff this summer. They are interested in Horticulture 261. How about a thumbnail sketch of how you will approach the course material, the lectures and the lab? Will your personal experiences in the field influence the material you present?

Do you foresee adding any new classes—introductory, advanced or graduate—to the Horticulture Department offerings?

FR: I am passionate about teaching and ensuring a meaningful learning experience for my students. That's right—meaningful learning—an education that matters to the student. I had very few good teachers during my nine years of college, but, when I did watched closely. I believe training good students is vital, but, is not entirely complete without the practical experience gained from working in the field. Basically, the students arrive as laborers and we must help them discover within themselves the ability to think as managers. As a teacher I am committed to establishing credibility through my command of the material and letting the students know that I sincerely care about their education in my class.



I would like to expand the curriculum by adding a few courses such as; Turfgrass Pest Management (team taught by myself, Julie, and Chuck), turfgrass seminars (helping the students prepare presentations), a Turf Environmental Management class (a decision making course where students have to make management decisions with a focus on environmental issues), and a graduate level Turfgrass Physiology class.

GR: *Wisconsin has only a four-year program (one of the largest, at that). What are your feelings on 2-year vs. 4-year programs?*

FR: I am the product of a 2-year program and believe in the concept of an intense technical education. However, I am also the product of a 4-year program and believe in the concept of a more in-depth, well-rounded education. Each program serves specific needs and neither one is complete without a commitment to continuing education once you have completed a formal education. Our industry is changing so fast and becoming technically demanding to the point where to stay competent one must pursue advanced education.

GR: *Do you see any need to expand the Wisconsin program and offer the industry more grads? Are you concerned at all about job availability in the near future?*

FR: I believe the program and the number of grads should expand as we as a group believes it ought to. I do believe that we will continue to need new graduates particularly at the BS and MS level with the increased amount of technical expertise required for environmental compliance.

GR: *What kind of research and demonstration work do you expect to be doing at the NOER facility? What will be the focus of your overall research program?*

FR: I would like to have a broad based research program which addresses some current concerns of the industry from an applied perspective. Additionally, I want to explore some particular topics such as turfgrass response to weed competition, moisture stress, and growth regulators from a more basic scientific perspective. I look forward to collaborating with Wayne on Turf Soil Management Studies and developing forecasts for

pest problems based on growing degree days, especially soil degree days. Possibly I would like to investigate developing native grasses for potential turfgrass breeding efforts. One thing for sure is that I am rarely short on ideas or opinions.

GR: *How do you see yourself "fitting" with the WGCSA and the WTA? What kind of support do you hope for and expect from each group? How will you interact with Wisconsin golf course superintendents?*

FR: I think I might have addressed this question already, but if not, I see myself fitting right in with ALL the industry groups, not just golf. As I mentioned earlier I am rarely short on ideas and will feel free to share them. After all, the job description did say "aggressive individual". I have worked in the industry all my life and know how to grow grass. Additionally, I know that there is more to this business than growing grass; personnel management, mechanical expertise, irrigation specialist, environmental compliance, public relations, etc. Part of me will always be a golf course manager.

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GR: What are you going to call your feature that will appear in each issue of THE GRASS ROOTS? Have you selected the topic for your first one?

FR: I will wait to decide on a title for my GRASS ROOTS column and my first topic until after I've been around the state and met you all.

GR: Like it or not, Wisconsin is a very liberal state and many of us are anxious to learn of your background in dealing with legislation and legislators which affect our industry. Where do you see the pesticide laws heading?

FR: The liberal ideology has always felt most comfortable to me because I believe it is more tolerant of diversity than the other political views. However, I firmly believe, in general as a society we need less, not more laws. This is particularly true with the pesticide issues. Whether we like it or not, pesticide use for turf will continue to be scrutinized. In Michigan I have tried to work on 2 fronts; 1) helping legislators and the public to put the risk of pesticides in perspective and 2) teaching IPM principles to the industry to reduce reliance on pesticides. I want to continue the same type of approach and add golf club membership environmental education, so that our golfers have a clear understanding of the environmental pressures their superintendents are under.

GR: Do you view *P. annua* as a permanent and quality golf turf? (If you don't, you will!) Do you have any special insights into its management?

FR: I believe that there may not be a finer surface to play golf on than *Poa annua*, lest velvet bentgrass. I also recognize that ecologically our turfgrass environments favor the competitive advantage of *Poa*. Still, I am troubled. Troubled because many turfgrass managers still can't decide on an effective and consistent management strategy for *Poa* which is not input intensive. Troubled because we know it likes its N and we know it requires irrigation of the soil above field capacity which increases the likelihood for off-site movement of inputs. My experiences growing *Poa* and bent have led me to conclude that no one grass is the entire answer, I believe it is our ability to manage and cooperate with the total environment—soil, air, water, and plant material. I still believe that the understanding of the soil remains the big-



Barbara, Danielle and Frank Rossi.

gest "black box" in our profession—not the computer.

GR: Give us a quick "byte" of your impressions of the following: Madison, the UW campus, Wayne Kussow, Chuck Koval, Tom Salaiz, The Grass Roots.

FR: Impressions:

Madison—similar to Ithaca, NY, all the amenities of a city with a small town feel. Love the lakes !!

UW Campus—reminds me of the Cornell campus, very impressed with the mix of old and new architecture. Parking stinks !

Wayne Kussow—have met only briefly on a few occasions, have read his research and believe him to be a keen scientist as well as a sincere and gentle man.

Chuck Koval—met for the first time last week, personable and dynamic. He seems like a mover and shaker type.

Tom Salaiz—we think alike and our visions of the UW program are similar, enjoy his enthusiasm and see him as the "glue" of the program.

The Grass Roots—top quality publication. Read the last 2 years of issues prior to the interview, can tell much of Monroe's heart and soul are invested, can foresee many lively discussions ahead with Monroe regarding his opinions—seems he's not short on them either.

GR: Do you expect to be at the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association Field Day in late August?

FR: I will be at Field Day!

GR: Finally, Rod Johnson is dying to find out if you play golf. Do you? How often? How well? CAUTION: I think he's hoping to lighten your wallet very early on!

FR: Remember, I came into this business through the maintenance shed, not the pro-shop. I am about a 20 and am still playing with a 1960 set of Walter Hagen's my Dad handed me down.

No bets, Rod!

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