



HE WORKED HIS WAY TO THE TOP

by Lori Ward Bocher

After visiting with the quiet and modest Curtis Larson for just half an hour, I knew it wasn't his fast-talking ways that helped him progress from a service mechanic to Executive Vice President during his 31 years at Wisconsin Turf Equipment Corporation. Hard work, dedication, a working man's knowledge of the products, and a good rapport with the people who use those products, are what took him to the top. Nothing fancy, nothing clever—just perseverance and a good old-fashioned work ethic.

A native of Wisconsin, Curt was born in 1935 and raised on a small farm in Trempealeau County near York—half way between LaCrosse and Eau Claire. It was a farming community with a large Norwegian population—which suited Curt just fine. "I'm pretty much a pure-blooded Norwegian myself," he explained, adding that his great grandparents on both sides of the family were immigrants from Norway.

Curt graduated from Hixton High School in 1953 and went straight to work for a local milk co-op. A year later, he moved to Janesville to work as an auto assembly person at the General Motors plant. After building cars for a little more than a year, he switched to servicing them at Wurtz Mobile Service in Janesville, where he worked for about five years.

Wisconsin Turf Equipment Corporation came into the picture in 1961 when Curt became a service mechanic working on lawn mowers and small engines.

"What attracted you to Wisconsin Turf?" I asked.

"It looked like an interesting and upcoming business—kind of a new industry," Curt answered. "Most of all, they were looking for someone with some mechanical background like I had."

As the company grew, so did Curt's responsibilities. "I started as a service person and then also began



working in the parts department," he recalled. "Then I became the Parts and Service Manager. I did that for quite a few years, and then came into the management side of the business. I started as Assistant Manager, then worked as General Manager for many years, and then two years ago became Executive Vice President."

"What does it take to move from the ground level as a mechanic up to Executive Vice President?" I wanted to know.

"Hard work and perseverance. Wanting to get the job done. Treating everybody fairly or as you'd like to be treated as a customer," he emphasized. "I felt that I always had a very, very good rapport with the customers throughout my days in service and parts. I knew many, many people on a first-name basis."

"Does your background in mechanics help you today?" I asked. "Does it help to know the business from the ground up?"

"I definitely think it does," Curt answered. "It gives you a different perspective than if you had gone to school for a business degree. It lets you see the problems that people have to work with. In some cases, you can understand their problems better and have the ability to help them because of that."

Wisconsin Turf Equipment Corporation is a major supplier of turf

maintenance equipment and materials for golf courses, parks, schools, landscapers, sod growers, cemeteries—any place that maintains turf. Headquartered in Janesville with a branch office in New Berlin, the company covers the lower half of the state as well as six northwestern counties in Illinois.

A major distributor of Jacobsen equipment, Wisconsin Turf also handles Cushman, Ryan, National, Smithco and Turfco. On the materials side of the business, it is a distributor for Milorganite, Lebanon Chemical, Allied Chemicals and Medalist America seed. The company has 28 full-time employees and no seasonal help. About 65 percent of the company's business is with golf courses, Curt estimated.

As Executive Vice President, Curt's duties are in administration and sales work. "I enjoy getting out on golf courses to visit with the customers and check on any problems they may be having or to learn about what may be occurring in the industry," he said. "I don't get out every day, but later in the year when there is more time.

"I feel that I know the biggest share of golf course superintendents on a first-name basis," he continued. "I could call up and ask any of them a question. They're all very good friends. They have a tough job to stay very positive and to stay abreast of all the government rules and regulations."

Curt also admires the golf courses these superintendents manage. "Wisconsin golf courses are some of the finest in the country. It's never more evident than when you travel," he said, adding that he's been to Florida and Arizona courses in the winter. "I'd put our Wisconsin golf courses up against anybody. All the superintendents should be commended on their quality courses."

"What challenges face the turf industry in Wisconsin right now?" I asked.

"The pesticide issues are always very difficult," he answered. "The other one that you're going to see surface more and more is water management. There was a golf course that had to curtail all sprinkling during the drought of 1988. They lost the total golf course. Those are two critical areas. We're going to see some

real hard questions raised in the next few years."

Curt's involvement with the turf industry doesn't stop with his business. He's been a director for the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association for a number of years. "It's been interesting to watch the change in the industry and, of course, the advent of the O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research and Education Facility. I was with that from Day 1 of the development," he pointed out.

"What do you think of it now that it's complete?" I asked.

"It is going to be a first-rate education and research station," he replied.

"And how does that help or affect your business?"

"Instead of having to go out of state to find some answers to questions about seed, chemical or fertilizer evaluation, we can have those questions answered in our immediate area. These products may work differently in Wisconsin than in some other state," he explained. "Now we'll be able to watch those plots as they grow and mature and generate information for years and years and years. I think that's the biggest single benefit.

"And the Noer Center will help bring in and keep professors at the University of Wisconsin," he added.

"It just brings everything into a complete circle," he continued. "By itself, the Noer Center is one outstanding item. But, put into the complete circle of the turf industry—whether it be for golf courses, sod growers or distributors like us—it benefits all the people because of the information we can gather."

Like many who work in the turf industry, Curt's hobbies revolve around grass, too. Golfing is a favorite activity. "I try to get out once a week," he said. "I don't play very well, but I love to play."

With his work taking him to many golf courses, he likes playing a variety of courses rather than belonging to one local club. But, diplomat that he is, he wouldn't name a favorite course. "I think I've played just about every golf course in our part of the state," he pointed out. "They all offer unique and separate challenges. There are so many fine golf courses. I enjoy playing them all."

"Because of your line of business, do you see courses differently than an ordinary player?" I asked.

"That happens. But when I play, I

like to put that aside and just make it a fun afternoon. I try not to get too wrapped up in what I might see or what I might not see. I try to be just a golf course customer on that afternoon."

Curt also enjoys working in his yard. "I love to work on my lawn," he said. "We have a nice lawn and I like to keep it in good shape. Maybe some of that rubs off because of the well-manicured golf courses I see."

SYMPOSIUM TO MOVE

by Rod Johnson

Plans are well under way for the 27th Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium. This year's event will be held on the traditional Tuesday and Wednesday, October 27th and 28th.

The annual event will continue its "Downtown Milwaukee" tradition but in a break from the norm we will be meeting at the Hyatt Regency Hotel. The Symposium Committee is excited by the potential of the move and hopes that regular attendees will share the enthusiasm. We have been assured by the Hyatt the highest quality facilities and services.

The topic chosen to be covered in depth is *Greens Site Construction and/or Renovation*. An outstanding group of speakers has already committed to share their expertise with our group. Dr. Norman Hummel Jr., Cornell University, will give news and views on USGA specifications. Bob Vavrek, USGA Agronomist, will discuss methods of greens construction being used today. Lee Bruce, owner of The Bruce Company, will offer his insights into greenscaping.

Brian Silva, Golf Course Architect, and always a trend setter, will speak twice to the group. His topics will include greens restoration, bunker renovation, and tee construction. Don Sweda, Golf Course Superintendent at Beechmont C.C. in Cleveland, Ohio will relate his experiences in re-grassing greens. John Huber, Huber Sod Ranch, will discuss the industry trend towards using washed sod in construction.

The always popular panel discussion will have two well known superintendents debating the merits and

Curt and his wife, Mary, have four grown children. Brian is service manager at Wisconsin Turf. Bruce is a professor of agricultural economics with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C. Barry, who formerly worked at Wisconsin Turf, now works for Medalist America seed. And daughter Andrea just graduated from college with a degree in elementary education.

drawbacks of "in-house" vs. "out house" construction.

Keynote and luncheon speakers will be announced at a later date. The list of "possibles yet to confirm" is outstanding. Our own Jim Latham, USGA Great Lakes Region Director will again, as only he can do, summarize the Symposium.

Feel free to contact any Symposium committee member with any questions or concerns that you might have. Committee members are Bob Belfield, Rod Johnson, Jim Latham, Al Nees, Wayne Otto, Terry Ward, Bob Vavrek, and Bruce Worzella.

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