



People of the USGA: *STAN ZONTEK*

by David Earl

Editor's Note: One of the most capable, personable and popular individuals to ever grace the Wisconsin golf scene was the USGA Green Section's Stanley Zontek. David Earl's excellent piece in the August 1992 issue of the *GOLF JOURNAL* updates us in the personal and professional life of a guy who will be in our hearts and minds for many years. It is reprinted here for your enjoyment with permission.

Stanley James Zontek, in his own phrase, grew up along with the grass. The USGA's longest-serving employee — he came on board in February of 1971, at the tender age of 21, after a degree in turfgrass management at Penn State — Stan, a West Virginia native, was only five years old when he first played golf. By the time he was eight, he was helping his father, club pro and course superintendent, mow the greens; in another four years he had a full-time job on the golf course crew, and, in his words, "by the time I got out of school, I really had a lot of on-course experience working for my dad and other superintendents."

To some people, agronomy — the science and art of turfgrass management — might sound a bit prosaic. Not for Zontek; not by a long shot. He's aware of the ultimate importance and the value of playing conditions for all golfers, be they competitors in a national championship or weekend players.

"The great common denominator of the game of golf is grass, but you never see two golf courses that are alike," he says. "No matter how you try to compare them, you really can't. I look at something new every day. It keeps my mind active. It's a challenge to overcome all the different problems."

Of course, the requirements for a USGA championship and day-to-day member play are different. As Zontek's cart traversed Saucon Valley Country Club, site of the 1992 Senior Open, he pointed to Superintendent Terry Laurent and some USGA officials, who



were checking green speed. "Our focus changes when there is a championship," he commented. "There is more emphasis on greens and green quality. But championship work is only a small part of what I do — the glamorous stuff.

long turf reports for individual courses. I also do a fair amount of public speaking, and probably give 20 talks a year to superintendents, club officials, and golf associations. I'm occasionally asked to speak internationally at turf conferences. Last year I went to England to talk about USGA course specs. You go outside the country because the USGA and the American superintendents set the standards for the world. The USGA is the largest funder of turf research in the world.

"Like golf, turfgrass has become an international game," he said, lighting a cigar. "The international players come over here to play, and they go back home and say they really love the American grass. They hunger for information."

The Green Section office in West Chester, Pennsylvania, where Zontek is based, actually turns out to be a family operation. Stan met Marti, his wife, while he was attending high school in the Philadelphia area. Now, if you were to phone Stan, it'd probably be Marti Zontek who'd answer the phone. "She's the most senior secretary at the USGA," says Stan proudly.

Ultimately, it all comes back to ground level. "You've got to have the grass, and that's what the Green Section is here for. If you look at how good the golf courses are today, to a

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"A typical day in the office involves a lot of phone work and paperwork. We are basically consultants to the clubs that subscribe to the Turfgrass Advisory Service. We do tremendous amounts of phone work. When a club calls with a problem and they want to know right away what they can do about it, it's helps if you have an ongoing relationship with the club. You remember the course and the greens, and you can answer them on the phone.

Don't get the impression, however, that Zontek rides his desk. "I only spent 60 days in the office, including weekends, last year," he said. "I fly and drive to many locations. In fact, last year I did about 175 eight-page

large extent we've had something to do with that. It's a number of factors — the new turfgrasses, maintenance techniques, higher budgets, or even better communication between clubs. We tell people, 'Hey this is what we need to do to have a better golf course.' We are educators."

The golf course superintendents come in for praise, too. "In England, for example, the superintendents are called greenkeepers, keepers of the green. In most cases, they're essentially foremen, workers on the staff. Here, the superintendent is a true professional. We aren't flamboyant — we just try to grow better grass." If you've played golf for any time, you should certainly appreciate that...