

A Well Deserved Tribute

By Mark Kienert

It was at the Reinders Turf Conference in about 1980 that I first met Rod Johnson. I remember this well as it was my own curiosity that told me to seek him out and size him up. For you see, he had just beaten me out for a position that I had applied and interviewed for. An assistant golf course superintendent had beaten me out of a position I had wanted. I was a superintendent, my pride was broken and my ego bruised, and here he was, just a few feet away looking and walking right towards me.

"My God," I thought, "the victor."

What brilliant thing could I say besides "congratulations." Time has eroded the actual content of the conversation during those first awkward moments. But I do recall assessing our interview with the "short-lived" general manager who had "experienced everything that a golf course superintendent had experienced."

This guy spent more time talking and contradicting everything we said that I often felt he was interviewing for the position himself. I remember the laughter Rod and I shared as a result of our interviews. I thought to myself that this guy was just like me, hungry for success in this industry for himself and his family. I found Rod to be humble and unassuming then, just like I do now.

Through the years our paths would cross from time to time as our backgrounds shared some common threads. For both he and I worked at North Hills Country Club under the

tutorage of Bob Musbach. Rod would call Bob from time to time "just to see what was going on." We often compared notes on all of our special projects and the goings on during the Lombardi Golf Classic, an event we both learned to love and hate. Soon, we would be sharing rooms in the warm up for the upcoming golf season by attending the Midwest Turf Conference at Purdue University.

It was always the right tonic to get you thinking about shaking those winter doldrums. It helped, too, that it was a road trip.

It was also during these conferences that I first became early pigeon fodder and cheap practice for Rod's many practical jokes—simple practice for the havoc he would inflict on the "Old Man" Wayne Otto in the years to come during their frequent golf tour stops at the GCSAA golf tournaments.

At Purdue, we always insisted on the same room, year after year, for any number of special reasons. It could have been for the scenic view of coeds walking to class or the beer tab hidden in an almost too obvious spot behind the curtain. This beer tab survived the rigorous cleaning by room service for three straight years,

Or maybe we liked the room because it was a simple number to remember after spending a long night at the "Chocolate House" debating the merits of which greens mower—Jacobsen or Toro—would be better suited for an operator with one leg shorter than the other.

But, of course, if you want to find out more about Rod's humor, Mike Lyons, Scott Schaller, Marc Davison, Wayne Otto, Bill Roberts or Monroe Miller would be better suited for the task of explaining some of his more inventive or notorious practical jokes. He is very devious in his craft.

If Rod were a commercial writer for some large ad agency, I am sure he would write ads like the one promoting ESPN's "Twelfth Man Competition". You know, the one with the dufus standing in the football field, gawking at the large empty stadium, soon to be plowed under by the tackle from some large linebacker coming out of the tunnel at the opposite end of the field. This commercial is like Rod's humor—always subtle, but WHAM! Before you know it, it is right on top of you.

I'll be honest with you. I have always been envious almost to the point of jealousy of Rod's great attitude toward his work and his life. No black clouds hanging around this man's head. He has that magnetic personality. People enjoy being around Rod, and He clearly enjoys being with other people.

Rod is very innovative, possesses keen intellect and has sharp insights. He is responsible for developing the first "water cooled" greens mower in the state. I recall the time he demonstrated a new greens mower—green in color—that came with a large pod-like storage compartment that he quickly converted into a beer cooler. When the salesman came to pick up his unit and

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give his best sales pitch, Rod complained about the large puddle of "fluids" coming from the machine and making a mess of his shop. Of course the salesman was horrified. It wasn't hydraulic oil or motor oil or anti-freeze (air-cooled engine, naturally). But there was still the fact that fluids were definitely dripping from the machine onto the floor. Soon afterward, Rod's prank was discovered and the machine was reengineered "lighter, twelve ounces at a time."

His years on the Wisconsin GCSA board of directors didn't go without notice, either. It was during my second year that Rod was elected to the board. What a brain trust we had in those days—Miller, Quast, Roberts, Bell, Worzella. Rod didn't take a back seat to any of them. He quickly rose to the position of WGCSA secretary. He would record the minutes of the association with a small take recorder to insure that his minutes accurately reflected all business being discussed. For this and all his efforts, he was sent flowers on Secretary's Day, a thought I am sure he didn't appreciate as much as we did.

It was a joy to witness a real matu-

ration process with Rod. It was a process that seemed to start to grow and flourish during the election campaign of Bill Roberts for GCSAA office. His confidence level rose with each year and position that Bill attained. It is at the point now that I feel that Rod is a highly electable figure on the national scene should he ever decide to run for a GCSAA position himself.

I've always classified the evolution patterns of successful golf course superintendents with the evolution of their respective golf courses. That is, during the initial career stage, the projects are small and compact in nature. As the years of success start to accumulate, the size and scale of projects undertaken grow. The benefit to the players become more geometric than straight line. My observation hasn't been more true anywhere than Pine Hills, Rod's course. Landscaping progress around the tees has been fitting and subtle and beautiful. This probably explains why we spent hours driving around the state of Indiana cataloging bridge colors and paint schemes, selecting the best for the bridge that crosses the river on the eighth and tenth holes.

Others have appreciated and taken advantage of Rod's abilities, too. Monroe Miller quickly appointed him as business manager of *THE GRASS ROOTS* and assigned him the task in insuring the magazine's financial security. He served the WGCSA very well as its president for two years. It was during this time that he was appointed to the Ad Hoc Committee that would study the revisions to AG-29. It was through this committee assignment that he developed the idea for the WGCSA Sign Compliance Kit. This stroke of genius paved the way for the WGCSA to contribute at a level that not only got us into the GCSAA Platinum Tee Club but to give "GCSAA's largest contribution by a chapter in the Association's history."

There could be no member more deserving of the WGCSA Distinguished Service Award than Rod Johnson. His selection is almost anticlimactic.

"I hope it came as a surprise to you, Rod, because we are seldom able to put one past you."

Congratulations from all of us. You've made us proud. 🌿

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