



## Lack of Turf Background is to His Advantage

by Lori Ward Bocher

"I think some of the superintendents look upon me as a rabble rouser," admits Dr. Wayne Kussow, head of the Turf and Grounds Management Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "When I first came into the turf program I told Monroe Miller, 'You know, I feel kind of uneasy because I don't have a turf background.'

"And Monroe made a statement which has proved to be very profound and very true," Kussow continues. "He said, 'That's to your advantage.' It has led me to question everything I read and hear about turf, ideas that are ingrained.

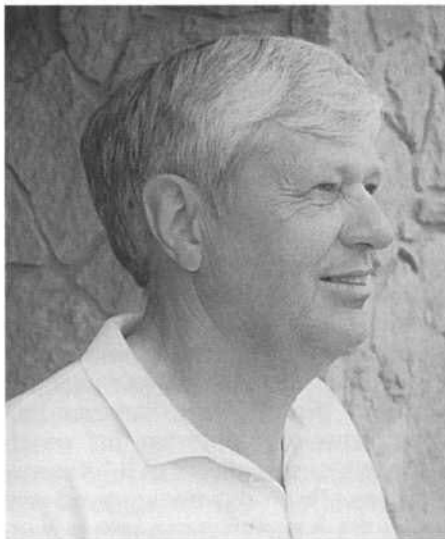
"I guess my main theme is, 'Think about things.' Don't just do them because you've always done them. Spend a little more time thinking about why you do things, and be sure you have a reason," he emphasizes.

Kussow uses core aeration as an example. "A lot of people have a misconception about what core aeration can do for them. The literature says that it doesn't do nearly as much as they probably think it does. Here's an operation that is costly and disrupts the golf course. Then it takes time for the greens to heal. The membership doesn't like it.

"And so my message is, have a reason for doing it," he continues. "Don't just do it because you've always done it. Know that core aeration is the answer to a specific problem."

How did someone with no turf background end up as head of the UW Turf and Grounds Management Program? It all began on an 80-acre dairy farm near Oconto, Wis., where Kussow was the second in a family of five boys. "My mother soon gave up on having the toilet seat lid replaced," he jokes.

Kussow never had any desire to make farming a career. "After my sophomore year in high school, we ran two farms for two years," he explains. "That entailed my getting up at 4 every morning to milk at the home farm and get the barn cleaned before going to



high school. Then I'd get home at 6 at night from football or basketball practice, run to the barn to do chores, come in, clean up, eat dinner, study a couple of hours and go to bed. I knew from that point on that I was not going to be a farmer."

After graduating from Oconto Falls High School in 1957, he followed his brother's lead and enrolled in the College of Agriculture at Madison. "By the end of my sophomore year I had already made up my mind that I was going to major in soil science and that I was going to go to graduate school," he recalls.

"I had taken a number of introductory agriculture courses and soil science was the one I enjoyed the most. And I decided that I wasn't going to learn enough to answer the questions I wanted answered unless I went on to graduate school," he adds.

After earning his BS in 1961, he stayed at Madison and earned his MS in 1963. "I seriously considered going somewhere else for my PhD. But I was able to continue a research project, so I stayed at Madison," he explains.

"The second year into my PhD program my faculty advisor, John Murdock, went off to Brazil," Kussow recalls, adding that the UW was helping universities in Brazil and Nigeria to

develop curricula in agriculture. "I decided if I was ever going to finish my degree, I would have to follow him."

So he and his wife, Carol, moved to the University Rio Grande de Sul in the southern part of Brazil where they lived for two years and where their first son was born.

"I finished up my research in Brazil and then took my final exam for my PhD while in Brazil," Kussow points out. "That was a first in the history of the University of Wisconsin — for someone to take an oral exam for their PhD in a foreign country."

He returned to Madison in 1967 and spent six months teaching introductory soils. Then he was hired by the University of Delaware where he taught soils fertility and started some research. After a year and a half at Delaware, Kussow accepted a position back at the UW in 1969. "And I've been here ever since," he adds.

His first appointment was as the assistant director of International Agriculture Programs (70 percent) and also with the Soil Science Department as an instructor of soil fertility. As assistant director of the International Agriculture Programs, he administered university projects overseas. "So I did a fair amount of traveling in that position," he remembers.

"I enjoyed travel up to a point," he adds. "People look at me kind of strange and say, 'You got tired of going to Indonesia or Nigeria or Colombia?' Yes, I did!"

So he opted for a more "permanent" type of travel. "In 1973, we packed up the family and went back to Brazil on another university project," Kussow recalls. "We did a crazy thing — going to Brazil with the two youngest boys in diapers. That's not a smart move."

They returned to Madison in 1976. "I requested that I be only 30 percent with International Agriculture Programs and 70 percent with soils," Kussow points out. "This allowed me to not only continue my teaching in soils, but to get some research underway." By 1982, he was full time with the Soil Science Department.

Up to this point in Kussow's life story, he had done no work in the turf-grass arena. So how did he become head of the turf program in 1984?

"In 1983, Jim Love was approached by the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District to test some experimental

Milorganite formulations," he explains. "Dr. Love wasn't interested at that point, so I went ahead and did the work for them and was introduced to turfgrass in the greenhouse.

"Then in 1984, when Dr. Love retired, the department was looking for someone to take over the Turf and Grounds Management Program," Kussow adds. "Since I was the only one in the department who had ever done anything in turf, they asked me. I said yes, providing I could devote all my research to turf."

It could have been difficult to follow in the footsteps of someone as well known as Dr. Love. But Kussow didn't let it bother him. "You can never replace a person because you're different," he says. "So I tried to take the program in some new directions."

One of those new directions was the formation of the Turf and Grounds Management Club which, among other things, helps students attend conferences and take field trips. Kussow gives a lot of credit to Mike Lee for getting the club started. "He put together a brochure describing the Turf and Grounds Management Program, and the WTA paid to have it reproduced,"

he explains. "That brochure has been very influential on the number of students that we've had in the program."

The number of turf students has grown considerably. "When I took over we had been averaging 12 to 15 students for many years," he points out. "Today we have 33 in the program." And one-third to one-half of soils majors each year are in the turf program.

One of the reasons for the popularity of the program is that jobs usually are plentiful. "In the past, graduates generally have had two or three different job opportunities," Kussow reports. "But the fellows who graduated this last May had to scramble a little bit to find a good position. They had to be rather persistent. But I'm happy to say that they're all employed."

About 80 percent of the program's graduates find jobs on a golf course, and many of those are right in Wisconsin. Other graduates go into lawn care, sales or other related fields.

The UW offers only a four-year turf program. "From time to time we talk about a two-year program, but we always talk ourselves out of it," Kussow explains. "With the background you get in the basic sciences with a four-

year degree, you're in a much better position to solve problems. Quite frankly, the two-year program does a much better job on the technical aspects, the 'how to'. But for the 'why' and 'what now', you need a four-year degree."

Officially on paper, Kussow's appointment with the UW is for 50 percent instruction and 50 percent research. He teaches the introductory soil science course (301) each spring and a five-week module on turf fertilization in the fall. He also advises all of the turf students.

But golf course superintendents know that Kussow goes the extra mile by doing a lot of extension work, too. "I'm always a phone call away," he says. He participates in winter conferences. And sometimes he analyzes soil samples for superintendents.

Kussow is even willing to travel to golf courses to do some trouble shooting. "Once in a while a superintendent will call with a problem that has the greens committee chair all upset," he explains. "There's a lot of heat being put on him, and he wants me to come up and render an opinion. Many times it's a problem over which the superin-

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tendent has no control. The club simply needs to hear that from a third party."

In spite of the bimonthly deadlines, Kussow is glad that he has a regular column in *THE GRASS ROOTS*. "It's recognized as one of the top superintendents' magazines in the country. I know that the articles we put in there are reproduced many places. It's a very important outlet for information — much more important than technical journals."

Kussow believes that environmental issues pose the biggest challenge for golf course superintendents. "The superintendent is in a very difficult position," he says. "On the one hand, he has to stay employed and meet the demands of the golfer. That means using products and materials with much greater frequency that he'd probably like to."

"On the other hand, environmental groups pressure him to use less," he continues. "We've had discussions with superintendents. They all agree that if it suddenly would be against the law to apply pesticides to golf courses, superintendents would say 'fine'. That would put them all in the same position. But, as individuals, they can't do it on their own or they're jeopardizing their position."

Environmental laws have changed the job of a superintendent in another way. "They find themselves spending much more time on paperwork," Kussow says. "A common complaint of superintendents from larger courses is that they don't have nearly as much time as they'd like to spend on the course. I think it's only going to get worse in the future."

On a more positive note, Kussow sees "people" as the greatest strength of the turf industry in Wisconsin. "One of the things that makes my job most enjoyable is the people I deal with," he says. "It's a terrific industry."

"In the university, I deal with a horrendous bureaucracy. Things happen very, very slowly," he explains. "It's so refreshing to pick up the phone, call someone and say, 'I'm in a bind. I need this material and I need it now.' Within half an hour I've got what I need."

"It's so enlightening," he continues. "But that's the way industry people are accustomed to operating. They're doers. They don't sit around and have seven committee meetings to make a simple decision. They go ahead and make the decision and move forward."

"And we have fantastic support from all segments of the industry," Kussow says. "Sometimes it's embarrassing."

I'll have the money to buy something, and someone will say, 'Save your money. We'll give it to you.' This happens all the time."

Kussow's dedication to his job doesn't leave much time for other interests. "My wife would say I have none," he admits, adding that he does like to ice fish and work in the yard. His wife, Carol, is a substitute physical education teacher in Madison.

The Kussows have three sons who have chosen substantially different career paths from their father. Jeff, 25, is a Captain in the U.S. Army Medical Services Corps and is stationed in North Carolina. Tim, 22, recently graduated from the UW-Green Bay with a double major in art and art education. And David, 21, is enrolled in the nursing program at the UW-Oshkosh.

"When Tim graduated, he made Jeff promise that he would be there in his Army uniform so Tim's professors could see the contrast in the family — the long-haired artist versus the soldier."

And then there's Dad — the farm boy who had a thirst for education, who traveled the world, and who turned a lack of turfgrass experience into an asset for Wisconsin's turfgrass industry. ♣



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