



# A Competitive Spirit

By Lori Ward Bocher

John Buck loves competition. You can see it in his hobby. "I have only one hobby, and that's golf," says this owner of JW Turf in Hampshire, Ill., and Pewaukee, Wis. "I like the competitiveness of the sport. It's a competitive game that's a lot of fun because, with handicaps, you can play with anyone, no matter what his ability. There's no other game like that."

He also enjoys competition in business. JW Turf sells a complete line of John Deere golf course and turf maintenance equipment. "We've been growing at a rate of about 25 percent a year since 1989 or 1990," John says, adding that the growth is due to a larger share of the market.

How does he get that increased market share? "For one thing, John Deere makes quality equipment," John answers. "And we strive to give a little better service than the competition in every way. I mean, total service to the customer, whether it be fixing his equipment or parts availability or just doing what we say we're going to do and being honest with people."

"You have to have the product," he continues. "But just about anything will cut grass. You know that and I know that. I really think the service means more than anything. It's building a relationship with your clients, building up some trust."

Setting up shop in Pewaukee about a year ago helped build that relationship with Wisconsin clients. "We've always done some business in Wisconsin, but we never had a location up there until we bought out a small John Deere consumer products dealership, Kruegers Lawn Capitol on Capitol Drive," John explains.

"Since our location up there, business has more than tripled in Wisconsin," he adds. "I think people feel more comfortable about buying from us when we have a location up there. And I like working in Wisconsin. Wish I was up there full time myself. Wisconsin is a little more laid back. The superintendents are very nice people to do business with."

John's first exposure to golf was when he was a high school student and worked on the grounds crew at Silver Lake Golf Course in Orland Park, Ill. "It was a part-time job, after school and on weekends," he explains. "That's how I got started playing golf."

Not counting that brief exposure to turf work, he's been in the turf business for less than 10 years. But he's been with John Deere since 1970. And he started working with farm implements long before that.

Born in Lockport, Ill., John was raised on a farm, graduated from Lockport High School, and studied agriculture at Joliet Junior College. But he never became a farmer. "After Junior College, I spent a few years in the Navy," he recalls. "Then I worked for a farm equipment dealer in Plainfield, Ill.,

for about five or six years."

In 1970, he became an entrepreneur when he and a partner purchased John Deere dealerships in Oswego and Sheridan, Ill. "It was something I had wanted to do for a long time," he says of the purchase. "We bought each of them on a 50:50 basis, so we each owned half of two dealerships. I worked at the one in Sheridan. It was almost all farm business at the time."

In 1977 he sold the Sheridan dealership and bought another John Deere dealership in Huntley, Ill., which is about 50 miles north of Sheridan. "And in 1979 we moved a short distance to Hampshire and built a new building," he recalls.

"At that time, we were a farm implement dealership and a consumer products dealer for John Deere," he continues. "But in 1986, Deere announced it was going to get into the golf course maintenance business. They were looking for about 40 distributors in the United States to handle their golf course equipment. I was interested in that. We had to do a marketing plan, and we were lucky enough to be awarded a contract in 1986."

"I put my son-in-law in charge of the farm implement business, and I then took over the new venture, JW Turf," he explains. For six short months John had a partner named Walter, which is why the business is named "JW Turf". "We dissolved the partnership but I kept the name because it was easier than changing it," John points out.

Located near Interstate 90 about half way between Rockford and the greater Chicago area, Hampshire has  
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seen much urbanization in recent years. "Chicago is getting very close," John says. "When we came here in 1977, about 90 percent of our business was in agriculture. Now, with our consumer products business, skid steer business and turf business, agriculture is probably no more than 25 percent of our business. It's changed a lot."

JW Turf is able to capitalize on that increased urbanization with its complete line of John Deere mowers and other golf course and turf maintenance equipment. "The golf course business is a whole lot bigger than anything else," John points out. "I'd say it amounts to 65 to 70 percent of our turf business now."

From the Hampshire office, JW Turf covers the northern third of Illinois, from Peoria north. And, from the Pewaukee office, they cover the southeastern two-thirds of Wisconsin. At the two locations combined, JW Turf employs seven sales people, four shop people, two parts people, two office people, and John.

John has seen lots of changes in golf course maintenance in the past 10 years. "Members are getting a little bit

more picky. They want their courses to look nicer," he says. "There's been a tremendous change in the way superintendents take care of their golf courses. They're forced to have better equipment so their golf courses look nicer and are marketable."

How does a company like John Deere respond to those changes? "Once a year John Deere invites about 500 superintendents to a feedback seminar," John explains. "These superintendents get to critique some of the new test equipment that John Deere has out. Plus, they get to sit down with the engineers and tell them what is needed in the marketplace and what's needed in the future. Deere's been doing that for about the past eight years, and it's helped quite a bit." John attends the seminars, too.

Since golf is John's only hobby, he likes to play two or three times a week when weather permits, and he plans winter vacations around golf destinations. "I belong to a couple of country clubs. But, being in the business, I get to play a lot of courses," he says. "And, when I play, I pretty much notice what kind of equipment is on each course."

Spoken like a true competitor! ♣

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