



One Eye On The Goal Line

By Lori Ward Bocher

Mark Kienert, the new president of the WGCSA, has me a little confused as we begin this interview. We're talking about his childhood—about how he was born and raised in Waupaca, Wis.

"Not getting the paper route really shaped my life," he recalls. "I had trained with a neighborhood boy, learned the route, went down to the newspaper office to receive the route. But the manager had given it to her nephew. Back when you're 12 years old, there aren't many other jobs you can have besides being a caddy. That's how I got started in the golf business."

So far, so good. But then he goes on, talking about how his goals to become a golf pro never materialized. And how he looked into being a golf course architect but decided against it because there weren't many new courses being built at the time.

"I decided if I couldn't build them, I'd maintain them," Mark says of his decision to become a golf course superintendent.

"Wait a minute, Mark," I'm thinking to myself. "We were talking about your childhood. Why did you jump so far ahead in your life story?"

But Mark's next words answer the question in my mind.

"It was then, at the age of 15, that I started working for superintendent Jeff Bottensek at the Waupaca Country Club," he says.

"All of that career planning happened before you were even 15?" I ask with amazement.

"Unfortunately," Mark answers. "I should have had more fun growing up rather than spending as many hours as I did on the golf course. I remember asking Jeff what I should major in in college to become a superintendent."

Jeff received his degree at Penn State University, but Mark had his heart set on being a Badger. "I had been hooked on Big 10 football," he

explains. "I love the Badgers and I love Big 10 football. Bar none, there's no other conference in the world that compares."

"The first game I saw as a high school student, Wisconsin was completely blown out of the water by UCLA. So it's kind of appropriate that the last time I saw UCLA play, we beat them in the Rose Bowl," he adds.

Not surprisingly, when Mark graduated from high school in 1972 he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where he majored in soils science under the guidance of his advisor, Dr. J.R. Love.

"Terry Kurth credits me with saving his life on campus," Mark relates. "He stepped in front of a bus and I pulled him back. Who knows. Maybe that's the reason I was put on earth."

Mark also remembers his talks with a kind, old gentlemen on campus. "It wasn't until a couple of months later when I read a big article about him that I realized I had been talking to

E.B. Fred." (He was a former Dean of the College of Agriculture who lived right on campus).

While a student, Mark worked for Randy Smith at Nakoma Country Club. He also worked there a short time after graduating in 1976 so that his wife, Karen, could finish school. "Working there opened doors for me once my wife graduated and we were able to look for a 'real' job," Mark remembers.

His first 'real' job was at the Milwaukee Country Club as an assistant to Danny Quast. That course is still Mark's favorite nearly 20 years later. "It's just beautiful from an architectural standpoint," Mark relates. "It's a grand old lady, a tremendous golf course that was made way back when. It has withstood the test of time. There are a lot of copycats out there, but you can't touch this one. It's a classic."

Mark wasn't hired back a second year at Milwaukee. "It wasn't one of the highlights of my career," he remembers. "So then I took a job

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down in Evansville, Ind., working in the transition zone. This summer I realized that, even though it was hard here in Wisconsin, they get weather like that every summer in the transition zone. Goose grass, to boot."

The Fendrich Golf Club was the most heavily played public golf course in Indiana, according to Mark. He remembers when the Mayor called him and told him to cut the roughs shorter. "I had made a definition in grass height between the fairways and roughs, but the Mayor wanted the roughs short again. He said it slowed down play too much. They wanted to see the turnstiles moving to generate as many funds as they could on a public course. The public golfer, in his words, didn't care about cosmetics."

Mark stayed at Evansville for a year. "I moved back to Wisconsin to be closer to family and to be back in the state. But it's not the way to build a resume. Let me tell you that right away," he says of his first two jobs lasting only one year each.

His next job was at the Prairie du Chien Country Club, a 9-hole, semi-private course, where he stayed four

years. "They were probably the best years of my life," Mark says. "People treated me well. It was a great job — you just maintain nine holes and then after work go out and play golf. It was before we had kids, so I became very active in the Jaycees. As a result of my hard work and stupidity, I was their Jaycee of the year one of those years."

Even though things were good, Mark moved on in four years — this time to the North Hills Country Club where he became the assistant superintendent under Bob Musbach. "Prairie du Chien couldn't pay two months of the year," Mark explains. "And Bob had a reputation for taking assistants under his wings and propelling them out into bigger and better jobs in the golf course world. So I went there to learn how to maintain fairways and irrigation systems — how to maintain a quality golf course in a large budget setting.

"I also went there for tournament experience," he continues, adding that the Lombardi Golf Classic is played there. "It was very interesting to see how pretty, how manicured, how detailed the course could look."

After four years at North Hills, Mark accepted his present position as superintendent at Bulls Eye Country Club, Wisconsin Rapids, in January of 1986. "I just completed my tenth year here," he says, adding that he made the move so that he could manage his own course again.

Bulls Eye is an 18-hole, private club that also owns a 9-hole public course. Mark manages both.

"We just accomplished a major goal here — bringing this course up to speed with a new irrigation system," Mark explains. "We still had a manual quick-coupler system. There's only a handful left in the state."

In the future, he'd like to build a new maintenance facility. "And ongoing golf course improvement," Mark adds. "Trying to keep up with the Joneses on a limited budget."

His most challenging year at Bulls Eye was the drought year of 1988. "The DNR suspended our irrigation permit for the year," he remembers. "The golf course essentially burned up under the severe heat. We had to regrass the golf course."

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Even though he made the decision to become a golf course superintendent while a mere lad of 15, Mark is happy with his choice. "Being outdoors, bar none, is my favorite aspect of being a superintendent," he reports.

Mark has been involved with the WGCSA since his student days, and he's been on the board of directors since 1984. He's held every office except treasurer, which is kind of unusual. "Every other organization I've been involved with, I've always been the treasurer," he explains. He's also served on every committee except for education.

Mark has definite goals for his term as president. "I basically set up three mandates," he explains. "I'm going to state them right up front. The first one is of image. The second one is for education. And the third mandate is for research."

For image, Mark would like to see the WGCSA and all superintendents become involved with the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program. "It's a great opportunity for students to ask questions and for us to explain what it is we do on the golf course," Mark says. "There are too many pot shots taken at golf courses, especially when it comes to pesticide use."

In terms of education, Mark is talking computers. "I'd like to see more superintendents on line," he explains. "I'm not necessarily talking about the internet, but about the ability to communicate via computer bulletin board systems."

"I'd like to see the WGCSA members support their staff members through education as well — the assistant superintendents, the mechanics we employ, the other technicians," Mark says. "I'd like to see programs developed to enhance their lives because I feel that if their lives are enhanced, our jobs as superintendents would be made easier."

When it comes to research, Mark would like to find a way to generate more research income for the O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research and Education Facility.

And another challenge he'll face as president is coming to a consensus over the chapter affiliations agreement with the GCSAA.

"Why do you take the time to be so involved in an organization such as this?" I ask Mark.

"It's one of those goals I've always

set for myself," he answers. "I never lost sight of that. It's something that I've always wanted to do, always thought I would do."

"You sound like a very goal-oriented person, from the time you were 12 years old until now," I comment. "Is that true?"

"True," he says, almost as if ashamed. "I'm goal oriented almost to a fault. I set my mind on something and too many times I keep going for it even though it's an impossible goal. I'm a perfectionist. I'm my own worst enemy. When I can't attain something, it bothers me."

Not all of his goals center around his career, however. Mark takes time to spend with his wife, Karen, and their two daughters, Cara (15) and Cassie (12). Karen, also a graduate of the UW, is a bank officer for the Firststar Corporation.

"We've been Badger football season ticket holders since the Morton years. We bought low," he laughs. "The kids enjoy it. They wouldn't miss it. Going to the games as a family — that's my payback, a reward to myself and to my family."

Indy car racing is another one of Mark's passions. "You can't tear me away from the tube," he admits. "People say, 'It's so boring. All you do is watch cars go around in circles. It's as boring as watching paint dry.' You know what I tell them? I watch grass grow for a living. Go figure."

Mark also likes to work with computers. "It's a black hole. You can't keep up with the technology," he points out. "I enjoy the technology in all aspects of our industry and in all walks of life. Sometimes I think about my grandparents and all the changes they saw in their lifetimes, from the horse and buggy days to a man on the moon."

"In my lifetime, I remember buying my first calculator at Madison and paying \$90 for it. Now the same calculator they give away in a box of Wheaties," he laughs. "Maybe some day my kids will look back at my life and say, 'Boy, look at all the technology changes he lived through.'"

As we close the interview, I ask Mark for a favor. "I feel little funny interviewing you because all of THE GRASS ROOTS readers know you much better than I do. Tell me a few things about yourself that they don't know."

"Well," Mark says, "we have our family tree traced back to the point

where people went by one-word names. As a result of that, we have found out that we're related to Lady Godiva. We were related to William Brewster, the first mayor of Plymouth, Massachusetts.

"I also have royal blood in my veins," he continues. "My great, great, great grandmother was either raped or was a concubine of one of the English kings. But we were on the wrong side of the royal bed to lay claim to anything."

"And in the great play, Hamlet," Mark continues, "when he's making his famous 'To be or not to be' soliloquy and holding the skull aloft? For some reason I'm related to the skull."

I bet you didn't know that! ♣

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