



An Observer's View of the NCTE

By Pat Norton

Over 2,000 Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin turfgrass professionals gathered back in early December at the Pheasant Run Resort & Expo Center in St. Charles, IL for the annual North Central Turfgrass Exposition.

As I am now an Illinois citizen, taxpayer, parent, golf course superintendent, and amateur writer/reporter, my editor felt it was critical...and of the utmost importance that I attend the NCTE and report back to you all on the state of the turfgrass/golf course industry in the state... that 'all Wisconsin citizens love to hate'... the 'flatland state'... the state where farmers still can make a pretty decent living(good farmland here in Grundy County has been selling for \$3600-4000 per acre)...the state that has given the world the great American president Abraham Lincoln, the beloved Chicago Cubs, the legendary Michael Jordan, and the ever humble, always likeable Dennis Rodman!!

I speak, of course, about the great state of Illinois! And, let me tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that the turfgrass/golf course industry down here is very vital, very successful at raising \$\$\$ for turfgrass research & scholarships, seems very cohesive and united, and puts on a pretty darn good turfgrass conference!

Here then is an observational summary of the NCTE from one average golf course agronomist...likes and dislikes...touching on the hot topics...and relaying back to you what's important to Illinois golf course agronomists...

- There are over 300 golf courses in greater Chicagoland alone, so take a guess who has the clout and the power when it comes to generating the money for turfgrass research and education. 'The Midwest', or MAGCS, has about 500 members of all classes...the Chicagoland GCSA consists, I think, of the more premier private clubs...while the Central Illinois GCSA and the NW Illinois GCSA, although smaller chapters, are very active at NCTE and throughout the year.

- All of these GCSA's, the ILCA, the Sod Growers Assn of Mid-America, and the many suppliers, distributors, and manufacturers combine their forces to strongly support the granddaddy organization of them all, the Illinois Turfgrass Foundation.

- The setup of all of these organizations is so similar to your collective situation up in Wisconsin that I have to smile a bit as I reflect back on the last three days. The big difference, though, is the immense size of the ITF, which permits it to contribute big money to the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, and lesser amounts to Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

- The fact is that the ITF does contribute big amounts to these two institutions...but the fact is also that the turfgrass research effort here is a bit diluted with two universities having turfgrass undergraduate & research programs...SIU concentrates on transition zone turfgrass in a seemingly low key way...they received \$19,500 from ITF in 1996,

while the U of I received a whopping \$103,500 from ITF for turfgrass research this year alone!!

- What would the UW-Madison, which has definitely achieved so much more in the way of turfgrass facilities & research due to the efforts of the WTA and the WGCSA, do with that kind of cash??? And I'm pretty sure I've got these facts straight ...since 1959 the ITF has contributed \$1,500,000 to the U of I, and \$250,000 to SIU!!! Serious money, I'd say...

- And although they've received such huge amounts of money over the years, U of Illinois seems to be just now awakening to the fact of their great potential! The interest and loyalty to the U of Illinois by the citizenry of the state is tepid at best, which rubs off onto all of the golf course superintendents. But the good news is that the turfgrass program there is heading in the right direction, has tons of fuel courtesy of the ITF, and like young Skywalker... is 'going to fulfill its destiny'.

- A big problem down here, as I see it, is simply that the U of I campus is so far away from so many of the golf courses, and for a number of years, not enough unity

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existed throughout the green/golf course industry. The Chicago area golf courses having been desperately wanting 'Chicago based research' to address their problems...I think for quite a long while...and really should have a Chicago based turfgrass research and education center, just like yours in Wisconsin!!

I'll bet Dr. Randy Kane of the Chicago District Golf Association would definitely think he'd died and gone to heaven should such a center be proposed and constructed. If Wisconsin can do it, there's no reason why it can't be done in the Chicago area!!

There is a really nice research green at Cantigny Golf Club that's been built in the last few years, but it's an entirely modified sand base, which I don't understand, given the number of native soil greens everywhere in Chicagoland....

Other observations from the NCTE conference and show itself...

- A super hot idea over the last year has been the introduction of biological fungus disease suppression/control using the BioJect System. The Bioject is basically a bacteria fermentation system that utilizes *Pseudomonas aureofaciens* as an antagonist to suppress, prevent, and somewhat control common turfgrass diseases such as dollar spot, brown patch, and even pythium. This system is set up in an irrigation pumphouse, utilizes the fermentation process to ever multiply and create more beneficial *Pseudomonas* bacteria, and then basically downloads it into your irrigation system for nightly delivery to all of your irrigated areas.

The Bioject also has available other bacteria fermentation processes utilizing the *Azospirillum* bacteria for better soil nitrogen fixation.

The entire premise is really interesting, really cool, and definitely the wave of the future. The cost for 1997 is \$17,000, which seems like a bunch of money, and it is...a bunch of money. About twenty golf courses have signed on as of this writing here in the Chicago region, and certainly more will follow.

I am very interested also, but am maintaining a healthy bit of skepticism until there is more proof that this system really does work...there have been some very mixed results so far of those units already on golf courses here and in the St. Louis area. I am certain that in two-three more years we'll be much more informed as to its effectiveness...

The big selling point is that it's supposed to dramatically reduce the reliance on chemical fungicides...thereby paying for itself every year...and it certainly does fit in with the trend towards environmental consciousness.

- Excellent talks given on all of the new creeping bentgrasses hitting the market...definitely makes me wish that little old Nettle Creek didn't have Pennncross all over the place...Pennncross, by the way, comes in way, way down on everybody's quality ratings, from Dr. Kane at the Cantigny research green to the U of Ill NTEP trials...also the management techniques with these new bents are way different than the old tried and true methods of Pennncross management, according to Patrick O'Brien of the USGA Greens Section...who also strongly advocates entire and complete regrassing of greens with the new bents rather than trying to overseed into existing greens and gradually shift the bent/poa populations...others on the 'panel of experts, such as Dr. Milt Engelke of Texas A&M, felt as

strongly that the gradual shift approach would be very feasible...Bruce Williams of Bob 'O Link Golf Club explained the regrassing of two problem greens utilizing 'A-4'...and stated that within weeks after opening these new greens for play that his members felt that these new greens were by far the best putting greens on the course...there'll be lots of older greens converting to the new bents in the future...utilizing lots of different regrassing methods.

- Both USGA regional agronomists in attendance, Paul Vermeulen and Pat O'Brien, gave just outstanding, very helpful talks...Vermeulen stated strongly that he's seen great success with the Verti-Drain in conjunction with Primer 604, LescoFlo, or Precisions' Cascade wetting agents...on helping older, native soil putting greens attain decidedly better water infiltration and percolation...which was absolute music to my ears as we have native soil greens that tend to hold way too much water...oh baby, I am on the right track after all!!

- The Thursday morning 'golf course pot pourri' session finished up the conference in just a very nice way...Bob Lohmann gave a very good leadoff talk on course redesign and renovation...which was then followed by four Chicagoland superintendents giving some really outstanding talks on;

- USGA putting green grow-in
- Improving rough areas on a highly trafficked course
- New irrigation system installation
- Extensive renovation/redesign/reconstruction activities at a private club
- New course construction and prairie establishment

Three out of the five superintendents speaking that morning had worked with Lohmann on their projects, which prompted a few wags in the audience to ask, "Is this the Lohmann Golf Designs Variety Hour, or what?"


Truthfully, hearing from fellow superintendents about their projects, their triumphs and failures, their do's and don'ts...when presented in an interesting, humorous manner...made for a very interesting, educational morning.

Overall, the NCTE was a great experience for me...I met quite a few more people and learned a bunch, especially from the USGA agronomists with their solid tips and experiences, and from fellow superintendents who took the time to take good pictures of their projects in progress, develop an interesting presentation, and deliver it in an 'easy to relate to' manner. 🍷

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