



Golf leads to successful turf career

By Lori Ward Bocher

Of the 39 Personality Profiles I've written for THE GRASS ROOTS since 1990, no one has had as diverse a background in turf as Alan Nees, Director of Marketing for the Milorganite division of the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District. He's worked on golf courses, in irrigation design and sales, in lawn care, in turf product sales, and as a turf agronomist. He has both a sales and science background.

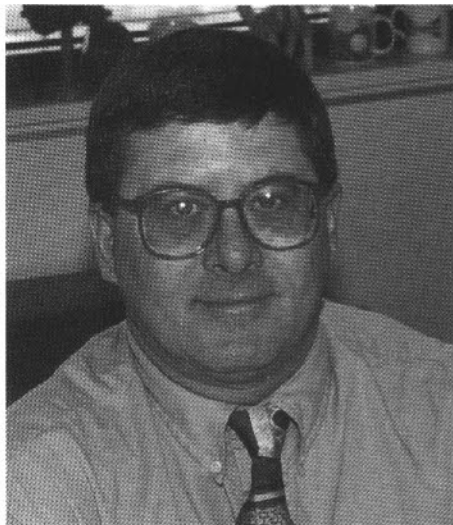
And it all started with an 11-year-old boy who decided to play golf.

Alan was born in Fort Wayne, Ind., where his father worked for U.S. Steel. The family lived for a time in eastern Pennsylvania, then moved to Chesterton, Ind., where he graduated from high school in 1970.

At the age of 11, Alan started to play golf. "As a junior golfer and high school player, I was marginally good to the point where I entertained some thoughts of turning professional — not with a playing career but as a club pro," he remembers. "But I looked at turfgrass management as an alternative opportunity, depending on which way my career path took me, so that I could somehow remain in the golf or turf field."

So it was off to Purdue University where he majored in agronomy with an emphasis in turfgrass management. He received his BS in 1974 and spent one summer in graduate school at Purdue. "I ran out of money at the end of that summer, and I ran out of sanity, so I opted to leave graduate school," he explains.

It was during his college years that Alan decided to pursue a career in turf management and not as a golf pro. "In the summers, I would work on golf courses, including the summer between my junior and senior year when I worked at Firestone Country Club in Akron, Ohio," he recalls. "At that time, the south course at Firestone hosted up to three PGA tour stops a year. It was



Alan Nees

one of the top five courses. That was absolutely the best summer of my life. It was a marvelous experience."

Alan notes that Pete Miller, a Wisconsin native, was superintendent at the time. And Pete Sinnott, the assistant superintendent, served as a great teacher for Alan.

His summers on the golf course made Alan realize that he didn't want to pursue a career as a golf course superintendent. "I saw too many people who had chosen that career path always being on the bubble," he says. "The politics and the musical chairs of the private club were just more than my professional sanity could bear."

"And I think I developed a bit of a knack on the sales end of things," he continues. "I tend to look at sales differently than a lot of people. I think the function of a sales person is to solve somebody's problem, not just write an order. If you can solve that problem, whether you use your catalog or even a competitor's catalog, the numbers will come."

So his first job out of college was at a Toro distributorship in Pontiac, Mich., where he worked in the design and sales of irrigation and pumping

equipment and systems for golf course, residential and commercial properties. After two years there, he moved to the Chicago area in the summer of 1976 and worked for Chemlawn.

"My branch manager purchased one of the first Chemlawn franchises that was made available, and it was in the Fox Valley area of Wisconsin," Alan recalls. "He and his partner hired me as their first employee in 1978. We started that business with just the three of us and the owner's wife who worked in the office. We grew it from \$20,000 in sales to about \$1.2 million in sales by 1984 when we had two branches, 12 lawn care trucks, two tree and shrub trucks, and a lawn maintenance division."

It was an exciting time in Alan's life. "We were growing by leaps and bounds," he recalls. "Just to know that you were intimately involved in that growth was very fulfilling and exciting. It was very challenging because I was directly involved in business decisions that a lot of people my age, and with my background, probably wouldn't be involved in. I learned a great deal."

But in 1984 the principal owner sold the franchise. "We had built our business in the Fox Valley differently than normal Chemlawn type operations," Alan explains. "It was built on very good service and technically very strong programs. That was different than even the Chemlawn corporate branches in Chicago."

"I had the bright idea that I'd be able to bring that same attitude and level of service to the Milwaukee area," he continues. "I bought a franchise of Spring Green Lawn Care. Unfortunately, the Milwaukee culture was different than the Fox Valley culture. The Milwaukee market didn't appreciate, and show as much loyalty for, that level of service relative to being able to get what they perceived

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as the same thing for a cheaper price. I hated it. I sold that franchise one year later. I was darn lucky not to lose my shirt."

At that point, Reinders Brothers was looking for a salesman. "So I hooked up with Ed Devinger and that group and spent the first year with them in Racine, Walworth and Kenosha Counties," Alan reports. A year later he was transferred to northeastern Wisconsin where his territory ran from Fond du Lac up through the central slice of Upper Michigan. He stayed there until May of 1989.

"I really enjoyed my position at Reinders," Alan says. "I especially liked the fact that, besides selling equipment, I could use my background in offering a full line of turf products such as fertilizers and things like that."

In 1989, the position of head agronomist opened up at Milorganite. Alan decided to apply. "Lo and behold, I was offered that position," he recalls. "It gave me an opportunity to concentrate on fertilizer from a technical standpoint, to use my skills nationwide, and to grow my knowledge into warm season grasses, desert soils, the sandy soils of Florida — all kinds of things."

He didn't know it at the time, but he was about to take off on a roller coaster ride at Milorganite. "In the next year and a half, we had some turnover in management here for a variety of reasons," he explains. "As people kept leaving, I had to assume their roles along with more and more responsibility. By the time the shake out was over, I was about the most senior person here after only two years. I was promoted to Director of Marketing in 1991, the position I still hold."

There were some real critical issues facing Milorganite at the time. "The EPA was developing a new set of rules and regulations for the disposal of bio-solids — our feel-good term for sewage sludge," Alan explains. "If that rule, which was 15 years in the making and very technical, was not put together the right way, it would have been absolutely devastating for Milorganite. I had to jump right in the middle of that. I went to the EPA offices in Washington a number of times to negotiate and educate and make sure the rule was

crafted so it was technically sound and fair for everybody."

Much of the negotiating revolved around the "exceptional quality criteria" of the EPA. "That's a three-pronged set of criteria," Alan explains. "The first is for heavy metals. Yes, there are heavy metals in Milorganite. But we were able to demonstrate to the EPA that there are heavy metals in other fertilizers as well and, in many cases, in higher levels in Milorganite — and certainly higher than the exceptional quality criteria."

"We argued that the EPA couldn't impose additional rules and regulations on us than what it would impose on normal fertilizers. They agreed with that, eventually," Alan adds.

"For the other two prongs, we had to demonstrate pathogen reduction and we had to show that the product was stable enough to meet vector attraction rules — that it wouldn't attract things like flies and mosquitoes that are vectors of disease," he continues.

The negotiating success with the EPA led directly to Milorganite's next major challenge. "The new set of rules opened the door for a number of other municipalities who thought that what we were doing was a pretty good idea," Alan points out, adding that cities like Tampa, Boston, New York, Baltimore and Houston installed equipment and entered the fertilizer market. "Product availability jumped from 80,000 or 90,000 dry tons in 1990 to nearly 300,000 dry tons today."

At the time other municipalities began entering the market, nearly half of the Milorganite being produced wasn't being used on turf; it was sold in bulk to citrus and vegetable producers in Florida. "When

the others entered the market, they put us right into their sites and went directly after that Florida market, actually subsidizing costs and giving the material away. They took that non-turf market from us," Alan points out.

"But that's OK," he adds. "Our strategies have been fairly clear since then. We have the name brand. We have the marketing effort and a marvelous distribution network out there. We needed to shift what we lost in Florida into the bag market. We've just about successfully completed that transition."

About 35 percent of Milorganite's market is now retail. The rest is sold in bag or bulk primarily for the golf and landscape markets. "Those two businesses, the retail and commercial, are very, very different," Alan points out. "We package the product differently. The distribution channels are different. The instructions are different. They're registered differently."

The Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District has two waste water treatment plants — the one at Jones Island where Milorganite is produced, and the other at Oak Creek where they have a land application program called "Agri-Life" in which liquid sludge is injected into agricultural fields. The majority of MMSD sludge, however, goes into Milorganite — perhaps 80 percent, Alan estimates.

Although not directly involved with the project, Alan was at Milorganite during a major reconstruction project at Jones Island. "Our old drying and dewatering plant, the plant that makes Milorganite, was constructed in the 1920's. It was in need of replacement if we were going to stay in the Milorganite business," he explains.

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"The new plant was built in conjunction with the deep tunnel project in Milwaukee — part of a \$2.3 billion public works project — the largest public works project ever done in Wisconsin," he continues. "We got a whole new plant and storage silos, and about 60 percent of it was paid with grant funds through the EPA. The new plant was built and run concurrent with the old plant, so we never stopped production."

With the recent changes, Alan believes that Milorganite is well set for the future. "As I go around the country to conferences and training sessions, I hear an awful lot of talk about going back to the basics," he says. "Milorganite was and is one of the basics to turfgrass management."

In addition to his work, Alan serves on the board of directors of the O.J. Noer Research Foundation. And he helps plan the Wisconsin Turfgrass Symposium. He's proud of the recent growth of the symposium, both in terms of attendance and reputation. "I'm not attributing that growth to myself, but to a great committee and input from attendees. One of the proudest things we have under

our belt is the growth of that event from less than 100 attendees in 1989 to well over 200 in the last couple of years," he points out.

"As a committee, we've focused a little more on the topic and on obtaining good quality speakers," Alan continues. "The committee as a whole has done an outstanding job. It's great to get the feedback later. It's an example of the partnership that Milorganite and the superintendents association has had for a long, long, long time. It's working really well."

Alan and his wife, Susan, have two children — Kyle, 12, and Tim, 10. Susan works part-time managing the customer service department for Ashdon Farms, a company that sells gift nuts and candies. They live in Brown Deer, where Alan serves on the board of directors for the Brown Deer Junior Baseball Club. He's also a baseball coach and manager for that group.

The former competitive junior golfer still gets out on the course once in a while. "Not as much as I would like," Alan relates. "But with my travels all over the country, I do get to play from time to time. And I've been curling

since my Appleton days. When I was young and in shape I was curling at a pretty competitive level."

While growing up in northern Indiana, Alan felt like he was in a suburb of Chicago. "Friends of ours two doors down had Bears tickets, so we grew up as Bears fans," he admits.

"But you changed," I quickly interject.

"I've changed," he says. "But I've got to admit that I still root for Purdue over Wisconsin."

With his variety of work experiences, Alan has been able to apply what he's learned in the past to his present job. "And then some," he adds. "I think I got forced into some situations that were beyond my normal levels of expertise. I've had a lot of great support from my old acquaintances from my Reinders and Chemlawn days. I can't tell you how much I appreciate that. They're still close friends. And I've been able to make new friends across the country. I don't know where I go from here. I'm not that old, I guess. So, we'll see. It still remains fun." ♣



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