



He's a down-to-earth, good ol' farm boy

By Lori Ward Bocher

I've known Monroe Miller for about 10 years now, and there's one phrase I've heard him use often. "Lots of the people in our profession are just good ol' farm boys at heart," he says with fondness, harking back to his childhood days on the farm.

It's been true. A lot of the people I've interviewed for the Personality Profile have been "farm boys." But now I've met the epitome of farm boys in the turf business — Ray Knapp, golf sales rep for Spring Valley Turf Products.

Even before I get the tape recorder turned on to record our interview, he's telling me, "My wife raises vegetables. We've got 10 acres under drip irrigation, so we're using the system a lot this year."

It was no surprise to learn that he was born and raised on a farm — in Newton County, northeast Indiana. "We had dairy cows, a beef herd, pigs, chickens, and everything else, like people had years ago," he points out. "My dad came from Austria, so I'm a first generation American. He moved over here in about 1930 with two brothers. One was a lawyer, the other a farmer like Dad."



Ray Knapp

When it was time to go to college, Ray chose an agricultural school — Purdue University — and a pre-veterinary medicine major. "I was in that for two years, but I never would have gotten into the vet school because my grades weren't good enough," he explains. "So I switched to agronomy. It took me nine semesters to graduate — in 1965."

First superintendent job . . .

"When I was a junior at Purdue, I worked at the Stevens Point Country

Club," Ray continues. "I was a grow-in superintendent for the Wadsworth Company, which was redoing 12 holes there. Then I continued to work there as the superintendent for six years after I graduated from Purdue. So I had no other background in golf other than working there. I had never worked for anyone else when I was hired as a superintendent, which is a little unusual."

In 1972, he was named superintendent at Tuckaway Country Club in Franklin. "I had 17 seasons at Tuckaway, and I had 15 Greater Milwaukee Open tournaments while I was there. So I had my tournament experience," Ray says. "We would line up our whole season on the GMO, make all of our plans sort of based on the GMO. The conditions the tournament players wanted on the course were what the members would want, so there wasn't much change. We'd probably only mow a little tighter on the greens and let the rough grow."

"We learned to have the greens run out of gas, run out of nitrogen, before the tournament," he continues. "And then we could really manage them well. We'd time the last nitrogen application so the plant wouldn't have as much nitrogen left and we wouldn't have to mow quite as much. It took us quite a few years to finally figure this out, and it's so simple."

For Ray, one of the most exciting GMO tournaments was around 1980 when Lee Trevino beat Lee Elder in an eight-hole playoff. "I'm sure I'll always remember that," he says. "You don't like to have a playoff because then you've got to go back out and work again! I'd rather have a four-stroke lead when there are three holes to go. One of the worst things is to have to go back out and play on a Monday, and that happened once."

Still enjoys GMO . . .

Ray still enjoys going to the GMO. "I usually spend all day Thursday and Friday there. I visit with some of my customers, take a couple

of them out to lunch on both of those days," he points out.

The GMO has since moved to Brown Deer Park, and Ray likes to stop there about once a week during the season to help superintendent Steve Bailey prepare for the tournament. "He's just double checking. It's always good to check with two or three people before you do anything. Helps avoid problems," Ray points out. "He checks with me and then he might check with Danny Quast. Danny helps Steve, too."

While Ray was at Tuckaway, the GMO was held around the 4th of July for many years and then moved to the first week in September, where it still is. But the tourney is being moved back to early July in 1999. "You can make an argument for either time of the year," Ray says, "but I believe the conditions on golf courses are normally better in July than in the first week in September."

His time at Tuckaway ended in 1988 when he was fired. "There's lots of politics involved," he believes. "But I lasted 17 seasons there, and it was a fun 17 seasons."

Ray decided not to look for another golf course job. "I like fertilizer. I'm

an agronomist. So I thought I'd like the sales game," he recalls. "I'm enjoying this more. I don't have to put up with the labor problems and with the other management problems that you have as a superintendent. A superintendent has a 7-days-a-week job during the golf season. As a salesman, I have my weekends plus two or three 3-day weekends during the summertime."

And his farm is one of the main reasons he likes having his weekends in the summer. "My wife, Carol, raises vegetables," he points out. "So she works the Madison farmers' market on Saturday and I go to the West Bend and West Allis markets. That's my second job — helping her with the farm." The farm, which is located just north of West Bend, is known as Knapp's Fresh Veggies.

Sales at Spring Valley . . .

In 1989, Ray joined the sales staff of Spring Valley Turf Products. Based in Jackson and owned by brothers Bill and Randy Vogel, the company manufactures turf fertilizers and also distributes some pesticides. An ag fertilizer division was sold six or seven years ago, according to

Ray. Ray's market covers the golf courses in the eastern half of Wisconsin, plus parts of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The company also sells nationally and internationally.

Ray likes the challenge of trying to help customers who call with various turf problems. "I've been getting about two or three calls a day from people who are having problems," he points out. "They want to see me right away. They've already done just about everything they know how to do. Maybe I can help them, maybe not."

"This is an unusual season in that, right now (late July when interviewed), there are unusual diseases all over the state," he continues. "We're getting diseases like summer patch and take-all patch on greens. There are grasses dying on greens and fairways. On older courses, the *Poa annua* is starting to die on fairways from anthracnose or pest diseases. There's going to be a lot of overseeding on older courses this fall."

"The newer golf courses aren't having as many problems," he adds. "The new bluegrass and bentgrass varieties have more disease resistance and they're able to maintain those courses better."

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"BECAUSE I HATE LOOSING MY BALL IN THE LEAVES, THAT'S WHY."

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For years, Ray has been a member of the WGCSA and the GCSAA. "I was on the program at some of the national conventions. I think that's noteworthy," says this usually modest man. He's also been attending the WTA shows for Spring Valley. "And I get over to see Jeff Gregos (TDDL) probably half a dozen times a year with problems that my customers have. So I communicate with him on a regular basis — just checking with the best."

Back to farming . . .

With talk about his turf career out of the way, Ray can get back to his favorite subject — the farm. "We raise 20 acres of vegetables. One of our big crops is zucchini," he points out. "We have yellow, green and white zucchini, which we specialize in because it's unusual. We had five crops of zucchini this season."

"We also have six acres of winter squash, a couple of acres of watermelon, tomatoes and peppers, and a few oddball things besides that," he continues. "We used to be in the wholesale and restaurant markets, but now we just specialize in the farmers' markets."

We've cut back the operation."

The Knapps also sell vegetable plants to home gardeners in the spring. "One of our specialties is raising over 100 varieties of pepper plants and over 60 varieties of tomato plants," he explains. "So if you want something unusual, you'll be going to one of the farmers' markets to look for us and get one of the heirloom varieties or new and improved varieties. We have people who drive to our farm all the way from Madison because they know we have the stuff they've read about or that they know is superior to something else."

"Basically, it's my wife's operation and I help her out with the spraying and fertilizing," Ray continues. "She decides what to plant, when to plant, where to plant." He also helps sell at the farmers' markets.

Small grains, too . . .

"We have another 100 acres of row crops. I raise four or five different grains," Ray explains. "We sell the grain to a fellow who's feeding a lot of chickens, ducks and geese. And we've got six sheep and two beef calves that he's raising."

The farm keeps Ray busy in the

winter, too. "We heat the house with wood that I cut from the farm," he says. "And two winters in the last five years we've heated the greenhouse with wood, too. We have one of those big outside wood burners that you only have to feed with wood three times a day. There's 300 gallons of hot water that circulates throughout the greenhouse."

These past two years the Knapps have gone down to Cancun, Mexico, in the winter. "We spend 7 to 10 days there," Ray says with a hint of pleasure in his voice. "Normally we would ski in the wintertime, but we haven't in the last few years. As a golf course superintendent, you can't get away in the summer so we'd go skiing out in the mountains in the winter."

Ray plays golf only six or eight times a year. "And it's usually with group outings," he adds.

Ray plans to continue in golf sales with Spring Valley until he retires. But you can bet this good ol' farm boy won't retire from farming at the same time. He'll keep right on plowing and planting and fertilizing as long as Knapp's Fresh Veggies are in demand. ♣

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