

Golf Course Friendships Keep Him From Retiring Too Early

By Lori Ward Bocher

People are always asking 77-year-old Vince Johnson when he's going to retire from selling turf equipment. Well, he tried retirement for four months, way back in 1982 when he was a young man of 60 years. "And for four months it was driving me nuts," he recalls. So Vince has no plans of retiring from a job and customers that he dearly loves.

"As long as I'm physically and mentally capable, I'm going to continue to do what I do, and I love doing it with the people I'm doing it with. There's no greater bunch of people than the people in the golf course industry," he says. "My only regret is, as one person, it's awfully hard to get around and see everyone that I'd really like to see.

"I could do other things. But I really enjoy this so much. It keeps me busy. I need challenges. I guess that's just the way I'm built. I thrive on challenges," Vince adds.

Vince runs his own turf equipment distribution company, now known as Johnson Turf Equipment (formerly Johnson and Associates). In August, he hired Mike Limoni as a sales rep; Mike works out of Green Bay. Together, they cover all of Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. How he got to the point of starting his own distribution company at the age of 68 goes way back to the beginning and follows an uphill, downhill, curving journey.

Father a landscaper . . .

Born in 1922 in Zion, Ill., much of Vince's childhood overlapped the Great Depression. "My father was in the tree and landscape service," he recalls. "When I was a small boy he used to take me up to a nursery in Wisconsin and I would go around with him when he was selecting plant material. He did a lot of landscape work on the north shore of the Chicago area. When I was about 15 years old I began to climb trees – trimming them – for my father.

"I did that until October of 1942 when I went into the Navy during World War II," Vince continues. He became an air traffic controller and spent the remainder of the war years in Alaska – most of them on the island of Attu, one of the last islands in the Aleutian chain. "We were only 60 miles from Kamchatka, Russia. We ran nuisance bombing raids over the Kuril Islands in the northern part of Japan.



"It was kind of boring," Vince says with a laugh. "We only had about 12 days of sunshine in two years. It wasn't cold, but we had a lot of snow and a lot of fog. The fog would just roll in – I'd never seen fog like that in my entire life. It was so heavy because the Japanese Current ran through there."

After the war, he wanted to go to college. "But the colleges were full. I got married in 1947, and then we had kids. I couldn't go to school then," Vince explains. Instead, he worked for the Civil Aeronautics Administration, the forerunner of today's FAA. However, his assignment in Evansville, Ind., wasn't challenging enough for him. Plus, he knew he'd have to move around a lot if he wanted to advance within the CAA. So he left the air traffic control business.

Back to landscaping . . .

"I came back to Illinois and worked into the business with my father," he explains. "I've always been an outdoor person. Getting back to landscaping and working outdoors was really my cup of tea."

In 1955, he had an opportunity to work for a large nursery – Eugene A. de St. Aubin Nursery in Addison, Ill. "I was their landscape designer for seven years," Vince points out. "We did a lot of commercial work in the Chicago area. After seven years, the owners decided that they didn't want to be in the retail business anymore, they just wanted to sell wholesale. So they





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turned the retail part of the business over to me and I went into the landscape construction business for myself in 1961."

His business was known as Johnson Landscape Company. "My former boss had a lot of connections with golf courses where they wanted to landscape their club houses, tennis courts, swimming pools, tee boxes – things like that," Vince recalls. "They would call me in to design the areas, my old boss would sell the plant materials, and then the superintendent would do the planting. I did a number of courses in the Chicago area that way."

National award . . .

But he's most proud of the construction work he did at an old railroad station and right-of-way in LaGrange, Ill. For this joint venture, he and the designer, golf course architect Lawrence J. Packard, received a national award from the American Association of Nurserymen in 1967. "It was the highlight of my life," Vince recalls. "We flew to Washington to receive the award. Lady Bird Johnson was at the ceremony because of her beautification program for America."

Now that he was in business for himself, Vince decided to get some schooling in business by attending a

two-year community college. He also joined the volunteer fire department since his company office in Villa Park, Ill., was close to a fire house. He remained with the department for the next 22 years.

When the oil embargo hit in 1972, the bottom dropped out of the landscape construction business. "It was just like everything froze up. It was unbelievable," Vince says. "I had a grounds maintenance company as part of my landscaping business, so I kept that but got rid of my heavy equipment and everything else."

"In 1975 the fire department had an opportunity to grandfather certain of us volunteers into the department full time," he continues. "The fire department was my second love, and I could work on a 24/48 shift (24 hours on, 48 hours off), so I was able to keep my grounds maintenance company and be on the fire department where I served as a paramedic for the next seven years."

As someone who has always liked challenges and the opportunity to learn, in 1979 and 1980 Vince returned to school, Southern Illinois University, where he received a bachelor's degree in business administration.

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Move to Wisconsin . . .

Sadly, Vince's wife, Delores, died in 1980. He married Alice in 1982, and they decided to move to her home state of Wisconsin. "I had spent a lot of time up here before, and I liked it," Vince recalls. So they moved to Neshkoro in northeastern Marquette County. Vince was 60 years old at the time.

"What I was going to do was retire," he says with a big laugh. "I did for four months. And for four months it was driving me nuts." He tried a number of different things, but none of them seemed quite right until he connected with Star City Fabrication out of Minnesota that made the Mars Sweeper for golf courses. "I became a national sales rep for this company, setting up distributors throughout the country, calling on salesmen with the distributors," Vince explains. "That's when I started to have regular contact with golf courses, in the early 1980's."

But in 1989, the company closed its doors without notice. "I decided in 1990 that nobody was going to close their doors on me anymore," Vince declares. "That's when I started up my own business as Johnson and Associates." He was 68 years old at the time.

Starts his own company . . .

"I didn't want to sell mowers. There are plenty of mowers out there," Vince explains. "I decided that I wanted to sell equipment that was unique, that would be interesting to golf course superintendents because they'd be labor saving and efficient. And that's been my philosophy ever since."

His product line has varied somewhat over the years, and he thanks the golf course superintendents who have called him with ideas for equipment that he could carry. "If it weren't for them, I wouldn't be selling some of this equipment," he adds.

"Just three years ago, I was at the OJ Noer Research Facility," Vince explains. "They had come up with this piece of equipment to simulate golf shoe spikes in the turf. I looked at it and said, 'Hey, I think something can be done with this.' Wayne Otto came over at about the same time and I told him I was going to look into the possibilities.

"And I did," he continues. "I spent a couple of months on and off talking with Wayne about what we could do with this piece of equipment. I went to a manufacturer and asked them if they'd be interested in



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developing it. They said they'd do it, and we've had the product on the market for about three years now."

That product is the Spiker Overseeder made by the T.I.P. Company in Stevens Point. "It's used for penetrating the green when overseeding," Vince explains. "We wanted something that would not disturb the green and would lead to better grass seed germination. So far, we've been very happy with the results. And we're beginning to get national recognition with it now."

In addition to the Spiker Overseeder from T.I.P., Vince also distributes turf equipment for Terra Care Products, the Kromer Co., and Greens Groomer World-Wide. And he carries a complete line of pruning tools from the Michael's Company.

Proud supporter . . .

Vince participates and takes pride in the golf industry. "I'm a very avid supporter of the WGCSA, the WTA, the OJ Noer Research Facility, the Northern Great Lakes GCSA, and the GCSAA," he points out. "I really believe strongly in what these organizations do. Their research, their symposiums. It's so important because we all need to continue to learn. I do. If I wasn't learning anything, something would be wrong."

He also enjoys his association with golf course superintendents. "I think if I knew some 30 years ago the relationship that I'd develop with the golf course superintendents and their crews, I would have gone into this business 30 years ago," he says. "There's such a relationship here with the people. They're not just my customers. They're friends. I do things with them, like play golf. Where else can you have a relationship like that?"

Those relationships mean even more to Vince since he lost his second wife, Alice, in May of 1998. "It was a devastating loss for me," he admits. "Our kids were all gone so it was just the two of us. We did everything together. It's taken time to heal. But life has to go on. We had a wonderful life together."

Vince has four children from his first marriage, and Alice had four children from her first marriage. So Vince now has eight children, 17 grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren scattered across the country.

For a man whose vocation is also his avocation, Vince doesn't have too many interests that aren't connected to his work. "I'm a lousy golfer, but I still love to play golf. I play with guys I enjoy being with," he points out. "And I do fish. I was an avid ice fisherman at one time. I fished whenever I could until I moved up here to Wisconsin. I still fish, but nothing like I used to."

Since his early days working on Chicago area golf courses, Vince has seen a lot of changes in the industry. The biggest of those changes is the number of courses. "I can't even begin to imagine the number of golf courses that are being built or being contemplated," he says. "I hear people say they're being overbuilt. But I also see all these baby boomers who are playing golf now — and a lot of them are playing. When they retire in a few years they're going to be playing a lot more golf."

"I see the future of the golf industry as just going crazy," he continues. "One of these days I can sit back and say, 'Man, oh man, I'm sure glad I was a part of this.'"

Vince, sit back and not be a part of it all? We'll see. ♣

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