

These Guys Have Fun Watching Grass Grow

Turf specialists have helped golf from the ground up



By Gary D'Amato, Golf Beat Reporter, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Editor's Note: This article appeared in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on April 19, 2000. Wisconsin Turfgrass Association director Jerry Kershasky invited a number of golf writers from daily papers around Wisconsin to the O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research and Education Facility for a tour and a visit with Noer Facility staff and UW - Madison faculty. The afternoon of that day was reserved for a round of golf, courtesy of Tom Harrison and Maple Bluff Country Club. The feature should have been call From Across The State for this issue! Gary's well written story will help a lot to get the word about the Noer Facility and its need for support out to the golfing public. For that, we say "thank you."

Verona - If you play golf, you spend hours walking on it, taking divots from it repairing ball marks in it and, on those occasions when you can't hole a putt, cursing it.

But you probably never think about it.

Turfgrass, the golf course's skin, gets no respect.

"Grass is like the Rodney Dangerfield of the plant world," said Terry Kurth, president of Badgerland Irrigation and an honorary director of the O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research and Educational Facility.

"Everybody loves a tree. Nobody thinks about the turf."

Spend a few hours with the research team at the O.J. Noer Facility, however, and you'll never look at a golf course the same way again.

These guys are passionate about grass. They can talk about root sys-

tems, pythium blight and the exaggerated dangers of pesticide run-off for hours on end. Play a round of golf with them at Maple Bluff Country Club, and they spend more time examining the *Poa annua* than the pin placements.

Call them grass geeks if you will, but golf wouldn't be the same game without dedicated scientists such as John Stier, Wayne Kussow, Jeff Gregos and Chris Williamson.

The O.J. Noer Facility opened in 1992. The Wisconsin Turfgrass Association raised \$350,000 in funds to build it, then deeded it over to the University of Wisconsin. It was named after Noer, a Wisconsin graduate and non-golfer whose contributions to the sport were enormous.

Noer developed Milorganite, a fertilizer that is processed from sewage and widely used by all segments of the turf industry. He became an internationally respected turfgrass agronomist and in 1985 was inducted into the Wisconsin State Golf Association Hall of Fame.

Noer's spirit lives on at the facility that bears his name.

The Turfgrass Disease Diagnostic Lab, managed by Gregos, provides disease diagnostic information and management recommendations to turfgrass growers.

It's not unusual for a panicked golf course superintendent to remove a diseased turf sample from his course, drive three hours to Verona, hand the sick grass to Gregos and ask, "What the heck is this, and how do I get rid of it?"

Stier, an assistant professor in the UW Department of Horticulture, is experimenting with a strain of supina bluegrass found in the Alps in Germany and Austria.

Supina thrives in shade, making it perfect for course tee boxes nestled in trees.

"Supina was found on cattle paths in the Alps," Stier said. "It has high traffic tolerance and high shade tolerance, which gives it excellent potential for golf courses."

The next time you play at University Ridge, which happens to be adjacent to the O.J. Noer Facility, you'll stand on supina bluegrass. Some of the tee boxes have been seeded with it.

Kussow, a professor in the Department of Soil Science, spends most of his time trying to grow bentgrass in less than optimal conditions. He is trying to figure out how to reduce stresses on greens that receive little sunlight or are cut extremely short (for faster Stimpmeter readings).

Williamson, a turfgrass entomologist in the Department of Entomology, has done extensive research targeted at management of black cutworms and white grubs in golf turf.

Hey, somebody's got to figure out how to kill those critters. You wouldn't want a black cutworm poking his little head out of the turf and deflecting your 3-foot putt for birdie, now would you?

We need these guys. Unfortunately, the scientists at the O.J. Noer Facility spend a good deal of their valuable time trying to raise money to keep the facility running and fund their projects.

So if you see a plastic O.J. Noer donation box at your local golf course this summer, drop in a buck or two.

Then stand back and watch it grow. ♣