



The End of the Scotts Era

By **Monroe S. Miller**, Golf Course Superintendent, Blackhawk Country Club

Two recent events combined to inspire me to sit down and put on sort of an informal record the story of O.M. Scott & Sons in Wisconsin. It also could be considered part of my duties as WGCSA chapter historian and Grass Roots editor.

One event was Gerry Sweda's seminar in Fond du Lac last March. I was visiting with him and reminded him he had been in my golf course shop as a regional sales manager with Scotts over 25 years ago. He was traveling with Jerry O'Donnell at the time. Of course, he said he recalled that visit, but I cannot imagine that he did.

The other event was a Reinders open house in Madison in early spring. Among those in attendance was Tom Wentz, currently the regional manager for Scotts (I guess, or is it Andersons?). I like Tom a lot and in my effort at being a smart alec I asked him, "who is going to sign your paycheck next week?"

Actually, I sympathize with all these guys who have suffered through so many changes with Scotts of late. There is little more discomfiting in life than the unknown, and with Scotts the last few years, there have been lots of unknowns.

When most of us think of Scotts, we think of quality. They've made a lot of excellent products over the years. But when they let an occasional dog get into the marketplace, they have always been quick to stand behind their name and correct whatever shortcomings there were and do what was necessary to make the superintendent customer satisfied.

We all think of Scotts and fertilizer. If I am not mistaken, O.M. Scott & Sons actually started out as a seed company. When Bob Erdahl left Blackhawk as our assistant to assume his own course, he gave me a wonderful little used book from 1922, published by O.M. Scott & Son, entitled *The Seeding and Care of Golf Courses*. It is one of my treasures, both because of Bob's kindness and because there will be no more Scotts on the golf course scene, except for seed.

Also, when I think of Scotts, I've observed in my career they were probably the first company to send out a specialized, well-trained and highly educated sales force that focused on a relatively narrow product line. We have had some great ones in Wisconsin.

Dan Mack was the first Scotts salesman I recall, although he never called on me. I met him while I was an undergrad turf student working for Peter Miller at Nakoma in the 1960s. Pete was a Milorganite man - I have written of going to the train yard on West

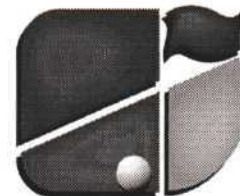
Washington Avenue to help off load Nakoma's Milorganite order from a train boxcar. Mack seemed knowledgeable and got the company rolling in Wisconsin. He suffered a serious car accident that put an end to his career. However, he is still alive, residing in Janesville. Bruce Schweiger recently made contact with him; there may be a story there.

Jerry O'Donnell succeeded Dan Mack for Scotts. Jerry was as qualified as anyone in America for a job like the Scotts tech rep. He was one of the first, if not THE first, to get a turf degree for the UW - Madison. And he followed that with a MS degree under Dr. Jim Love. He worked for Scotts in Marysville briefly after graduation, took the job as golf course superintendent at Nakoma and was vice president of the WGCSA when he returned to the Scotts payroll in 1973 as the tech rep for Wisconsin.

Jerry was like an extension agent - well educated and well experienced and well traveled. Plus, he didn't use any kind of tough sell techniques, mainly because he didn't have to. He stayed in the state until a promotion in 1978. He moved up the Scotts corporate ladder - regional sales manager, national sales manager and eventually a VP. He and his wife Jo are now retired and live on a lake near Reedsburg. I see him at least once a year at our alumni Christmas lunch.

Steve Andre was our Scotts salesman for a brief period, probably measured in months. Steve was a UW - Madison grad and a Madison guy and came back to Wisconsin from the PTI - Proturf Institute. He left Scotts for a job at Oscar Mayer here in Madison.

Then the Dick Evenson era began. He was a favorite



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among those who called on Wisconsin golf course superintendents. Always upbeat and helpful, he was knowledgeable about his product line. He was a ready and strong supporter in any way he could be of the superintendent. I saw him a couple of years ago at the GCSAA conference and show. He came down on his own just to see old friends from Wisconsin. Dick's era in Wisconsin with Scotts was 1979 - 1989.

Evenson was succeeded by Wayne Horman in 1990. Wayne was a bright, enthusiastic and sincere kid who started after graduation from the UW - Madison. Like Evenson, he was warmly welcomed by superintendents all across the state and was very easy to trust. He has done well with Scotts, one of the few (maybe the only) Proturf guys still with Scotts. He now heads their seed and biotechnology operations. Wayne left in 1997.

A past president of the WGCSA took over for Wayne. Mike Semler was another trusted, intelligent, UW - Madison grad. Obviously he had the respect of his colleagues since he elected him to our highest office. Mike impressed me with how much he knew about the Scotts product line, and how he had acquired that comfort in such a short time. But then it dawned on me that he, like me, had been using Scotts much of his career as a golf course superintendent! Mike had only a brief sales career; he tried it, was good at it, but really wanted back onto the golf course. Lee Bruce and Dave Weber welcomed him back with open arms.

I've told Mike that he must have had a crystal ball or else he is one lucky dude. Since his year in 1998, I have bought Scotts fertilizer from Cubby O'Brien of Turf Partners, another good salesman who calls on me. But TP game way to Reinders in the Scotts scheme of things and recently I placed an order with Bruce Schweiger, who used to work for TP and before that...he worked for Scotts! No wonder I asked Tom Wentz who was signing his paycheck.

Any discussion of Scotts and their presence in Wisconsin has to make note of Tom Wentz. Tom is the consummate professional, always ready with help whenever you need it. I cannot count the times I have made a request from him and every one of those times he has come through. He moved to Deforest in 1982, raised his family here in Wisconsin, and has a son on the Marquette University golf team. Despite his Buckeye upbringing, he seems to love Wisconsin.

Now Scotts Proturf is owned by Andersons. And within a short time I'll bet the familiar dark green Scotts oval trademark will disappear and if you want some Scotts product, it will have to be seed or something you buy from the homeowner line at your local hardware store.

Many people in the turf industry in Wisconsin know Terry Kurth. But did you know he also worked for Scotts? Sure enough, as an excellent Proturf seminar instructor. But he bought a Barefoot Grass franchise for

Madison, moved back, ran a successful business and ended up president of PLCAA. He is another success story for a UW - Madison turf student who to this day works hard to pay back the debt he feels for an excellent education.

The Scotts Proturf seminars were an annual affair, held somewhere in the state at no charge. The instructors, like the sales force, were excellent. I still have all the seminar manuals I received over the years.

Among my best memories of Scotts was a three-day visit to Marysville where I saw first hand the science and research that went into their products, the plants that manufactured them, and the staff behind the operation. It was unforgettable.

And now it comes to an end. I cannot say that I don't care or that I am not saddened. It seems to happen everyday in America anymore - corporate mergers and buy-outs. Someone makes big bucks somewhere along the line, and the end product will not be the same, regardless of what you will hear and hear and hear. I just hope no careers were lost or people hurt in this massive change.

But what won't change are the memories of the men and the company that have been right there at the heart of my golf course career for over 30 years. I worked for O'Donnell and both Semler and Horman worked on my staff at different times. That matters most to me. ♣

