

# Retired From the Course, But Not From the Business

By Lori Ward Bocher

From the smallest blade of bentgrass to the largest oak tree. From the age of 12 to the age of 57. From the East Coast to the Midwest. Dan Quast knows golf courses. Even now, after retiring as a golf course superintendent, he's still putting his knowledge and experience to work by serving golf course superintendents and arborists through his company, DHD Tree Products.



Dan Quast, born and raised down the street from a golf course in Dayton, Ohio, started his golf career as a caddie at the ripe old age of 12. By the time he was 14 he started working on the grounds crew. And after graduating from high school he went straight to the Stockbridge School of Agriculture at the University of Massachusetts where he enrolled in the two-year turf program and graduated in 1963. At the time, Penn State was the only other university that offered a two-year degree in turf management.

In the 38 years since, Dan's professional path has taken him to Wisconsin twice. And he's left his mark on the WGCSA by starting *The Grass Roots* back in 1974. For more on his career, let's join the interview.

**Lori: Tell us about your early career, after graduating from college.**

Dan: After I graduated I took care of a little golf complex in New Jersey that was owned by the W.A. Cleary Corporation. I was there two years. From there I went to Troy Country Club in Troy, Ohio where I worked for three years. Then it was on to Springfield Country Club in Springfield, Ohio, for five years.

**Why the various moves?**

I kept upgrading myself to bigger courses, better salaries. Then in 1973 I went to the Milwaukee Country Club where I was the superintendent for 15 years.

**What were some of the highlights of your years at Milwaukee?**

I think the highlight at Milwaukee was updating the course to today's golf game. I enjoyed the opportunity to work with Robert Trent Jones over most of those 15 years. We made a few changes each year. I learned a

lot about golf course construction – building greens, tees and bunkers.

The other highlight was just being able to work at such a great course and for such a great membership.

**What kinds of changes did you make on the course?**

The course hadn't been touched in so many years that most of the fairway bunkers were out of play. When they were built, golfers didn't have the equipment that they have today. The only people who were hitting into the bunkers were the high handicap golfers. The good golfers were hitting right over the top of them. Also, tees had to be enlarged.

**During your years at the Milwaukee Country Club, you were involved with the WGCSA, right?**

Yes I was. I originally started *The Grass Roots* in



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1974. And I did that until Monroe took it over. He's done a fantastic job – far better than I ever did. But I had the initiative at least to start it.

**What prompted you to do that?**

I had come from other superintendent organizations that had a newsletter, but when I came to Wisconsin there wasn't one. I thought it was a great opportunity for the superintendents to be able to communicate to each other. I also thought it was a great idea to raise revenue for the association through the sale of ads.

**What did those first issues look like?**

They were very small. They were just basically typed and printed, folded in the middle, and stapled. I asked superintendents to write articles. It wasn't very elaborate. But it most certainly did get the job done.

**Why did you leave Milwaukee eventually?**

After I had been there for 15 years I got a call from Bob Williams down in Chicago. He wanted to know if I knew of anybody who was interested in applying at Medinah Country Club. At first I wasn't interested in it myself. But then he told me they were looking for a

superintendent to help them make changes on the course and to get ready for the US Open in 1990. So I told them they could put my name in. I interviewed and consequently got the job.

I went there in 1989. In 1990 we hosted the US Open. It was the championship that Hale Irwin won – the first US Open ever to go into sudden death.

**Is that part of what attracted you to Medinah, the opportunity to work on a US Open?**

That was one of the reasons. The other reason was that, after walking around to look at the golf courses, I saw an opportunity to make improvements and to start programs that would make a difference.

**Did you also have a PGA championship while you were there?**

Yes we did, in 1999.

**Looking back at the opportunity to host two championships, what does that mean to a superintendent?**

It's really a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be involved in a major championship, and I was fortunate enough to be involved in two of them. Both were

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exciting events. I had the opportunity to experience and work with all kinds of people from all different sides of golf. I met a lot of great people. It really was very memorable.

## **Did you get to interact with players very much?**

No, not a whole lot. We worked very closely with the PGA staff and USGA staff on both championships. But once it's set up and the championship gets started, the players pretty much come in for the week and then leave right away. I have had the opportunity to meet tour players, but not a lot of time to interact with them.

## **What was the major challenge of hosting those two championships?**

The major challenge was trying to coordinate and put it all together. There are so many aspects besides taking care of the turf on the inside of the ropes. You have to coordinate, with many committees and tournament officials, where the hospitality and concession tents will be and how the people will best be accommodated. You have to determine where bridges will be built. Complexes must be built for the news media.

We were involved with all of these issues for three years. Both the PGA and USGA had offices on the grounds for three years prior to the championships. So it was not only working to get the course prepared for the championship, but also working and interacting with these people to have it culminate in a success.

## **During your years at Medinah, were the championships the highlight or was something else?**

The most gratifying part at both Milwaukee and Medinah was being able to work with superintendents who interned under my management and now have their own courses to manage. I am very proud of their successes and I consider them my extended family – 18 fine gentlemen in all.

Another thing I'm proud of, both at Milwaukee and Medinah, was the tree program we started. At both courses we had the best golf course tree program in the country. That was one of the best contributions I made to Medinah.

Medinah is a very old golf course that covers 640 acres. There are three 18-hole courses in a square mile. On the championship golf course, each fairway is lined with oaks, some of them over 200 years old. It was important that the character of Medinah be maintained by preserving the trees.

To start a tree program at Medinah, I hired a graduate of UW-Stevens Point, Randy Miller, who had a masters degree. He set up the program under my guidance, but basically the program is his. We put together a tree staff and started straightening up a problem that really hadn't been addressed in a long

time. Randy moved on and is working in the West now. For the past seven years Bob Camp has been the arborist there. He's done a tremendous job with the program. Almost all the tree work is done in house.

## **Is planting new trees a part of the program?**

Yes. Over the three golf courses we planted 120 trees a year. We got rid of a lot of unwanted trees and started planting trees that really belonged in those native forests. We also started a Dutch elm disease prevention program, treating 95 elms – 30 some every year. We didn't lose any elms during the 12 years I was there. And we started a fertilization and trimming program on the oaks.

## **When and why did you decide to leave Medinah Country Club?**

I left Medinah on March 31 of this year so my wife, Beverly, and I could spend more time operating our company, DHD Tree Products.

## **Is this a new company?**

No. Many years ago when I was at Milwaukee Country Club and we were trying to prevent Dutch elm disease, I worked with a forester in River Hills named Rod Johnson. We did the early research on

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Arbotect (which is used to prevent Dutch elm disease) and another product.

During that process, two other men and I started a company to get a patent for an idea we had for injecting elm trees. It was built around having a kit that the home owner could buy at the store. That product never came to pass. But in the meantime, we had started DHD Tree Products.

Over the years we three partners worked at building the company. Each gave a contribution of time and talent. When we made a little money we would pay expenses and put the rest in equity. Then one of the partners decided to buy a tree service and got out. When the other partner passed away, I decided to retire from Medinah and concentrate on DHD Tree Products.

I'm really excited about this change. It sort of rejuvenates me. It gives me the opportunity to travel throughout the state and visit superintendents and also to work with tree programs. It sure is a pleasure to get out and see the superintendents and golf courses. I've been in places in the state that I'd never seen before. There are some beautiful places in the state of Wisconsin.

**Are you focusing on golf courses for your clients?**

Yes, we're focusing on golf courses and also the trees on the courses. We're going to be working with arborists throughout the state, too. We're handling two products, Arbotect and Alamo. Arbotect is a fungicide used to prevent Dutch elm disease. And Alamo is used to prevent oak wilt.

**So you're just selling tree products?**

No. In addition to Arbotect and Alamo, we carry the Emerald Isle turf products which I think are superior. We carry biostimulants and a new foliar fertilizer called NutriRational which I think is going to be the future of fine turfgrass fertilization, the standard for fertilizing greens in the future. We're very proud of that product. We carry a line of cost-saving fungicides.

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**It sounds like this business is full time for you now.**

Yes it is. We're located in Juneau, Wisconsin.

**What do you see as your future with this company?**

We're very happy with the way it's been progressing. My wife and I hope we can grow the company and make a future for some younger people who can continue on. We don't want it to stop with us.

One of the nice things about running my own business is that I don't have to worry about the day when someone hands me a gold watch and says, "You're through." It puts our future in our own hands. I'm excited about that. If I want to work to 70 or 75, I can do that.

**I've heard other superintendents talk about how the job of the superintendent is becoming a young person's job. You're in your 50's...**

I'm 57.

**Did you sense that you were one of the older superintendents out there?**

I really didn't feel that way. I've always stayed abreast of the changes in the turf business. I don't feel old at all. After all the experiences I've had over 38 years, I'm still excited about it. I left the business for a chance to take control of my own life, to be able to go out and maybe share the knowledge I've gained with other people.

**I didn't mean to imply that you were too old to do the job. I just wondered if you suddenly realized, "My gosh, everybody in the business is younger than me now."**

Yeah, but I can remember when I was the youngest guy. When I came to Milwaukee Country Club I was 30 years old and I was the young person. In the past 27 years I've gone from being one of the younger superintendents to one of the older ones. But I've always thought of myself as being a young and creative thinker. I never felt too old for the job.

**What other professional organizations have you been involved with besides the WGCSA?**

I'm president of the Turfgrass Information Center at Michigan State University. It's a database for turfgrass information. Michigan State has the OJ Noer Research Library, the largest turfgrass library in the world. The Turfgrass Information Center not only has all the up-to-date research that's being done in the world, it also has all the research that goes back 20 years. And it can all be easily accessed through a TGIF database. It really is quite an information tool for superintendents, college students, and college professors.

I am also on the endowment committee for the Illinois Turfgrass Foundation. I've been involved with that for the past five years. I was never as involved with the Illinois association as the Wisconsin association

because my job at Medinah kept me busy most of the time.

**As you look back and reflect on 38 years in the industry, what are some observations you've made, changes you've seen, advice you have for other superintendents?**

For superintendents today, there's so much more to know about tools and equipment and chemicals. The young superintendents who are entering the business today are getting in at a prime time because of all the changes in the past 10 or 15 years that have helped us to do our jobs better. Topdressing programs. Pesticides and equipment have improved. More technology. It really is a fascinating and fantastic business.

At the same time, the demands on the game and on the superintendent have changed, too. Today's superintendents have to be human resource people, turf experts, and good business managers. They most certainly have to be all three.

**How has your change in careers changed your lifestyle?**

As every superintendent knows, the job is pretty much seven days a week from April to October. I've been doing that for 38 years, and after 38 years it's nice that my wife and I are able to take some weekends off and spend time for ourselves. We're looking forward to doing those things that we've never had the opportunity to do before.

We bought a log home on Fox Lake. We're excited about that. Someone is even trying to teach us to fish, which I thought would be easier. I also enjoy having more time to play golf, which is one of the things I really like to do. ♣



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