

# From Taking Pictures, to Creating Picture-Perfect Turf

By Lori Ward Bocher

He's not a golf course superintendent, but you've seen him at many of your meetings; at 70, he's still eager to learn. Maybe you've heard him speak; he believes strongly in colleagues sharing information – so strongly that he's helped form several organizations in his industry.

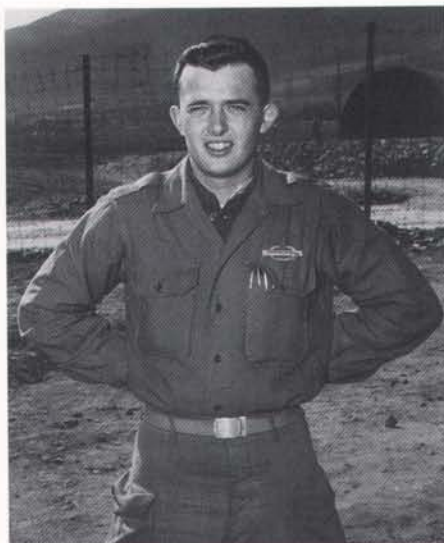
And maybe, if you stop to think about it, you thought the photos he used to accompany his talk were pretty darn good. Well, that's because he studied to become a photographer. He was an Army photographer during the Korean War, capturing on film the likes of U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower, French President Charles de Gaulle and Republic of Korea President Syngman Rhee – plus a few USO show girls like Marilyn Monroe and Debbie Reynolds.

And just who is this photographer turned landscaper? Roy Zehren, owner of Natural Athletic Turf, Inc., out of Mequon. Instead of taking pictures for a living, he makes picture-perfect athletic fields and consults others on how to do the same.

## Start at the beginning...

Roy, who was born in Milwaukee in 1930, admits that landscaping is in his blood. "My father was a landscaper – one of the first in Wisconsin," he explains. "And I had five uncles in the business. At one time there were four or five Zehren landscape businesses under different names.

"I remember putting in my first lawn – where I actually did the seeding and everything – when I was 10 years old," he continues. But he didn't really care for the business that much. So shortly



after graduating from high school in 1948, he studied at the Layton Art Academy (now the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design) and Milwaukee Area Technical College where he received a degree in photography.

"Then I was drafted during the Korean War," he relates. "I started out as an infantryman but ended up as a photographer and correspondent for the Army Signal Corps." This is the division that does all of the public relations work for the Army, supplying photographs and articles to publications, among other things.

"I really got a lot of exposure in that job," Roy recalls. "In fact, I was one of the few people who was allowed to photograph President Eisenhower, President De Gaulle and Korean President Rhee. These are the photos I'm most proud of. Not many people can say they did that."

He had many other interesting assignments during his years with the Signal Corps. He escorted



Time-Life photographers all over the front line and did some freelance work himself for Time-Life. He became the personal photographer of one of the generals. He spent two months with the French

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battalion and two months with the British battalion. He shot stars like Marilyn Monroe and Debbie Reynolds who appeared in USO shows.

*(By the way, Roy plans to donate his Korean War photos to the Wisconsin State Historical Society's Veterans Museum.)*

### **Back to the U.S....**

When the war ended, Roy came back to Milwaukee. "I wanted to get a job in photography at the Milwaukee Journal or someplace else, but they said I didn't have enough experience," he recalls. So he did what he knew second best: "I became a landscaper. In the middle of 1954 I started Zehren Landscape Company."

He decided not to go in business with his father. "I've really never worked for anybody else in my

life," he points out. "I've always owned my own businesses." His father, who never wanted him to go to art school and study photography in the first place, helped him get started in his second career as a landscaper.

"I remember saying to him, 'Dad, I'm going into landscaping. But I have no tools, no nothing,'" Roy recalls. "He gave me a wheel barrow, a shovel, and some other basic tools. But two days later I got a bill from him for the tools. Dad said, 'If you're going to be a successful businessman, you've got to know there are expenses.'"

Roy worked out of his car that first year. He did residential work at first, then some commercial work and a few athletic fields as his business grew. "In 1960 I bought out my father," he says.

"Between 1962 and 1970 most of my uncles retired. By 1970 there were only two of us left in landscaping – one uncle and myself."

### **The move toward athletic fields...**

In the early 1970s, Roy had the good fortune of meeting Dr. Bill Daniel from Purdue University. "He invented the PAT system – Prescription Athletic Turf," Roy explains. "I got to know him, he got to know me. In 1974, when the first PAT football fields were built in North America, I was picked as a general contractor. I built the first PAT field in 1974, Engleman Field at UW-Milwaukee. That was a test plot for Camp Randall in Madison because they wanted to use it there. But Camp Randall ended up getting new artificial turf instead."



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Roy formed a new company in 1974, Natural Athletic Turf, for the building of athletic fields. He ran this company along with his landscaping business. "But sports turf got to be more and more of my business, and landscaping less and less," Roy says. "So in 1993 I terminated Zehren Landscape. From '93 on it's just been Natural Athletic Turf.

"I think we're the only company, at least in Wisconsin, that does sports turf exclusively and full time," he continues, adding that in a typical year they may put in 30 to 35 baseball diamonds, one or two football stadium fields, four or five football practice fields, half a dozen soccer fields, and new greens and tees on golf courses. "Some of these we build from the ground up. Others we rebuild or renovate extensively."

Roy estimates that he's worked on about 20 golf courses so far. "I tell you what. I like to build them, but I couldn't maintain them like you superintendents do," he says. "That's another world. I'll build them, you take care of them. I don't think I'd like to get up every day and be in the same place. I like to move around more."

#### ***Business grows, evolves...***

After using the PAT system for several years, Roy invented his own "sand system" for playing fields. "My pride and joy is having done Marquette University's Valleylands playing fields in 1993," he adds. "Their soccer fields are still in my system."

Natural Athletic Turf employs eight to ten people in the summer and three or four during the winter. They usually work within a few hundred miles of Milwaukee, mostly for colleges, universities, public school districts, cities, villages and private sports organizations.

At the age of 70, Roy isn't cutting back just yet. "We get so many calls and so many chances to do more fields," he says. "I'm healthy

and feel like I'm 55, so why quit? We just keep doing as many as we can. Some years we do more, some less. Some years we do more golf work, some years more diamonds. It's never the same. This is going to be my 48th year in the business. Each year it gets a little better.

"I get to travel all over the United States," Roy continues. "I don't think I've ever had two days alike in 47 years. That's what keeps me going, knowing that no two days are alike. I also like this business because we don't work in the winter."

A few years ago, Roy did think about planning for retirement. "I formed another company, Sports Turf Consulting," he explains. "I thought maybe when I turned 65 or 70 I'd retire and just do consulting. But, as I said before, there's so much work out there and we're well known in the business. So now I'm running two companies. But some day, I suppose, I'll slow down and sell Natural Athletic Turf and just do consulting."

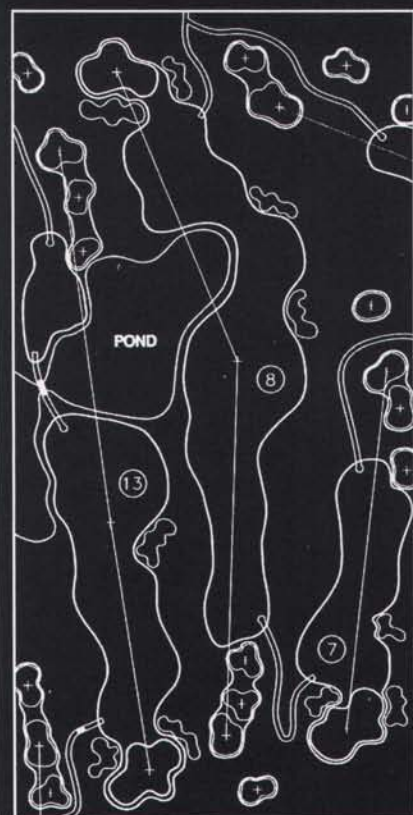
When he decides to sell, Roy would like the business to go to Jack Wallisch, his right-hand man and project manager for 22 years. "He will take over the company if he wants to," Roy says.

#### ***Keeping up with the times...***

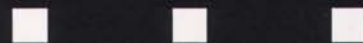
Roy has seen a lot of changes in the business since he put in his first lawn at the ripe old age of 10. "If I hadn't kept up on all the new systems, I would have been left in the dust," he says. "Times change. You can always learn new things. I figure my best business asset is that I started using new ideas right away, tried to be the first. By the time somebody else started doing the same thing, I was ahead of them."

And he's still learning. "I just got back from a conference in Tampa for the Sports Turf Managers Association," he continues. "Now there are four or five different methods across the country where

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they combine artificial turf with real turf, like they tried at Lambeau Field. The field in Tampa where the Super Bowl was played this year was partially artificial because they injected plastic tufts in the grass to help stabilize it. In fact, we STMA members walked the field two weeks before the game. But after watching the game, I don't think the field was that good.

"It was very slippery. It's always that way," Roy continues. "George Toma, who has been in charge of getting the field ready for every Super Bowl, does the same thing every year. He overseeds very heavily with rye. And he puts on tons of fertilizer. The grass gets lush and thick, but it's also young and fragile. At half time the players had to go and change their shoes. They weren't allowed to practice on that field before the game so they weren't quite sure what to use for their footing."

#### **A spark plug...**

Roy has known George Toma, former groundskeeper for the Kansas City Chiefs, for many years. "He was one of 10 of us who, in 1981, founded the Sports Turf Managers Association of America," he recalls. "So was I. And I was on its board of directors for five or six years."

Roy was also one of the founders of the Wisconsin Landscape Contractors Association in 1965, and its third president. He was one of the founders of the Wisconsin Landscape Federation, an association of associations, in the early 1970s and also its president. He was an early member of the Wisconsin Turf Association and served on its board of directors. He helped start the Wisconsin Sports Turf Managers Association three years ago and currently serves on that board. He's also a member of the WGCSA and the Wisconsin Parks and Recreation Association.

"I've enjoyed being on a lot of boards," he says. "I get the pulse of what's going on this way." When asked what prompted him to help start so many industry organizations he answers, "I really don't know except that I'm a go-getter. Got a big ego, too. And I'm not ashamed to say that."

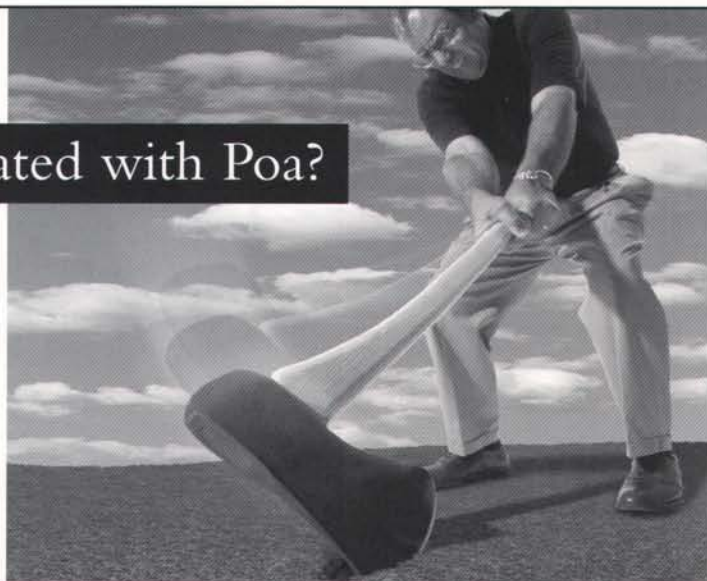
#### **Golfer and gardener...**

Roy doesn't just work with turf. He plays on it, too. "I love golf. I'm just an avid golfer," he admits. "And

so is my wife, Geri. We do a lot of golfing together." The Zehrens spend part of the winter near Destin in Florida's panhandle. They also have a summer place in Door County where they like to golf.

Roy even turns golfing into a learning experience. "You can always learn something on each course you go to," he says. "I kind of analyze each course and see things that I think I could do or that I wouldn't want to do. But I don't let it bother my game too

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much. I'm not going to be changing these courses."

Most of the year the Zehrens live in Port Washington where their hobby is gardening together. "We spend a lot of time, almost every day, in our garden," Roy says. "Lots of flowers. Vegetables, too. I like to work outside. I'm not a person who comes home from work and goes in the house. I work outside until it's dark."

"We belong to the Port Washington Garden Club," he continues. "Every year they have a garden walk where they sell tickets to the public so people can see five or six gardens. Our yard is on the tour this year."

Roy's wife, Geri, sells real estate in the Port Washington area. She also helps out a great deal with

Natural Athletic Turf. "I always say she's the brains of the company," Roy adds. Both Roy and Geri have children from previous marriages.

### ***Hasn't forgotten the camera...***

Did Roy ever regret not pursuing a career in photography? "No, no, no," he answers. "Because photography still plays an important part in my life. To me, landscaping is an art form. Photography is an art form. I combine the two. When I was first in business I took a lot of 'before and after' pictures of my job sites. I used that as a great selling tool."

"And I'm called on a lot to give lectures," he continues. "I gave a lecture just this past January at the Wisconsin Turf Expo. I use my slides to help show younger people how to do things. I try to give

something back to my industry. No, I have no regrets because I still use my photography with the business, and I still do my personal photography."

Plus, he's had a lot of personal satisfaction from his life's work. "When somebody comes to me with a raw piece of land and we can turn it into a beautiful athletic complex, that's just great," he says. "We did that for Beloit College a few years ago. They had 14 acres of woods, a swamp, and poor playing fields. We turned it into a completely new athletic complex. That gives me a chest-thumping pride. Everybody's happy. In business, that's what counts. Take something and make something."✻



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