



# He Keeps Putting on the Miles

By Lori Ward Bocher

Somehow, I see Joe Deschler as the man in Robert Frost's poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Okay, so Joe doesn't ride a horse. But he does see a lot of snow and woods in his sales territory of northern Wisconsin and Michigan's UP. It's the last verse, though, that reminds me of Joe the most:

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep.

*But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep."*

Joe puts on 45,000 miles a year as a territory sales manager for Horst Distributing, Inc. "It takes a lot of hours to drive that many miles," he says. "Any salesman who puts on more miles than that is spending too much time driving and not enough time selling. It would be better if I'd be putting on 35,000 miles a year as a salesman."

But his territory is too large and spread out to allow him that luxury. Joe's territory is defined by Hwy. 13 on the west; the shores of Lake Superior on the north; Antigo and Merrill to the south; and more than half way across the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to the east. There are more lakes than golf courses in his territory.

"I travel all the way to the end of Hwy. 41," he says of his drive up the Keweenaw Peninsula to the northernmost point in Michigan, Copper Harbor. "Marquette, Michigan (population 20,000) is the largest city in my territory. Up here, I must get a good chunk of the business to make it pay. When I covered more densely populated areas, if one customer wasn't in, I



Joe Deschler enjoys boating with granddaughter Mariah.

could go on and meet with others. Up here, I might go two and a half hours between accounts.

"But it's worth it," he adds. "Great people up here. I guess I just wish I could call on everybody because I also really miss the customers in my previous territories. And I enjoy seeing them at meetings."

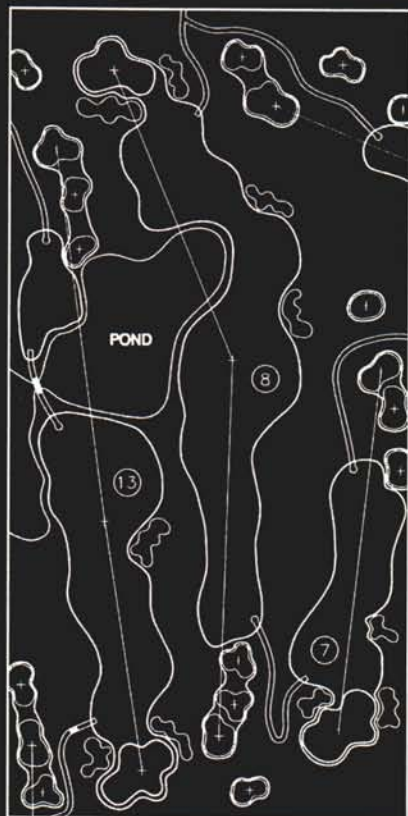
In addition to having a huge territory, Joe lives on Pearl Lake near Redgranite – close to 100 miles south of his nearest customer. "I'm gone most all the time during the week. Pretty much stay in motels every night. I guess we're just used to that," he points out. "Unpack Saturday, pack on Sunday. Occasionally I come home on a Monday night which is a real treat."

Joe wasn't working his present territory when he built his lake home. "I did look for a place in the far north for about three years and didn't find anything that made me jump at it," he says. "I found some fabulous places, but they were way out of my price range. I wasn't going to pay a half million dollars for a house." So he continues to commute from Redgranite until he finds that perfect spot.

### **Wears many hats...**

As a territory sales manager, Joe is responsible for everything in his territory – sales, demos, meeting with the board of directors, following up after the sale, and more. "And we deliver a lot of equipment as we do our sales," Joe adds. Unlike the horse-riding gentleman in Frost's poem, Joe drives a

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“super big” pick-up truck – dual-wheels, crew cab, 4-door, diesel – that doubles as his office when he’s on the road. And he pulls a big trailer full of the machinery he’s delivering or demonstrating.

Merger mania is obvious as Joe lists the line of turf equipment that Horst carries. “We sell Textron products, which are all orange now. But they used to be the green of Cushman, Ryan and Ransomes lines,” he points out. “We also sell Smithco, National, and Turfco products, along with many other lines too numerous to name. And we carry a complete line of fertilizers, chemicals, and soft goods.”

About 75 percent of Joe’s customers are golf course superintendents. The rest are municipalities, school systems, colleges, resorts, industrial plants, cemeteries, etc. As a former golf course superintendent, Joe especially likes calling on golf courses.

“It’s been very valuable to me to have had a golf course background,” Joe points out. “It has helped me greatly. People feel comfortable talking about any aspect of the business with me,

like, ‘Well, Joe, you remember back when you used to aerify,’ or whatever. I can relate. There isn’t a turf machine that’s made that I haven’t either operated or seen. I’m a far cry from a turf expert, but I know an awful lot about this business. And I plan to be in it for a long time yet.”

What does Joe like most about working in turf sales? “The people,” he answers. “Ninety-nine point nine percent of the customers are the greatest people in the world. I just love dealing with them. I like meeting the new people. And I enjoy what few old timers are left. Most of the people know me. It’s really great.”

What does Joe like least about turf sales? “I despise appointments,” he answers. “Invariably, the customers I’m with prior to a scheduled appointment will want more of my time for one reason or another and I then must cut them short. If someone needs me, I want to stay. Many times I need to come back to them after my appointment to finish up.”

Joe has been involved with many golf course groups. “I was a



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member of the GCSA for years," he points out. "And I've been a member of the WGCSA for years – when I was a superintendent and now through my company. I'm currently on the board of directors and an active member of the Northern Great Lakes GCSA. It's a great little association for northern Wisconsin and the UP."

#### **Lifetime miles...**

Joe hasn't always been in turf sales. He has traveled many "proverbial miles" in his lifetime, going from golf course superintendent to turf sales manager to business owner and back to turf sales manager.

Joe was born in Racine and raised in Mequon. His first golf course job was at Ozaukee Country Club. "I thoroughly enjoyed working on the golf course and I thought it would be a great

career," he recalls. So, after graduating from Shorewood High School, he traveled to Penn State for their two-year turf program.

"But I didn't graduate from the program," he points out. "I came home to get married and was planning to go back. But then I landed the job at Tripoli Country Club in Brown Deer. Being that young, I was probably insecure and thought I'd better stay there instead of going back to school. I was the superintendent there for close to nine years."

Joe had the distinction of being the youngest golf course superintendent in the state at that time. And although he enjoyed working on the course, he didn't enjoy working for 500 members. "I like to keep everybody happy, and that's impossible," he says. So he went to Horst Distributing in 1967 as a territory sales manager, and he cov-

ered the southeast part of the state along with much of central and northern Wisconsin and the western UP for 13-1/2 years.

#### **Tries his own business...**

Then he traveled down what turned out to be a dead end road. He worked as a marketing manager for an energy company in Wausau while starting up his own business, Energy Efficient Structures, Inc. "We manufactured and sold a foam block building system where you put the blocks in place for the structure you're building, and then pour concrete into the foam blocks," he explains.

"Our blocks had wood nailers built right into them so, when you were all done putting up the structure, you could apply the siding on the outside and the drywall on the inside," Joe explains. "It was a neat system. My entire home is built out



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of it. We also carried a complete line of other energy efficient products.

"So why did I get out of the business?" Joe rhetorically asks. "I picked the wrong time to be in it – the early to mid 80s when the construction business was really taking a slide. Spent all of our money. Used up all of our capital and investment. Not happy about it, but I did it. Now it's done. I'm glad I did it when I was younger because we were able to recover from it. Took a long time and a lot of hard work for my wife, Pat, and myself, but we did recover."

When he closed the doors to his business in 1988, Joe tried to get a sales job with Horst again. "But they had a full staff at the time, so

for the next six years I worked for two other companies that sold turf equipment but were mainly ag dealers – Mid-State out of Columbus and Hanley Implement in Sun Prairie," Joe recalls.

"They were good ag companies, but they didn't operate their turf businesses the way I was accustomed to," Joe remembers. "So I kept trying to get back in with Horst. When my good friend Ron Schumacher retired from Horst in 1994, I went back to work there."

***Different and the same...***

There are great differences between the territories he has covered for Horst – the south earlier versus way up north today: densely versus sparsely populated; small versus large geographic area;

seven to eight versus three months of golf. "They don't have as much time to make or spend money up north. Obviously, it's not as lucrative here as it was in the southern part of the state. But this is the territory that was open."

When it comes to customers, though, there are no differences. "I thoroughly enjoy the customers in both places," Joe says. "There are some of the greatest people in the world up here. I have some great friends in southern Wisconsin, too. And I try to give all customers the same treatment, no matter how much business they do with me."

Having worked in the turf industry for many years, Joe has witnessed a few changes. "The machinery is so specialized now,



"I'VE FOUND THAT THE DEEP ROUGH ISN'T SO BAD, AS LONG AS I HAVE MY GPS UNIT."

very technical, very precise," he says. "Years ago we had about five machines to sell – a fairway gang mower or an F10. Now we can give people a choice of seven different fairway mowers, many different rough mowers, and many different greens mowers. We sell 21 different models of bunker rakes today. Years ago, we had one."

"The changes in turf – if I were to wake up after a 20-year sleep, I'd probably be taking a 9 iron off of the tee and chipping onto this big, long green – which is actually the fairway now," Joe jokes. "The fairways are maintained like our greens were back then. Not quite, but close."

**Super's job is very demanding...**

"The customers – extremely tal-

ented people before, and likewise today," he continues. "But a greater number of customers are more educated today. The superintendent's job is very high-pressure. They are responsible for the happiness of all of those golfers who get one or two days a week off and go to the golf course to blow off steam and relax. If the golf course is in lousy shape, you've really ruined that guy's week."


"I really do give credit to all superintendents everywhere," Joe adds. "It's a very demanding job. My job is very demanding, too, but not as much as a superintendent's job. There are things that they *have* to do. There are things that I'm *supposed* to do. If my work didn't get done today, it wouldn't be the end of the world. But it

would be for them."

One worry that Joe had as a business owner, and still has as a territory sales manager, is not knowing what his financial outcome will be each year; there's no regular paycheck like there is with a superintendent's job. "If my customers don't buy from me, I don't get paid," he says. "I guess I've always worked on commission. It can be scary at times. If the economy goes down, people stop buying. When that happens it's kind of like working all week without being paid in the end."

**When he's not making miles...**

When Joe isn't on the road, he enjoys spending time with his family. "I tell people I've always been married, but it seems like only a few years," he says. Joe's



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wife, Patty, works part time as a pharmacy technician. "She is a great gal and has put up with my nonsense for all these years – and there has been plenty of that and much more to come! Even with all that, I think she still misses me when I'm gone – although she has always claimed that I cannot ever retire because I do drive her nuts. I am always on the go at home and rarely sit down."

They have two children and five grandchildren to visit. Joe, Jr., lives in Spring Grove, Minnesota with his wife and three children. Mary Jo lives in Markesan with her husband and two children. Joe, Jr., is in the radio business while Mary Jo is an office manager and college student.

If he weren't gone so much, Joe would spend more time fishing, boating, swimming and working in his yard. "I love early and late evenings. I live on a lake and probably get a chance to fish twice a year," he points out. "When you're gone all the time, you can't get much work done at home. A person who comes home every night can mow his lawn one night and weed his flower beds the next night. I don't get to do that. All the things one does each evening I must do on the weekend."

"My health has always been good, although I've had a couple of industrial accidents this fall and winter," Joe reports. "In one I broke seven bones and in the other I injured my knee. After a

bout with blood clots and my leg being locked up in a 45 degree position for five weeks, they were finally able to operate. Hopefully everything is fixed now and I am on the heal."

Joe has no plans to retire in the near future. But when he does retire, he won't disappear. "I can't imagine me ever not being in the turf business," he says. "I can't imagine getting old, retiring, and not visiting with all the people I know. I can't imagine just retiring and never being seen again. So that's a warning. Sorry guys, but you're not going to get rid of me."

Even in retirement, Joe will have "Miles to go before he sleeps, miles to go before he sleeps." ❧

## 2002 Symposium Will Bring Advice on "Doing More With Less"

The downturn in the U.S. economy coupled with a large number of golf opportunities available to today's golfer have challenged Wisconsin golf course superintendents to tighten the budget belt. The economic situation has inspired the topic for the 2002 Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium: *Doing More with Less – Resource, Time and Money Management*.

The Symposium will be convened at The American Club in Kohler for the second consecutive year. The dates are November 12 and 13.

Speaker invitations have been made, and we have a number of commitments in hand.

Dr. Mike Hurdzan will return to Wisconsin. A high profile golf course architect, Mike is well known for his design work and has received numerous awards in areas of environmental sensitivity and cost effective construction. He is also the author of the popular and widely read book, *Golf Course Architecture*.

The maestro of the popular on-line TurfNet, Peter McCormick, will be with us and will keynote the Symposium on "Can Computers Get You More For Less?" His presentation will include a discussion on the role of e-commerce and chat lines in the industry. As he does so well on TurfNet, he will also provide insight into areas we often overlook and take for granted in the rush of business.

Bob Graunke, golf course superintendent at TideWater Golf Club in Myrtle Beach, SC, works for a management company and will share his experiences in the golf business and tell of what a management company looks for on the golf course and how it affects the bottom line. Bob is going to discuss "value of money" issues we may be missing in our more traditional roles.

Bruce Williams, superintendent of Los Angeles CC, will present a condensed version of his GCSAA seminar, "Time Management for Superintendents."

A panel discussion among WGCSA members Mike Semler, Mike Drugan and Marc Davison will focus on "Tightening the Belt."

Additionally, the subjects of written maintenance standards and lease vs. purchase of equipment will be addressed. We are waiting for speaker confirmations on these topics.

The highlight of the WGCSA educational program each year is the Symposium; 2002 will be no different. Now is the time to plan to attend.