

There's Just Something About Wayne

By Lori Ward Bocher

Wayne Otto. Need I say more? You all know him better than I do. You see him at WGCSA and turf meetings, always ready to learn more. You call him when you want to try something new on the course because, chances are, he has already tried it. You can remember the first time you met Wayne. Some of you have stories that go way back.

But Wayne is retiring from Ozaukee Country Club at the end of 2002. So *The Grass Roots* editor wants me to do a Personality Profile on him. Surely, Monroe could write this one with his eyes shut. But he asks me to do it. And he asks me to interview Wayne in person, instead of on the telephone like I do so often. Maybe, just maybe, I saw a side of Wayne that the rest of you don't always see. So read on. And let me know if I've captured the essence of Wayne. Let me know if I've surprised you with a few things.

When I set up the appointment, I inform Wayne that I have to bring along my 9-year-old son, Andrew, who is on spring break. When we arrive at the shop two days later, Wayne greets Andrew with his dog, Max. "Would you like to take Max for a walk on the golf course?" he asks Andrew. He puts a leash on Max and gives Andrew a two-way radio in case he gets lost on the course and needs to call for help. "But Max knows his way around the course," he assures Andrew. Nice man, I say to myself.

Later, Wayne admits to me that he panicked when I told him I'd be bringing my son. "What can I find here for a 9-year-old boy to do?" he asked his assistant, Karl Wehausen, who then suggested Max. Andrew and Max are best buds for the morning. And Wayne tells me that



Max is a dog that needed a home after his step-son rescued it near the Mexican border. "What's one more dog or cat?" he rhetorically asks. There's definitely a soft side to Wayne.

Wayne and I step inside his neat shop office. You'd never guess you are inside a barn from the looks of his carpeted, paneled, and brightly lit office. Golf posters, golf calendars, bookshelves, and a golf-ball clock cover the walls. Wayne is dressed in a stylish green sweater. There's no doubt that this superintendent has a professional attitude.

Raised on nearby farm...

We begin the interview and I learn that Wayne was a farm boy. "My grandfather's farm was across Mequon Road, bordering what is today the course," he says. "I grew up on that farm. Hated every minute of it. Farming is a tough, tough life. I

used to hate summers. All the other kids would go someplace in summer and I was stuck on the farm."

Although Homestead High School now borders the course, Mequon didn't have a high school back in the 1950's. Wayne graduated from Cedarburg High School in 1957. And guess what. He didn't go back to the farm; he joined the Army Reserves where he saw six months of active duty at Fort Leonardwood in Missouri. "I had never been away from home before, never done any traveling," Wayne recalls.

But he came back close to home when he joined the grounds crew of Ozaukee Country Club in 1958. "Grunt work," he says. But it helped him find his calling. "After being born in the country, the city life looked pretty good to me. I thought about working at a bank in downtown Milwaukee," Wayne remembers. "But it didn't pay as much as working on the golf course. And I found out real quick that I was an outside person. The superintendent rode around in a golf cart. I thought that looked like a pretty nice job."

An intern from Penn State was working on the course, and that inspired Wayne to take the two-year turf management course at Penn State. He went in the fall of 1958 and graduated in the spring of 1960. "They didn't want me to intern at the same course I had been working on, so I went to Omaha, Nebraska," Wayne explains.

Wayne recalls one story that shows how much times have changed since then. "One day we received a truckload of sod that came from somewhere in western Iowa," he says. "This sod was literally grown in someone's pasture because there were cow pies



enveloped in the rolls. What a difference compared to the big rolls of sod that many use today.”

He stayed at that course until he got his first superintendent job at a 9-hole course, Sunset Valley Country Club, in 1961. “I designed it, built it and maintained it until 1964.”

In 1964 he went to Lincoln, Nebraska where he became superintendent at an 18-hole course that was built in the 1920’s. “They were building a new course and needed someone to oversee the transition from 18 to 36 holes,” Wayne explains.

In 1967, Wayne received a call from Ozaukee Country Club asking him if he wanted to interview for the

superintendent job. “I thought it would be a good chance to get back home and see my folks,” he says of his decision to come back for the interview. “Six weeks later I was here for good. The job paid \$12,000 a year versus \$8,000; and I thought a private course would be more glamorous than a public course.”

Wayne also recalls that, in 1967, the budget for course maintenance was \$59,000; today it’s \$690,000.

Too many trees...

Now that I know how he got to Ozaukee, I ask Wayne what major changes he’s seen on the course in 35 years. And so begins a long discussion about trees. I learn that

Wayne is not too fond of trees on a golf course - at least not too many of them.

“Back in the 50’s and 60’s the course lost a lot of trees to Dutch Elm disease,” Wayne begins. “The membership was worried, so they had us plant a lot of trees. We used to plant 50 to 100 trees a year. Trees were planted by committee and for memorials. Now it’s an arboretum. We have way too many trees. But the members still have a soft spot in their hearts for trees. So we still have them.”

Besides the fact that grass doesn’t grow well in the shade of trees, Wayne points out that too many trees also effect the game of golf.

“He’s a leader in our profession”

Leader. Well liked. Quick wit. Even keeled. A little guy who can eat. Energetic. Mediocre golfer. These are words that Rod Johnson uses to describe Wayne Otto. Rod, the superintendent at Pine Hills Country Club in Sheboygan, has known Wayne both personally and professionally for 20 years. The two are known for “getting the snow off their backs” each February by taking a golf trip one week prior to the GCSA annual meeting.

“He’s a leader in our profession,” says Rod, “because he’s been at it so long and he’s stayed involved and educated. Other people his age might sit back and take a ‘so what’ attitude. He’s always sitting in the front row at educational conferences and he makes sure he’s current.

“I’ve never seen anybody who doesn’t like Wayne,” Rod continues. “And when people meet him, they remember him and his name.”

Wayne has a quick wit, is confident in what he says, and doesn’t try to impress anybody with his knowledge. “He’s known for that quick wit,” Rod adds. “People wait for what he’s going to say. He uses a lot of single words and short phrases rather than a complete sentence. But you always get his meaning.

“Last fall,” Rod says, “I’m talking to him and making a comment about how close the end of the season is - how it’s all down hill from here. His response was: ‘Can you stand on your head that long?’

“One time a member at Ozaukee Country Club asked Wayne about building a golf green in his back yard. He didn’t think it could be too hard,” Rod continues. “Wayne’s quick response was, ‘You’re better off having another child.’”

According to Rod, Wayne is neither quick to anger nor easily excited. “He’s pretty even keeled. You don’t see him get

excited over many things other than really good, classic golf course architecture. And he only got mad at me once, and that was an accident.”

Wayne likes food. “This little guy can eat,” Rod relates. “He once ate 24 tortillas in one setting, plus the meal. He loves Mexican food. When we go on golf trips, it’s Mexican four nights in a row. And he’ll ask for ‘hot gravy,’ which never rings a bell with the waitresses because he means hot salsa. When they bring him the hottest sauce they have, he’ll finish it all. They’re just in awe.

“When you ask him if he wants to go eat, he always says, ‘I suppose I could eat.’ You know he’s going to sit down and eat like you just can’t believe,” Rod says.

Rod believes that Wayne maintains a trim physique because of a fast metabolism and an energetic lifestyle. “I only knew his dad for a little while, but he seemed to be the exact same way. Wayne is a carbon copy,” Rod says. “But I’ve roomed with him enough to know that it takes a little bit to get him going in the morning. And when he’s riding in a car, he can go to sleep in two seconds.”

Sorry, Wayne, but Rod says your golf game isn’t as good as it used to be. “But he’s a lot of fun to watch,” Rod points out. “Somewhere on an 18-hole course he’s going to pull off a miraculous shot. You’re going to stand there, shake your head, and say, ‘How did he do that?’ He’s going to chip one in from way out of nowhere or make a 50-foot putt. And he just walks up and acts like it was nothing, like he could do it any time.”

Rod’s favorite description of Wayne’s golf game came from John Jenkins, superintendent at the Chicago Golf Club. “After watching Wayne swing the club for seven or eight holes he said, ‘You know, if that swing ever breaks down, I don’t know where we’ll get parts.’”

"The fairways are overgrown," he says. "We used to be able to see the whole hole from green to tee. You can't do that anymore. My philosophy is to design a course by ground features and not air features. Use tall grass and sand, not trees."

And trees require a lot of maintenance. Wayne hired arborists to be on staff for several years, but found that they were always hired away. So for the past four years he has hired a consulting arborist who reports on what needs to be done to the trees each year. The course crew does the actual work.

Wayne adds that the course was built in 1921 and designed by William Langford, a Scotsman. "They don't like trees on golf courses. They like open farmland. He's probably turning over in his

grave right now," Wayne jokes.

Fan of topdressing...

Another major change on the course is more to Wayne's liking. He was one of the first in the state to adopt sand topdressing on greens. He remembers learning about it at the Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium in 1975, and he started doing it in 1976. "We still do it. It has really firmed up the greens. It has made a huge difference in how the ball rolls," he says, adding that the greens at Ozaukee are the original soil-based greens.

"The amount of play has increased so much that we would have had to have rebuilt all of those greens if it weren't for topdressing," he explains. "We've achieved a sand build-up of 3.5 inches over 25 years."

Another change Wayne has witnessed is the use of lightweight mowers on fairways and mowing fairways at shorter heights so that they practically look like greens. "The height of cut on fairways has gone from 1.5 inches when I started to four-tenths of an inch now," Wayne points out. "We're harvesting clippings now, too," he adds. "That really helps fairway maintenance."

Greens have also changed tremendously. "We used to mow them at a quarter of an inch," he says. "Now it's as low as a tenth of an inch. We used to be scared that our greens might die. Today we maintain them right on the edge with very little or no fertilizer, very little water, skinned down to the bone and just hours before death."

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an increase in the bird population during Wayne's 35 years there. "I have always been proud that we were very proactive in the Audubon program," Wayne says. "Until the early 1990's, I never saw a bluebird here. Now I see them all the time."

Other changes include: more time in the office doing paperwork, more compliance reports to the state, and more Mexican labor. Also, there are more universities that offer turfgrass majors and more Extension turf specialists. "When I started, O.J. Noer, Charley Wilson and the Green Section guys were really in demand when problems occurred," Wayne points out.

Balancing wishes of club members...

While club members enjoy seeing

and hearing birds on the course, there are some things they don't like. Brown spots on the turf is one of those things. "In 1994 we made a commitment with the board to use IPM - to use pesticides as a last resort," Wayne explains. "We have had to modify this, to do some preventive applications, because country club members do not like brown spots."

"It's the 'Augusta Syndrome,'" he continues. "That's a very green course, and they see it on TV. Or they golf in the south during the winter. About every seven years we really get clobbered with winter injury. Winter problems are greater than summer problems. We're close to Lake Michigan so it's cooler; we don't always get a quick recovery in

the spring. It has been as late as mid July before we've gotten the course in the shape we want it to be. When you're dealing with Mother Nature, you can't turn the heat up."

Another thing club members don't like? Earthworms. "It's immoral to kill earthworms," Wayne believes. "But members don't like to see the castings. And with shorter grass, they're more visible. We've tried to do things to drive them down deeper, but it's been tough."

"We deal with expectations," Wayne says of his profession. "If we do well one year, they expect better the next year. The closer we get to perfection, the more magnified the imperfections become."

Enjoys the profession...

In spite of the challenges and

"He makes friends with everybody"

Friendly. Renown in the turf industry. Innovator. Best grass grower. Young at heart. Fun to be with. Curious. A good golfer. These are words Dan Quast uses to describe Wayne Otto. Currently the owner of DHD Tree Products, Dan has known Wayne since 1973 when he became superintendent at the Milwaukee Country Club.

"He just came down to see me one day," Dan recalls. "From that time on we've been friends. Wayne's the type of person who makes friends with everybody. Everybody who meets Wayne likes him. He claims that, back in the old days, we met for lunch 105 straight Saturdays. Jim Latham was there, too. We'd sit around and drink beer and talk about turf all afternoon. That was a great part of his life."

"He's well renown and well respected in the turf industry - not just here in Wisconsin, but all over the country," Dan continues. "He loves the profession. He loves to grow grass. He seems to always be the first one to try new things - an innovator. I can remember back when sand topdressing was introduced into the business. Wayne was one of the first to start a sand topdressing program which later became the standard for taking care of golf greens. And Wayne was one of the first people in the country to be certified by the GCSA. He's always up-to-date on what's happening in the industry."

"I guess the bottom line is, Wayne is the best grass grower that I've ever met," Dan continues. "And I said that back 20 years ago, too. He has the best looking and fastest greens and the best fairways. And it isn't by accident because the soils there at Ozaukee Country Club are heavy. But he finds a way to do it."

One of Dan's favorite stories about Wayne goes back to before he even knew him. He remembers Wayne telling about his first

trip to the Purdue turf conference in the 1960's when he was working in Nebraska. "He asked his boss if he could go, and the boss said 'sure,'" Dan tells. "So he flew and took other transportation to get to Purdue. He stayed at a hotel. And when he got back he submitted all of his expenses to which his boss replied, 'I said you could go. I didn't say I'd pay for it.'"

Dan has traveled to a lot of turf conferences with Wayne. He has also gone to Scotland with him. "We played 16 rounds of golf in 15 days, and we walked them all," Dan recalls. "We visited all of the classic golf courses and looked at all the great architecture. He enjoyed Scotland so much because, over there, there aren't any trees on the courses. They think Americans are crazy to have trees - that isn't golf."

"Everywhere we'd go, he'd get out his pocket knife and cut a little piece of the turf," Dan continues. "He wanted to see not only what was on top of the ground, but what was under the ground, too. We're standing on the 18th green at St. Andrews and he's cutting out a piece of the turf. I told him, 'You're going to get us thrown into jail one of these days.'"

"Then we went down to the Masters one year. He did the same thing on a fairway," Dan recalls. "A policeman came up to stop him. I thought we'd get thrown out and never be able to come back again. He had to put that piece of turf back, that's for sure."

"He always was a good golfer, and he always enjoyed the game," Dan says. "A lot of superintendents don't."

"I know how old Wayne is but, when I look at him, he just seems young. He's young at heart. He's active. He's ready to go. He's just a fun guy to be with. You're always happy to see Wayne," Dan concludes.

frustrations that come with the job, I'm convinced that Wayne has loved being a golf course superintendent. "I look forward to one day after the next. I really like the business and the golf course," he says. "There's no better place in the world at 5 or 6 in the morning - the smell of fresh air, birds chirping."

He has also enjoyed being involved in the industry. Wayne was president of the WGCSA from 1977-78. He was president of the Midwest Regional Turf Foundation in 1983. He's been a director of the O.J. Noer Research Foundation since 1989 and a Green Committee member of the USGA since 1991. He served on the WTA board in the late 80's and early 90's. He has helped with the Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium for at least 25 years. He has given talks, hosted tournaments and participated in turf studies.

I ask Wayne why he has been so involved. "Giving something back," he answers. "There are two kinds of people - givers and takers." Wayne is a giver.

"I enjoy being involved," he continues. "The association with others in the profession keeps you current. You've got to get out and see what everyone else is doing. And the people are great to be with. I have a friend in the grocery business who can't believe how friendly golf course superintendents are. We have friendly competition. In the grocery business, it's cut-throat."

Wayne also feels the need to be educated. The Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium is one of his favorite ways to do this. "Whether it's talking in a huddle or listening to a formal presentation, I always get some ideas of what to do or what not to do," he says. "I'm always learning."

Because he's been a Wisconsin golf course superintendent for 35 years, Wayne is well known in the state. "It's changing though," he admits. "Now I go into a room and look around and say, 'Who are all of these people?' It doesn't seem that

long ago that I was one of the young pups."

There are fewer superintendents over the age of 50 compared to when Wayne started in the business. "Sometimes the course doesn't have confidence in the older guys anymore," Wayne believes. "At a certain age they feel no one will steal you from the course anymore. The most power you have on the job is the first day."

After the last day of his job at Ozaukee, Wayne hopes to do some consulting. "I don't like that word," he says. But he feels he has something to offer. He'd like to be able to help superintendents work through turf problems instead of seeing them be fired.

Loves the course for golf, too...

Wayne is an avid golfer who loves to see different courses. He and Rod Johnson have been taking an annual golfing trip for years, and he went on a golfing expedition to Scotland with Dan Quast (see sidebars). "The best trip I ever had was going to Scotland in 1985," Wayne admits. "St. Andrews. That's where it all started. I actually wanted to stay in Scotland."

Wayne explains that the golf courses are more natural in Scotland. Fairways are mowed 12 times a year. "We mow greens more than that in one week," he quips. "And with their cool, cloudy, maritime climate, there are no trees on the courses," he adds with a smile.

His annual golfing trips on the way to the GCSA annual meeting every year since 1987 are work, according to Wayne. "My wife says it's a vacation." Sorry Wayne, I think I agree with your wife.

Wayne's wife, JoAnn, has her own medical transcription business. They have three children between the two of them. Wayne's stepson, Erik, is a golf course superintendent at Lincolnshire Country Club in Crete, Illinois. His daughter, Camille, lives in Lincoln, Nebraska. Wayne also has a son, Wayne, Jr.

When he's not working or playing golf, Wayne loves to work in his garden of flowers and ornamentals. And he and JoAnn recently bought a camper and traveled to Florida. "That is something I thought I wouldn't like, but I found out I did," he admits.

As the interview winds down, I ask Wayne if there's anything else about him that other superintendents may not know. He thinks for a moment and then answers: "My wife says that one thing she admires about me is that I talk to everyone the same way - from the guy in a bar to the president of the board. I have to. I don't know any other way. Here I am. What you see is what you get."

Wayne, I think most golf course superintendents would say that what they see is just great. They wouldn't have you any other way.

And my son, Andrew, thinks so, too. As we pull away from the course he says, "Those guys (Wayne and Karl) were real nice to me. I couldn't believe they'd be that nice to a kid." 🌿



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