



Golf Course Experience Led Him into Turf Product Sales

By Lori Ward Bocher

When he retires from the sales business in 20 years, John Turner would like to work as an assistant superintendent at a private golf course. Then he will have come full circle in his profession. For the past 22 years John has been managing a Midwest sales territory selling turf fungicides and insecticides to golf course superintendents through distributors and formulators.

Now as he rounds a corner in his career path that takes him further away from golf courses - he was recently promoted to "formulator account manager/lawn care operations" with the Bayer Corporation - John takes a moment to reflect on his career. It all began because, like so many others in the industry (see sidebar article), he had the fortune of growing up near and working on a golf course.

John was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1956 where his father was an engineer for General Electric and his mother was a homemaker. Lo and behold, his childhood home was four blocks from a golf course. "I played golf there as a kid, and I was offered a job there at the age of 11. I still have the first dollar I made at the golf course," John recalls. "I started by working three or four hours a day on the course raking sand traps and mowing tees. As the years passed I became more involved with the course and its operations. When I turned 16, I started with a full-time wage of about \$1.75 an hour. For a 16-year-old working 50 to 60 hours a week, that was pretty good."

Wanted to be a teacher...

John graduated from Fort Wayne's Wayne High School in 1974 and enrolled at Purdue University. "Ironically, I started out to be an industrial arts teacher," he says. "I had always enjoyed woodworking and working with machinery and tools. I had the aspiration to be an industrial arts teacher from September through June, and then work on a golf course during the summer months.

"I got all the way through to the point of doing my student teaching when it finally dawned on me: This was not my calling," John explains. "So I went back to my second love, the golf course, and began to talk to various golf course superintendents. I changed my major from education to turf management and continued for another two and one-half years at Purdue. I graduated in 1980 with a BS degree in agronomy with a minor in turfgrass management."

While in college, John continued to work at golf



John Turner and his wife, Pam, say farewell to Wisconsin.

courses - the public course (Fairview Golf Club, a Donald Ross course) he had worked on since a child and a private course (Orchard Ridge Country Club) where he was a second assistant. "I decided that was my new calling - to be a golf course superintendent," John says. "But in 1979 my professor at Purdue encouraged me to alter my direction by pursuing a sales position in turf. I actually took his advice and talked to various trades people from turf equipment to fertilizer and chemical companies. I started interviewing for various sales positions right out of college.

"Then, the day of my final exam in 1980, I was offered a job with TUCO, or the Upjohn Company. I accepted," John continues. "They wanted a manufacturer's rep to travel eight states in the Midwest to sell turf products through suppliers and to represent their fungicides and insecticides to the golf course industry. Don Maske, now retired, was the one who hired me, and he has been my mentor. Don previously held this sales position for 10 years until he was promoted to district manager."

Begins in sales...

So he graduated in May of 1980, moved to Chicago, and began his new job on June 2. John worked for the Upjohn Company and its various "derivatives" from 1980 to 1997. Through three company mergers his territory shrank and his product line expanded, but his role was basically the same.

When John started with Upjohn in 1980, his territory included eight states: Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas. In 1985, the TUCO division of Upjohn was sold to NOR-AM Chemical Company; his territory was reduced to five states (he no longer had Minnesota, Nebraska and Kansas), but he now had more products to represent, including a slow-release nitrogen source called Nitroform.

In 1995, NOR-AM Chemical merged with Hoechst-Roussel and formed a newly named company, AgrEvo USA. His territory was reduced to Wisconsin, Illinois and Indiana. Once again, he was selling additional products from the Hoechst-Roussel side of the merger. "Through the mergers I was able to keep the same customers (in the remaining territory) and to sell more products," John points out. "The mergers allowed me to stay with the same business and learn new market strategies without giving up my tenure."

While working in sales for the first 17 years of his career, John worked predominantly in the golf course business. "It was a two-step distribution process," he explains. "We'd sell through turf distribution partners and detail our products to end users."

Goes beyond golf courses...

A major change in John's career came in 1997 when the Bayer Corporation approached him and asked him to become a sales specialist supporting both turf and pest control products. There, his customer base expanded beyond the golf course community to also include lawn care, arborist, structural pest control, and formulator accounts. His geographic territory continued to be in the Midwest - Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana.

While in this job, John saw the opportunity to diver-

sify his background and create new challenges for himself; he recommended to Bayer that it create a position for someone to work exclusively with formulators. "It's a specialized area," he points out. "We take our products, like Merit for grub control, and offer it to specific formulators who impregnate their fertilizer base with the active ingredient and sell it as their fertilizer with Merit insecticide. We work with our formulators on state registrations, labeling, licensing agreements, and marketing."

So John recommended this new position to his management, and the new position was created in September of 2002. "I was called in to interview for the job and I got the offer from Dan Carrothers, director of Bayer Environmental Science," John says. "It is truly an exciting time in my career and an opportunity to build new customer relationships."

As the formulator account manager/lawn care operations for Bayer, John now works with formulators in the Midwest, Northeast, Southeast, and California. He's on the road about 100 nights a year and, as always, he maintains an office in his home. "With my 22 years of experience, I've met a lot of people in the industry," John says. "I may not have built relationships with formulators outside the Midwest; however, I know who they are and they know who I am. Now I have the opportunity to present programs and build new relationships. The company has high confidence in knowing that I can do that quickly and effectively and, in return, create new sales for the business."

Sales is based on relationships...

Building relationships is important to John - what he likes most about sales. "Over the years I've become more personal with people so they've gone from being customers to being friends," he says. "I see the whole chain

Close ties to the golf course

CAUTION: Nine out of ten turf professionals agree. Growing up in close proximity to and/or working on a golf course may exert undue influence on your choice of profession.

While working on this article it hit me: Many of the people I've interviewed this past year or so have grown up near a golf course and/or worked on golf courses while growing up. Being somewhat analytical, I wanted to know precisely how many. Would you believe, nine out of ten?

John Turner: Grew up four blocks from a golf course; worked at courses beginning at the age of 11 and through his college graduation.

Dean Musbach: Was born and raised on golf courses where his father was a superintendent; visited grandfather on a golf course where he was a superintendent; Dean worked on courses while a student.

Wayne Otto: Grew up on a farm across the road from a golf course; began working on the course soon after graduating from high school.

Ed Kirchenwitz: Grew up four or five blocks from a golf course; his first job as a child was on a course.

Dave Brandenburg: His first summer job was on a golf course.

Ervin Graf: Grew up across the street from a golf course; his father was a superintendent.

Dan Quast: Born and raised down the street from a golf course; his first job was on the course.

Scott Schaller: His father, grandfather and uncle were all golf course superintendents; his first job was on a golf course.

The only person in the past 10 articles who didn't grow up near a golf course was Bill Vogel. However, he did grow up on a farm and return to a family business.

of events as my customers grow and mature. I see their children grow up and get married.

"On the flip side, it takes a long time to build these relationships," he continues. "You have to be patient. A lot of the young sales reps today see me, see some of my successes, and they want to achieve success instantly. You have to establish your credibility first. One of the hardest things about changing jobs is leaving behind the long-term relationships I've built in my core states, like Wisconsin. My new challenge is to build and expand new relationships. Based on past experience, I trust that I'll be able to do that quickly."

John points out that the industry is very competitive, with five other large companies competing with Bayer. His goal is to understand the customers' businesses better than the competition. "Anybody can sell a product," he believes. "I want to be more involved. I want to know how they buy, when they buy, who's involved. If I can make them more successful by knowing their businesses, then they'll make me successful. That's my highest priority - to travel and meet my customers, to know their businesses inside and out. And, at the same time, to try to initiate programs and products that fit their needs both now and in the future."

High degree of professionalism in Wisconsin...

Having traveled extensively in Wisconsin during his first 22 years in sales, John finds both the quality of golf turf and golf course superintendents to be very high. This, he believes, can be traced to "an evolution of extremely high professionalism in the state of Wisconsin," John says. "I've always admired Wisconsin turf managers and even the people of Wisconsin."

This professionalism is due, in large part, to the educational forum in the state. "It all starts with a young person who likes the field of turf," John says. "The university provides the backbone, the education. Then it encourages the young people to go out and work with superintendents who serve as mentors. As a result, the young people begin to create their own identity, their own way of managing people and growing grass.

"Monroe Miller even mentored me a little bit when I was a young salesman," John points out. "He truly opened his doors, asked me about my goals. He actually sat down with me and gave me a list of people around town to talk with. He was very influential in my young career. Other golf course superintendents like Wayne Otto, Dan Quast and Carl Grassl have also been very influential in my professional sales career in Wisconsin."

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Having someone like Monroe take the time to mentor a young sales rep has paid dividends for the turf program in Wisconsin. "One day Monroe asked me, 'Why doesn't Upjohn give out turf scholarships here at Wisconsin? They give scholarships at other schools, why not Wisconsin? We have so many students coming through the turf program who need financial help.'

"So Monroe wrote a very lengthy letter to me and explained the benefits," John continues. "I presented it to our company. They thought it was a great idea. In 1981, the UW received the first Upjohn scholarship, and Wayne Horman received it. Today, Wayne is employed by Scotts. For many years I had the pleasure of giving these scholarships to students, and I've seen these students get jobs and do well in the industry."

John has also served the industry through professional organizations. He was president of the Illinois Turf Foundation in 1988 and president of the Midwest Regional Turf Foundation in 1989 and 1997. In 1995 he received the Illinois Turfgrass Foundation Distinguished Service Award. And he currently serves on the board of directors for the Illinois Turf Endowment. He has not served on any boards in Wisconsin but has enjoyed being an allied supporter of the various associations within the turfgrass industry.

During his five years with Bayer, John has been recognized as a "high performer," receiving both the Bayer Masters and Leadership awards.

John has one very personal tie to Wisconsin; his wife, Pamela, was originally from Chippewa Falls. He met her in 1982 when they were both living in Chicago, and they were married in 1985. Pamela works as a sales manager for Salem Services, a staffing and consulting firm. They live in Elburn, a far western suburb of Chicago.

He's a high flier...

Growing up near a golf course did more than affect John's career path; it also influenced his hobby of choice - flying radio-controlled airplanes and helicopters. "My dad was a B-24 bombardier in World War II, so I grew up hearing stories about flying," John explains. "As a kid, we always would go out to the airports to watch aircraft. And to this day Dad and I attend the EAA air show in Oshkosh each summer where we interact with former WWII veterans and POWs."

When he was 11, John saw someone flying a model plane out in a field. "I realized that I wanted to build my own plane and learn to fly it," he says. "The golf course I worked on was an excellent place to practice my flying skills. It gets expensive when you misjudge

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"After work or on weekends I like to go to our field down the road or to a golf course to fly my planes. A golf course makes a great airfield," John explains. "Years ago, I often took my planes or helicopters with me while making a sales call. The golf course superintendents would say, 'My kids have got to see this.' From that point forward the kids would always ask, 'Dad, does Mr. Turner still have his airplanes?' It has created a lot of interesting discussions even when I meet people at trade shows many years later."

John used to fly at competitions, but now he does it just for fun. And for knowledge. "When I fly commercially on airplanes, I understand the dynamics of flying which helps me relax during take-off and landings and through turbulent conditions," John says.

"I also enjoy playing golf. If I play twice a month, that's about it," he says. "I usually play with golf

course superintendents on their fund raising events, or I get calls from superintendents inviting me to play their course and be their guest. It's a true pleasure. But I still can't seem to get my handicap down. It seems to increase by one stroke each year. I may need a golf lesson from Bruce Schweiger!"

This past summer John traveled to Scotland and golfed at St. Andrews, Turnbury and Glenn Eagle. "I've had a chance to go to where golf started, to experience the golf course conditions there, to experience the history of golf," he says. "I could reflect back on all the people who have played St. Andrews and the famous designers and architects who have been there. It's memorable just to think about that."

As he summarizes his life so far and looks toward the future, John says, "I started as a kid at a small public course. Then I worked at a private course. Then in the turf business. Where I want to be in 20 years is retired from the sales business and back to the golf course as an assistant superintendent. Then I will have completed a full circle." ❧



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