

From Course Owner to Equipment Sales, He Likes Both Sides of the Business



By Lori Ward Bocher

“From Friday night Fish Fries to aerifying greens to selling iron, he’s done it all.”

That’s the way Monroe introduced me to this issue’s “personality” to profile, Gary Huenerberg. Indeed, Gary has experienced many sides of the golf and green industry, from owning a golf course and serving as its superintendent to selling turf equipment on the road to being promoted to director of sales and marketing for the Wisconsin Turf Equipment Corporation (as of October 1, 2003).

“The transition from owning and managing a course to a career in turf equipment sales was smooth,” Gary reports. “My background as a superintendent/owner made it very easy for me to go out and relate to the golf course superintendents. I was able to draw on my past experience of having gone through everything they’re going through.”

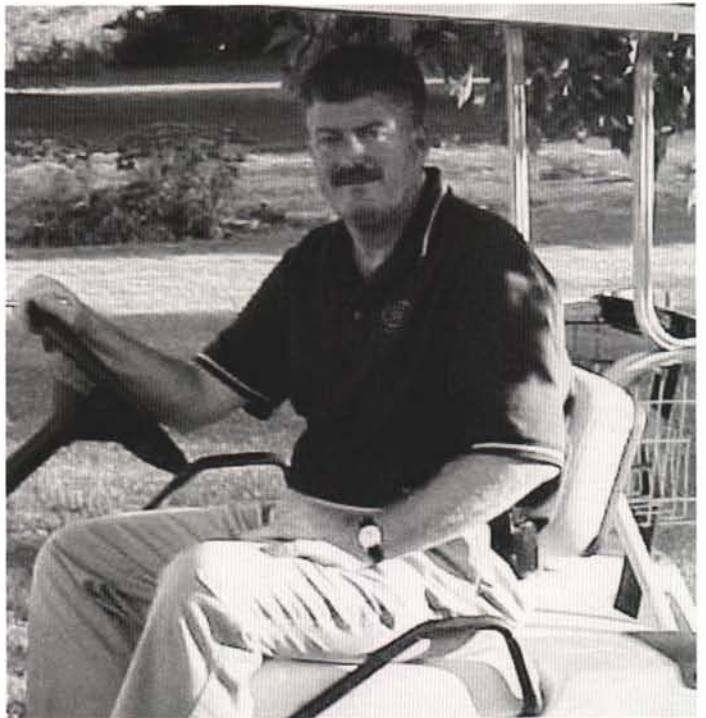
Gary was a third-generation golf course superintendent, and his 16-year-old son has plans to become a fourth-generation super. But that’s getting ahead of our story. Let’s go back to see how family has shaped Gary’s career until an unexpected offer to buy the family golf course changed his direction.

Landscaping and farming...

Gary’s grandfather and father had both worked as golf course superintendents. But they were running a large landscaping business in Bartlett, Illinois, when Gary was born in 1961. “Bartlett was a far western suburb of Chicago at the time, but other suburbs have grown right past it,” Gary points out. “The area was expanding quite rapidly, which was great for the landscaping business as far as both new construction and maintenance. My start in the green industry was holding the end of a 100-foot tape to help my dad measure lawns for sod.”

But in 1970 when Gary was 10 years old, the family sold the business in Illinois and moved to Wisconsin. “It had always been my dad’s dream to own a dairy farm, so we moved to one just south of Watertown,” Gary remembers. “I enjoyed the farm work as most any kid would. But after milking cows for nine years, I decided that the dairy business was not for me. I wanted to expand the cash crop side of the business and Dad wanted to expand the dairy. Obviously, we didn’t agree.”

“At the same time we noticed an ad in the *Milwaukee Journal* advertising a golf course for sale in Brillion, Wisconsin,” Gary continues. “With my dad’s



background as a golf course superintendent before getting into landscaping and farming, we decided to buy and run the course instead of farming. So we moved to Brillion and bought our course, Deer Run Golf Course, a 9-hole public course.” That was in 1979.

Course improvements needed...

The course had been built in the early 1960s, and not much had been done to improve it since then. “It was pretty run down,” Gary admits. “It needed a lot of help. All of the maintenance equipment that was there fit into a small, one-car garage. We continually made improvements as we could afford them.”

“We put in an entire irrigation system,” Gary continues. “When we got there the course had gas engine water pumps and roller bases on the greens and tees. There wasn’t any fairway irrigation. The only in-ground component was where you connected the hose into the water source.”

“One thing I like to say about the gas engine pumps, which we struggled with for two years, is that they had an automatic shut-off at night because, when they ran out of gas, they shut off,” Gary jokes.

So they bought a used trencher and started installing a new irrigation system on their own, going

from one end of the course to the other. "We bought the material and asked a lot of questions," Gary recalls. "It took a lot of time to do this on our own."

During the 17 years they owned the course they also planted approximately 1,000 trees. "It was pretty barren when we got here—probably only 30 trees on the course," Gary says. "We planted trees to give the course some direction and definition. It really made it look more like a golf course."

They also built and rebuilt many greens and tees, put in bunkers, and laid a couple of miles of tile because many holes on the course were in low areas. "Probably one thing unique to the course - we had a flood control system," Gary points out. "All the water on the course from the ponds and creek were tied together. We had a dam on the course where we picked up the water and pushed it out into the marsh which was across the road from us. Our pumping system was capable of pumping 30,000 gallons of water per minute—the same pumps that cranberry growers use to flood their fields."

Superintendents help out...

Gary was glad for the network of superintendents, and he joined WGCSA in 1983. He especially remembers the help he received from superintendent Roger

Bell who was at North Shore Country Club in Menasha at the time, just 15 miles from Brillion. "I got to know Roger real well. He helped us out a lot," Gary recalls.

"Superintendents are always more than willing to help each other with problems," he continues. "If you call them up, they'll give you whatever help you need with whatever issue you're dealing with. Roger helped me in the early 1980s when I had some pythium on our greens. I didn't know what it was at the time because it had never been this far north. I went to see Roger and, fortunately or unfortunately, he had the same thing. He knew it was pythium and he gave me some Terramec SP to spray on it which controlled the pythium. I was also first in line to buy Roger's used equipment each year."

Since Deer Run was not a destination course and wasn't close to any urban area (Brillion is a town of 3,000), the Huenerbergs needed something to act as a draw, to keep customers coming back. They chose to maintain optimal playing conditions and to advertise heavily in Appleton (20 miles away), Manitowoc (25 miles away) and Green Bay (30 miles away). "We would also draw somewhat from Fond du Lac which was kind of unusual for a 9-hole course," Gary adds.

"We did fine with just 9 holes," he continues. "Of

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course, through the years people always asked us if we were going to expand to 18. We kicked the idea around many times and actually had land available to do it. We looked at the cost. We did a lot of talking to other golf course owners who went from 9 to 18 holes. It was a huge investment. The way our course was situated, we probably would have had to put up a new club house. And we were still in a town of 3,000 people and a county (Calumet) with more cows than people. We stayed at 9."

New group for course owners...

Networking with other golf course owners was important to Gary - so important that he and five other owners started a new organization, Golf Course Owners of Wisconsin. "It's an organization for the privately owned public golf courses in the state," Gary explains. "We started it in the early 1980s. The six of us did a lot of traveling in those early days to sign up new members. Now the group represents more than 150 owners in four different sections of the state.

"Since golf course owners have similar goals, our reason for getting together was to share ideas and help each other out," Gary continues. "I'm kind of

proud of that organization. There was nothing like it in Wisconsin until we decided to get this going."

Private owners have a unique set of challenges and opportunities. "If you're the owner and you decide to do something, you can do it today," Gary points out. "You don't have to wait for a committee. It's your investment, and it's your livelihood on the line. Management is simpler. But there are good years and bad years no matter how the course is owned or managed."

After 17 years of owning and improving Deer Run, the Huenerbergs sold it in 1996. "We weren't really looking to sell the course," Gary explains. "It was our long-range plan that my wife, Karol, and I would take over the course when my parents, Elwood and Muriel, were at retirement age. Then someone approached us and made an offer. We came to an agreement and sold it.

"I considered it as a chance to pursue a different career path," Gary continues. "I had enjoyed running the golf course, but I was looking for something that would give me more time for family than running your own business does. Since we had a small 9-hole course, we were involved with everything from working on the course during the day to working in the club house at

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night, plus the bookwork and everything else. At the time we sold I didn't know *what* I was going to do, but I knew I'd come up with something."

Sales at Wisconsin Turf...

Through the golf course network, Gary learned of an opening at Wisconsin Turf Equipment Corporation in Janesville. He applied for a job as a sales rep for southwestern Wisconsin, and he got it. "For my first venture into working for somebody else, I couldn't have picked a better company," Gary believes. "Wisconsin Turf has been run by the Christopherson family since 1956. It's a large company with a small family atmosphere. I was hired by Lyle Christopherson and Curt Larson, who worked there for 39 years and is known by everyone in the turf business. The transition was smooth."

As a sales rep, Gary's territory ran up to LaCrosse, over to Wisconsin Rapids, and south. He was out on the road five days a week giving equipment demonstrations and talking to superintendents. He drove about 45,000 miles a year.

"One of my worries when I went into sales was that I wouldn't be able to stay current with the knowledge that a superintendent needs," Gary points out. "I found that I learn a lot more by being out there talking

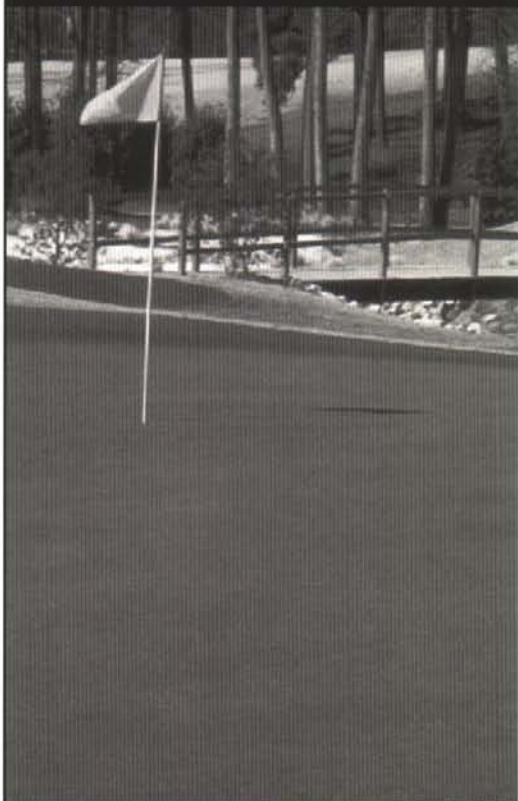
with the guys, seeing what they're doing, seeing the good ideas that they have. I've learned more being out on the road in the last five years than I learned in the previous 17 years working on the same course. If you're at six, seven, eight golf courses in a day, you see a lot of things."

For his work, Gary was honored with a Jacobson Pacesetter Award in 2001. The award recognizes outstanding sales performance and total customer service. His award was for the best rep in the Midwest, the Dakotas, and all of Canada. "It was my third year at the company. It was an honor to be recognized," Gary admits.

Director of sales and marketing...

On October 1, Gary was promoted to director of sales and marketing - a newly created position at Wisconsin Turf. "I'm writing the book as I go," Gary says of his new duties. "Actually, a lot of what I do I was already doing as a sales rep. I was picking up some of the things that needed to be done, like coordinating demonstrations with the other salesmen and dealing with some of our vendors.

"Our main product line is Jacobson, Cushman and Ryan," Gary explains. "We also work with many secondary companies, like Smithco, Turfco, and National. I like to describe our company as carrying everything

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Working with vendors, Gary looks at their new products and evaluates them as to whether or not Wisconsin Turf should carry them. When they do add new products, he determines how to market them and he introduces the sales staff to the new product. He also rides with sales reps on occasion to see how they're doing and to give them pointers.

His goals for the new job? "To continue to expand the company as far as new products," Gary answers. "There are constantly new companies coming up with equipment that makes the job easier for golf course superintendents. I want to get those products out to our customer base so they can give them a try and we can evaluate them.

"I also want to work more with the web site because that seems to be the first place people go if they're looking for something," Gary adds. "I'm thinking of adding a list of used equipment that we offer so superintendents can go to it for a quick reference."

Off the job, on the course...

When he's not working, Gary's biggest hobby is golf. "When we owned the course, I got to play maybe one

9-hole round a week," he recalls. "And when I was on the road as a sales rep, I didn't get to play much, either, even though I was on courses all week long."

He and his wife, Karol, are also very active in their Wisconsin Synod Lutheran churches - St. Matthew's now that they're in Janesville, and Trinity when they were in Brillion. Karol is a registered nurse specializing in IV therapy at Mercy Hospital in Janesville. She has always worked full-time as a nurse, even when they owned the golf course. "She helped with payroll and in the club house when we owned the course, but she always worked as a full-time nurse, too," Gary points out.

Gary and Karol have one son, Ryan, who is 16 years old. "He's very interested in the golf course business," Gary points out. "In fact, at this point his plan is to get a degree in turfgrass management and become a superintendent. When he was 4 years old he was my golf car man. He'd wash them and put them away. And he helped my dad and me a lot with irrigation at night."

If son Ryan follows through with his plans, he'll be a fourth generation superintendent. Sounds like a future *Personality Profile*, doesn't it? ♣

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