

# Career Turf Specialist Likes Working With Golf Course Superintendents Best



By Lori Ward Bocher

"I enjoy being around golf course superintendents. I've hired them, I've trained them, and I call on them now. I deal with them as professionals. They certainly deserve our respect. For the amount of hours they put in, dealing with the stresses and strains brought on by Mother Nature and the challenges of managing golf turf, we're here to support them."

Who is this man with so much respect for golf course superintendents? Tom Wentz, a turf products specialist for Reinders. Tom has seen a lot of action in the sales arena, from selling direct to managing other sales reps; from covering a few counties to covering the entire country. He's lived through mergers and buy-outs and corporate restructuring. And now, in the last decade of his career, he's back to doing what he loves most — working directly with golf course superintendents.

"Working in sales for as many years as I have, I've always believed that if you keep giving to others, they'll give back. If you help enough other people, you'll get the return down the road," Tom says. "For me, sales is really a service business, and I enjoy that."

## Roots in farming...

So how did this farm boy from Ohio end up selling turf products? For no particular reason except that it seemed like a good choice.

Tom was raised on a farm near Wauseon in the northwest corner of Ohio. "We milked at most 30 cows, used milk cans back then," he recalls. "We also had some chickens and hogs." When the milk plant required them to put in a refrigerated bulk tank for cooling the milk, Tom's dad sold the cows.

When he graduated from Chesterfield-Dover High School in 1965, he was in the largest graduating class in the school's history — 28 seniors. "I always like to mention this," Tom laughs, adding that this school merged with other small school districts the next year.

Tom went from a class of 28 to a class of thousands when he enrolled at The Ohio State University. "I started off majoring in engineering," he points out. "That lasted about a year and a half. I decided to get out of engineering and into something a little more familiar. Since I was raised on a farm, naturally the agriculture side of business appealed to me. I talked to a few of the guys who were turfgrass majors and said, 'Hey, that sounds kind of intriguing.' So I ended up majoring in agronomy and specializing in turfgrass management. Up to that point I had really never been on a golf course.

"Naturally, when I chose to major in turfgrass manage-



ment I decided to get some turf background," Tom continues. "So I spent one summer at Sylvania Country Club near Toledo. That's the club where the GCSAA was founded. It does have a significant place in the history of superintendents. I worked there one summer. The next summer I worked for the Scotts Company in Marysville, Ohio. I worked in the research department, in herbicide screening.

"After my two summer experiences, one as an assistant superintendent and one working for Scotts in research, I elected in my last quarter at Ohio State to really get into the sales field. That intrigued me the most of all," Tom relates. So when he graduated in December of 1969, he interviewed with several companies in both agriculture and turf and ended up taking a sales position with Agway, an ag-based co-op that recently had started to sell turf products.

But not so fast. This was 1969 and Uncle Sam had dibs on Tom first. "The Vietnam War was still going strong and they had instituted a lottery system for the draft based on your birth date," Tom explains. "I remember the evening when they were drawing the numbers. I ended up with Number 26, so my odds of being drafted were high. I had already accepted the job with Agway at that time. I told my future boss that I'd enlist in some reserve unit so I'd only have to be gone six months of active duty and then serve five and one-half years as a reservist."

Tom moved out to Syracuse, New York, in January of 1970 and started looking around. The Army, Navy and Air Force Reserve units were all filled. "The only one left was the Marines Corps, so I ended up becoming a Marine," Tom says. "I had six months of active duty with training at Parris Island (South Carolina) and Camp

Lejeune (North Carolina). Most of the guys I trained with went to Vietnam.”

**Sales career begins...**

But Tom started at Agway with a sales territory in the Philadelphia area, southern New Jersey and Delaware. “I was in a specialty group called the Commercial Sales Division. We focused primarily in the golf turf markets at that time, but also did some work in the lawn care market,” Tom explains. “I was in charge of all fertilizer, chemical and seed sales. We even sold golf cart buildings, but we were primarily in the soft goods.”

While working for Agway, Tom met his wife, Pat, who was living in Delaware at the time. “We met through a mutual friend,” Tom recalls. “We were married on a Navy base in Bainbridge, Maryland. I was raised in a Protestant family, and she was raised in a Catholic family, so we had to get married in a place that appealed to both families. We were married in a chapel on the base — her father was a career Navy man. We had a priest and a minister officiate.”

In April of 1973, Tom took a sales position with Scotts. “I was assigned a territory in the eastern part of upstate New York,” he says. “We were called technical representatives, but it was a sales position, primarily in the golf

market. After a couple of years I was also given the state of Vermont. So I had a beautiful area — the northern Catskills to the Adirondack region of New York, and then the Green Mountains of Vermont. We lived in Saratoga Springs.”

Then in the spring of 1982, with his new MBA from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in hand, Tom accepted a promotion to Regional Sales Manager for the Scotts Midwest region; he replaced Jerry O'Donnell who was promoted to Director of Sales for the Professional Division of Scotts. Tom took over Jerry's house in DeForest as well as his job. “I came out to Wisconsin to go over some information with Jerry,” Tom recalls. “We were sitting in his office, the same office I'm in right now. I said, ‘Gee, this house has everything we're looking for — a screened porch, privacy in the back yard, a Scotts lawn. What more could we ask for?’ So we ended up buying his house.”

**Hiring superintendents...**

Tom inherited a sales force of 12 technical reps. His region included Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, the Dakotas, Kansas and Missouri. His job was to hire and train reps in both sales and product knowledge. He also managed the marketing and the product line. “Most of the people I hired — 95 percent of them — were former golf course superintendents,” Tom points out. “So I had a chance to hire some really high quality individuals, which I think superintendents are anyway. One ended up being the president of the GCSAA when he went back to being a superintendent — Dave Fearis.

“We really had very little turnover in my region — probably the lowest turnover of any region within the Pro Turf Division of Scotts. I was pretty proud of that,” Tom says. “I always found that the best time to recruit superintendents was in late August when the stresses and strains of managing a golf course operation during a long summer, with pressure from Mother Nature, the golfers and the membership or owners, all add up.”

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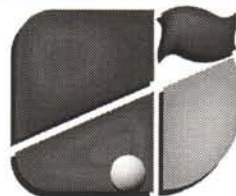
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Tom traveled a lot in this position visiting golf courses with his technical reps. Then in 1999 the Pro Turf Division of Scotts made a major move. Instead of having a field force selling directly to golf course superintendents or other turf managers, they elected to sell their products through distribution channels.

"We ended up having to let go of 65 percent of our sales force as a result," Tom points out. "That was a major shake-up. They moved me into a role as Technical Services Manager. I worked with distributors doing product and technical training with their district sales reps. Two years later, in June of 2000, the Pro Turf Division of Scotts was bought out by the Andersons Company. I went on board with Andersons as a Regional Manager. The last year or so Andersons put me back in the technical service role. So I've gone back and forth between Regional Manager and Technical Services manager with Scotts and then with Andersons."

#### Going full circle...

All of that stopped in January of 2004 when Tom joined the sales force at Reinders which, by the way, carries Andersons Golf Products. It was a welcome change for this veteran of sales. "In my last job with Andersons I had responsibility for the whole country," he points out. "We

wanted less travel for me, a chance for me to be home every night. When the opportunity to join Reinders came along, I couldn't pass it up."

Now Tom sells turf products in the southern area of Wisconsin, from Dane County to Milwaukee and Fond du Lac to Racine. "I'm a turf products specialist. I'm responsible for about 100 golf courses in that area. We have specifically assigned golf courses here. I'm able to get home every night now, which is nice," Tom says. "It's probably more of an adjustment for my wife than it is for me. She was used to having a couple of nights a week to herself."

Tom also likes being back on the golf course and working directly with superintendents. "I really welcome the change," he says. "I represent Reinders and all of the products that we sell, providing product support and technical advice — advice that I've been giving for 30 years. Only now I can work directly with the superintendent again instead of working through district sales representatives.

"It's fun managing people, but I missed being out there making the sale and helping other people to improve their golf course operations," he continues. "I missed the ebb and flow of writing those orders, making sure the

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product was delivered on time, and dealing with any issues that related to the product — serving the customer's needs. I'm back to what I did originally, my first love. This is really a nice change. I can see doing this for another 10 years or so."

**More time to be involved...**

Now that he's working a smaller area, Tom plans to become more involved with the WGCSA. "Rather than being involved with so many associations in so many states — I had a chance to travel around and be a part of many — now I can focus on one. I'm looking forward to going to the meetings," Tom says.

He also plans to spend more time with family. Tom and his wife, Pat, have two children living in the Milwaukee area. Their daughter, Tara, will turn 30 this year and lives in Brown Deer with her husband, Dan, and their two children — Alexis, 2 years, and Isaac, born May 27 of this year. "We enjoy spending time with our grandchildren," Tom says.

"Our son, Mark, will turn 26 this year. He works for Wells Fargo in Milwaukee," Tom continues. He's an avid golfer. I tell everyone I taught him everything he knows about golf, and then he had to go to a pro and get everything corrected. He played golf in high school and at

Marquette University, a Division 1 school in the USA Conference. His senior year we went to every tournament, including one in Hawaii. It was a fun way to cap his last year. He's still quite actively involved in amateur golf in Wisconsin."

Remember how the Protestant Tom and Catholic Pat were married at a Navy base? When they moved to Wisconsin they became Lutherans (ELCA). "What else would we be in Wisconsin?" Tom laughs. "Pat likes it because it has a formality closer to the Catholic Church, but yet, for me, it's Protestant. We were quite involved in the church when the kids were growing up — teaching Sunday School, serving on the church council, things like that."

Tom enjoys playing golf. And he and Pat like to travel. "We went to Ireland last May. We plan to do more traveling as the years go along. Maybe we'll move someplace warm for the winter once I decide to take more time off from work," Tom says. "At the same time, wherever our children are, we want to be close to them, too."

Close to family. Working directly with golf course superintendents. Tom is in a good place right now. He's content with the way his life and career have unfolded, and he's looking forward to many more years of the same. ♣



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