



# He Really Knows (and Loves) His Turf Equipment

By Lori Ward Bocher

When Editor Monroe Miller first asked Dennis Robinson if he'd do a *Personality Profile* interview a year or so ago, Dennis declined because he thought there were so many other people out there with more experience. But then something happened while he was helping at the PGA championship at Whistling Straits this past summer that changed his mind.

"*Golfdom* magazine had done a cover interview with David Swift, the superintendent at Whistling Straits," Dennis recalls. "I realized he's young enough to be my son! When I started at Horst Distributing (in 1980), a lot of today's young superintendents weren't even born yet or they were just children. The equipment and procedures I remember from being a golf course superintendent in the 1970s is ancient history to them. Very ancient."

So Dennis, a well-known sales rep for Horst Distributing, consented to an interview. His passion for his job, for his customers, for turf equipment, and for turf management comes through loud and clear. For those readers over 50 years of age, sit back and reminisce with Dennis; you'll find yourself nodding in agreement and thinking, "I remember that." For those younger than 50, you'll gain a new appreciation for your equipment and see how some things have come full circle in turf management.

"When I was younger I always appreciated talking to the old guys because they always had cool stories to tell," Dennis says. "Guys like Bill Kazda of Plum Lake Golf Club in Sayner. Guys who were around when golf courses were



Left to Right: Randy Mallmann, Dennis Robinson, Dr. Milt Engelke, Greg Kallenberg, Joe Deschler. This picture was taken at Jacobsen's Global Product Training held this past October at Tega Cay Golf Club, Charlotte, NC. Dr. Engelke held seminars on turfgrass management for all sales people in attendance.

mowed with horses. I always thought that was neat.

"Now I talk to guys who can't imagine a Cushman Truckster with a kick start and not an electric key start, or a vehicle with handlebars instead of a steering wheel, or vehicles that didn't have brakes," he continues. "If you started a walking greens mower when it was engaged, you'd pull the rope and it would run away from you. A lot of strange things like that used to happen."

## Back to the beginning...

Dennis has lived his entire life near Mishicot in Manitowoc County. Born in 1955, the youngest of four children, his life started on a dairy farm. "My dad sold the farm for health reasons in 1966 so I no longer was a farm boy," Dennis points out. "But I think one of the reasons I'm working with turf is because I've always wanted to work outside. That desire is in you if you've lived on a farm."

Another reason he's working with turf is because his first job just happened to be on a golf course - Fox Hills Inn and Country Club at Mishicot. "I started working there as a busboy when I

was 16 years old," Dennis recalls. "I worked there through high school — from busboy to head busboy to buffet chef and bartender. Eventually I became the bar manager and ran all beverage operations."

But that yearning to work outside drew him to the driving range when he was 19 or 20. He worked his way up to crew foreman, assistant superintendent, and finally superintendent in 1975. Dennis never had any formal turf education. "I went to the School of Hard Knocks — to learn from your mistakes and other people's mistakes," he says. "This is probably something that can't be done anymore. But I learned by going to a lot of meetings and talking to a lot of people. I attended any turf seminar that I could get my hands on. I became a member of the WGCSA in 1975, and I attended my first GCSAA national conference in 1978 in San Antonio, Texas. And I've been to every GCSAA conference since then, either as a superintendent or as a salesman."

Dennis has always appreciated the way that golf course superintendents openly share their knowl-

edge and experience. "Superintendents don't hide what they're doing. They're willing to share with others," he points out. "Like I always say, you either swim together or sink together, but whatever you do, you do it together. We have a very personable class of superintendents in Wisconsin. It's so much fun dealing with them — when I was a superintendent or now that I'm a salesman. I love every superintendent that I call on. I learn so much from them. And I try to impart information that I receive - to be a conduit of information because I see how people do things and I know what questions superintendents are asking."

His years as a superintendent were great background for his current job in sales. "You can't appreciate what a superintendent is

going through unless you've been there yourself," Dennis believes. "If I'm to be successful as a salesman, the formula is incredibly simple: I need to be the type of salesman that I wanted to call on me when I was a superintendent."

**From super to sales...**

So when did Dennis make the transition from superintendent to salesman? In December of 1980. "Ron Schumacher, the salesman for Horst Distributing who called on me at Fox Hills, told me in early November that they'd have a sales job opening soon. So I went there the next week for an interview and started in December," Dennis recalls.

"Horst Distributing is a great company with a great reputation, but there was one other thing that interested me in going there more than anything else," he continues. "In September of 1980, Horst had a

field day at the White Sox camp in Brothertown, Wis. Those of you who deal with Horst and are old enough will remember that location very well. They introduced a brand new riding greens mower, the Jacobsen Greens King IV, that had foot pedal flow control for forward speeds. Up until that time, all riding greens mowers were either stop, go, or hyper speed (like the GKII). There was no slow or speed up. I liked that new mower so much that, when the opportunity to go into sales for Horst came up, it convinced me to take the job because greens mowers are the bread and butter of the job and I saw a great potential for sales."

He had used the earliest models of the Jacobsen Greens King while a superintendent. "Its nickname was 'the praying mantis' because it looked so weird," Dennis recalls.



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"It was very good as far as cutting — no better machine in my estimation. But it was an operator's nightmare. You had to keep your wits about you. So I knew how well it would cut. And, with the operational issues resolved by having the flow control on it, I believed it was the right machine for the time. It still is. In fact, there's very little difference between the Greens King IV of today and the Greens King IV from 1980."

Dennis describes the old 'praying mantis' and how to operate it as if it were yesterday. "There was a steering handle on the top, like the handlebars of a bicycle," he explains. "There was a lever on the right side that made you go forward or backward and a knob below that lever that made it go fast or slow. And there was a

knob on the left side that would turn the reels on and off. There was a left foot pedal that would raise and lower the mowers. And a right foot pedal was the brake which never worked.

"So when you drove up to the green, what you ended up having to do was: quick, pull the right knob into the low gear; push the lever forward into forward motion and it would lock; push the left knob to engage the reels; then, with the left foot pedal, lower the mowers - all while you're steering. It was like click, click, click, click, click, and no mistakes or you would scalp," he remembers.

**More changes...**

Dennis has seen lots of changes in the turf management over the years. "When I started in the early 1970s, we had two height-of-cut

bars for mowing greens - 1/4 inch for spring and 5/16 inch for summer," he explains. "Compare that with today's heights of cut. What we didn't have years ago was really good irrigation. If you didn't raise your height of cut in the summer, the grass would burn out.

"Today we're mowing fairways at the height we used to mow greens," Dennis continues. "Back then we would mow fairways at 1-3/8 inches. Today, with the low-mow bluegrass, you're mowing at 1/2 inch height of cut. And we're starting to maintain fairways the way we used to maintain greens 40 years ago - topdressing, aerification, fungicide application, etc."

Dennis has been in the business long enough to see some things go full circle. "Originally fairways were mowed with F-10s. Then we

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started mowing them with light-weight fairway mowers like the Jacobsen LF-100," he says. "Well, it seems like people need more productivity today, so they're going back to larger and heavier mowers. But those same weight issues that were a problem before lightweight mowers have cropped up again.

"And I remember when Jacobsen came out with the very first riding greens mower in 1968. Everyone was mowing greens with walking mowers up until that point," Dennis continues. "People said we'd never again see walking greens mowers on greens, and that was very true until the mid 1980s. Now, virtually all private clubs and many public courses use walking greens mowers.

"It's like the tie," Dennis jokes. "It goes from wide to narrow and

back to wide. It's a very trendy industry."

Just as equipment models have changed, so have the number of models. "When I started selling, we had one riding greens mower; today we have nine models. We had two sand trap rakes; now we have nine. We had one fairway mower; today we have 10 different fairway mowers," Dennis points out. "There was a day when I could tell you, in detail, every specification written about every piece of equipment I sold - right down to the tire size. I can't do that anymore; there's just too much information with so many models."

The territory that Dennis covers has also changed a lot during his 24 years with Horst. "When I started with Horst in 1980 there were two salesmen for the company. We each covered about 27 counties in

Wisconsin and the UP of Michigan," he explains. "I went as far north as Copper Harbor in the Keweenaw Peninsula. You can't go any farther north than that!"

### **More nights at home...**

Not long after the first year, with his first child on the way, Dennis asked his boss for more help so he wouldn't have to be away from home so many nights. "So we hired another salesman in the fall of 1982," Dennis recalls. "The number of counties in my territory dropped from 27 down to 14. Then about six years ago we hired another salesman. Now my territory covers seven counties in a band from Manitowoc County all the way west to Marquette County. When I started I was gone four or five nights a week. Now I'm only gone one or two nights a month."

As change comes and goes, one

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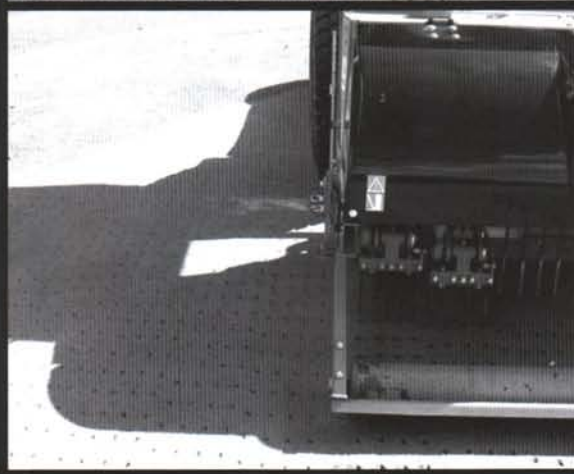
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thing about Dennis hasn't changed: The way he treats his customers. "I take a lot of pride in not just being a salesman, but in really being a person who can be a problem solver," he says. "I'll sit down with superintendents and discuss what they're looking to do and then match up my equipment to do the best job. I understand golf course budgets and the maintenance aspects. Instead of making their job match my equipment, I'll make my equipment match their needs."

And he isn't so concerned about making the immediate sale. "Sales isn't what I sell today, but what I sell tomorrow," he says. "My business stretches out for three years; chances are what I sell today I began working on three years ago."

Not all of his sales work is with golf course superintendents. "I also work with landscapers, lawn care companies, commercial properties - anybody who has grass to seed or mow," he says. "I even deal with cemeteries, and that has always been a most interesting change of pace. That's something neat about my job — the pace varies. I have to be very multi-faceted in my job. In other words, it doesn't get boring because I have so many different people to see and they have so many different needs."

Over the years Dennis has chosen not to be too involved with professional turf organizations. "I don't believe that suppliers should run their customers' organizations," he states. "I believe it's best when members run their own organizations. I get asked quite a bit to be on a board and I tell them, 'No, you guys need to run your own show.'"

**Church and family man...**

Outside of work, church is one of the most important things in Dennis' life. "That's where I'm

involved, as an active member of our congregation. I've done all kinds of things at church," Dennis says.

Family is also extremely important to Dennis. He met his wife, Kathy, when they both were working at Fox Hills in the 1970s. "She's a hairdresser and she was working in a beauty shop at the driving range," he explains. "My mom had gone in there to get her hair done and she said, 'You should meet that girl. She's really nice.' Yeah, yeah. But we did meet, we fell in love, and we eloped. I proposed on July 3 and we were married on July 7, 1978." Kathy has been working at Styles beauty shop in Two Rivers for 24 years.

The Robinsons have two children. Jennifer will graduate this spring from Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minn. "Ever since she was 6 years old she's wanted to be a teacher," Dennis adds. Brent is a freshman at the Milwaukee School of Engineering. "He wants to be an architectural engineer."

Dennis and his family still live a mile away from Fox Hills, and both kids work there. "What's really neat... before they went to work

there I could tell them stories about golf courses and it meant nothing to them," Dennis says. "Now they come home and talk about all the weird things that happened on the golf course, like the tractor that ended up in the bottom of the irrigation pond because the guy running it didn't know how to work the brakes."


Brent is on the baseball team at MSOE, and this winter Dennis is planning two trips to Florida - one to attend the GCSAA conference (by himself), and the other to watch Brent play baseball (with the family).


With 24 years in at Horst and 18 to go before he retires, Dennis is glad he likes his job and the company. "Horst Distributing is an absolutely great company to work for," he says. "They support their employees tremendously. In terms of longevity at the company, I'm in the middle. If a company doesn't change salesmen often, it's usually an indication that it's a pretty good company."

And also an indication that Dennis is a pretty darn good salesman. ♣

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