



# A Desire To Learn Has Shown Him Many Aspects of the Turf Industry

By Lori Ward Bocher

In my nearly 15 years of writing the Personality Profile column for The Grass Roots, I don't know if I've ever met anyone who has worked in as many aspects of the turf industry as Alan Nees. Golf course maintenance, lawn care, irrigation sales, equipment sales, fertilizer sales and marketing, business manager - he's done it all. Firestone Country Club, ChemLawn, Reinders Brothers, Milorganite, Agrotain International - he's worked for them all, plus a few more.

"I think my current job will take me into retirement pretty easily," says Alan, who will turn 53 this spring. "I think my drive (to try different jobs) up to this point has been based on my willingness and desire to learn new things. I've always tried to learn more and experience more rather than just jump around for bigger dollars."

Since 2000, Alan has been a business unit manager



and part owner at Agrotain International, a little-known company with big potential. "We produce and market products that significantly improve the efficiency of urea," he explains. "Urea is the most widely used nitrogen source in the world, by far. But it has two drawbacks. Urea is manufactured from ammonia. When you surface apply urea it breaks back down into ammonia, and ammonia is very volatile. Agrotain is a urease inhibitor that reduces the losses from volatilization."

### Loves the technology...

"I absolutely fell in love with the technology when I was first offered a chance to join this new company," he continues. "If you can grasp the enormity of how much urea is used around the world and the fact that you could capture 30+ percent of what would be applied, it's huge. There are applications in so many areas."



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Alan and his business partners are “tickled to death” with the progress the company has made in less than five years. “We’re divided into four separate business units,” he explains. “I’m the business unit manager — or BUM, as we say — for North American turf and ornamental sales. I have a counterpart who is the BUM for North American agricultural sales — and that’s really the biggest part of our company.”

“We have an international business unit, and we’re currently selling product in 52 countries around the world,” Alan continues. “We also have a business and production development unit.”

Although Agrotain International is a relatively new company, the product Agrotain has been around a little longer. A business acquaintance of Alan’s had the opportunity to purchase the patent and technology for producing Agrotain - plus a large inventory of the product - and he asked Alan and others to help form a company.

“The inventory lasted four and a half years,” Alan says. “Now we’re making more. The compound is very technical, very sophisticated. It’s being produced at a plant in central Pennsylvania that also makes most of the ibuprofen used in the country.”

The biggest market for Agrotain is agricultural, and it’s sold in liquid form to fertilizer manufacturers to be impregnated on urea or added to UAN solution. The company also utilizes a nitrification inhibitor to stop the nitrogen from converting to nitrate nitrogen once it’s in the soil.

“For our turf market, we add those two inhibitors (urease and nitrification) to urea at two different concentrations,” Alan explains. “The first concentration we call UFLEXX™, ‘U’ being for urea and ‘FLEXX’ because it’s so darn flexible. It has a moderate response and will typically last six to eight weeks. UFLEXX is used somewhat for golf turf, with the wider use coming in the lawn care, retail fertilizer, sod production, and hydroseeding markets — all kinds of applications.

“A step up from that is more of a golf product that we call UMAXX® — ‘U’ again because it is from urea, and ‘MAXX’ for its maximum efficiency, maximum performance, and maximum value,” he continues. “This is a 12- to 16-week product. We sell both products to fertilizer blenders like Spring Valley, EC Grow, and Howard Johnson’s. They’ll blend it with phosphorus and potassium sources to derive their different blends. Because UMAXX and UFLEXX are not coated products, you can melt it in water and spray it. This offers a little more control over nutrient management.”

**Back to the beginning...**

How did Alan get to this point in his career? Via a long and winding road that started with a little boy who liked to play golf. “I grew up in Chesterton, Indiana, on the southern tip of Lake Michigan,” he explains. “I started playing golf at a pretty early age when I was 10 or 11. That

was pretty much my life. My dad was a pretty good player and about my only golf teacher.”

Alan played in junior tournaments and on his high school golf team that won a few conference championships. He also spent summers working on the grounds crew at Valparaiso Country Club, playing golf in the afternoon when the work was completed.

“I was a good player, but not a real good player,” he admits. “I thought about going the PGA route and playing competitively, but I decided I wasn’t good enough. When looking at my career options after high school, I decided that I really enjoyed the outdoor aspect of golf and the art and science of maintaining the course. So I opted to go to Purdue University -one of the top turf schools in the country.”

Between his junior and senior year at Purdue, he had the good fortune of working as an intern at Firestone Country Club in Akron, Ohio. “They were hosting three televised tournaments a year then,” he says, adding that he was there during the American Golf Classic. “During the tournament we’d work a split shift - early in the morning until 8, and then back again at 4. During the day we’d get to watch the golf tournament.”

**Appreciates his mentor...**

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Firestone, assistant superintendent Pete Sinnott at the time. "There were three college interns there that summer," he recalls. "After work, nearly every day, Pete would take the three of us out on his own time and show us some of the intricacies of what was going on. Say we had planted a bunch of willow trees. He would take us back out after we had done all the work and say, 'This is why we planted this tree here and not five feet over there,' little things like that. He was a very influential man to me."

Alan majored in agronomy with a turf specialization and graduated with a BS in 1974. He went straight to graduate school with Dr. Bill Daniels as his major professor. "He was one of the leaders of the industry and the one who encouraged me to go to graduate school," Alan points out. But he dropped out after earning about 10 credits - one of his few regrets in life. "I was getting married and didn't have any money, so I decided to go to work."

His first job out of college was with a Toro distributor, Wilke Turf Equipment Company of Pontiac, Michigan. "I was hired to work in the irrigation division which I thought was a really good opportunity because I didn't have a lot of training in irrigation design and engineering or water movement," Alan recalls. "I thought it was a good opportunity to learn and round out my knowledge."

He was there for about two years before being offered a job with ChemLawn in the Chicago area - closer to home for his wife. "The company was about 10 years old at the time and really had pioneered the whole concept of professional lawn care," Alan says. "The company's growth nationally was just unbelievable. When I go to trade shows around the country, I'd bet a least 25 percent of the guys who have been in the business for a while worked at ChemLawn at one point in their career."

It was a very demanding job. Start at 5 or 6 a.m., spray yards all day, measure lawns, sell new service, come in at 6 p.m., wash and fill the truck, answer phone calls and follow-up on sales calls, done by 9 p.m. But Alan enjoyed it and was there for about four years. When his boss decided to purchase a ChemLawn franchise in the Fox Valley region of Wisconsin, he asked Alan to come along with him. But not right away. So Alan spent a year and a half working as an assistant golf course superintendent at The Marriot Lincolnshire Resort in the Chicago area.

### **Moves to Wisconsin...**

When he relocated to the Fox Valley, business was great for ChemLawn. "Within a pretty short period of time we had grown the business to 15 or 18 trucks and had routes all over Northeast Wisconsin," Alan relates. "We did over \$1 million in sales. Then the primary owner decided to sell the franchise to another franchisee, and that was it."

"But I had decided to leave a little bit before that happened," he continues. "I bought my own franchise with a

different company, Spring Green Lawn Care, in 1983. Spring Green was operating a corporate branch in the Milwaukee area that they split into three branches, and I bought one of them.

"And you know what? I absolutely hated it," Alan admits. "When I was with ChemLawn in the Fox Valley we really worked hard to provide good service. There wasn't much competition then, either. In Milwaukee, there was more competition and people would switch providers just to save a buck without considering the quality of service. I sold the business after one year."

At this point in his career, Alan first started having contact with golf course superintendents in Wisconsin; he became a sales rep for Reinders Brothers. "My initial territory was Racine, Kenosha and Walworth Counties," he explains. "And I was working for one of the great characters of the industry, Ed Devinger. I learned an awful lot in a short period of time."

"When another Reinders rep left his Fox Valley territory, I told them I really liked that area so they sent me up there for a couple of years," Alan continues. "That was a much larger territory - from Manitowoc, Fond du Lac and Winnebago Counties on up, including the central strip of the UP. I worked that territory for about three years and absolutely loved it."

Alan was glad to be back in the golf course environment. "I always viewed a sales job maybe a little differently than many," he says. "It wasn't about writing an order at all for me. It was much more about helping someone solve a problem. If I could recognize that problem, that was a good thing. If I had the solution to the problem, that was even better. And if I didn't have a solution to the problem but knew where to get it - even if it was from a competitor - then that's what I did."

While at Reinders, Alan found that his strengths developed more in the soft goods and fertilizer side of the business. "I would much rather talk about fertilizer," he admits. "I think nutrient management has one of the biggest impacts on what a turf manager is really trying to accomplish in terms of color, growth, density and health of the plant. That was always a lot more important to me than selling a greens mower."

### **Switches to Milorganite...**

So in 1989 when Milorganite offered Alan a job as their agronomist, he took it. "Milorganite has been around forever. There's just a huge amount of history there," he says. "To have the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of O.J. Noer, Jim Latham, Bob Welch, Charlie Wilson and those kinds of people was just awfully special."

"Another thing I factored in when considering the job: I knew a lot about how to grow grass in Wisconsin. But there's a big country out there - a big world, even," Alan says, adding that Milorganite is shipped throughout the country and overseas. "There are a lot of different grass species and soils and climates and other factors involved

with growing turf. I saw this as a chance to further broaden my knowledge and expertise.

"My role was to provide technical support," he continues. "At that time Milorganite had a very active soil sampling program. Golf courses from all over the country would send soil samples into the lab and I would get that data, analyze it, and make recommendations. I also provided technical support for sales and distribution."

Shortly after he joined Milorganite, there was a shake-up in management. Alan found himself as director of marketing, a position he held from 1991 to 2000. This was a very difficult time for Milorganite when other municipalities, faced with stricter EPA regulations, started drying their sewerage sludge, too, and selling it as fertilizer.

"They looked at Milwaukee as the shining star, the beacon, the guiding light," Alan points out. "They saw this as their answer, too, because Milwaukee had been successfully recycling bio-solids into a usable fertilizer source for, at that point, 70 years. Everybody thought it was a good idea.

"Almost overnight the market went from the 50,000 tons per year we produced (plus another 20,000 tons from other smaller sources) to a total 250,000 tons being produced by competitors all trying to undercut our price," he points out. "I learned marketing under fire. We had some very talented people on our staff.

And we had a brand name that was ingrained in the market for years and years. So we set about ways of leveraging that brand from the competition. We shifted the emphasis to include retail as well as golf. We started working more with fertilizer blenders who would use some Milorganite and some synthetic fertilizer. And we spent a lot more money on marketing and advertising in order to maintain the market."

The efforts worked; after a little dive in the mid 1990s, Milorganite regained its market share. "When I left in 2000 there were some back orders again - but not allocations like there were in the 1980s," Alan explains. "Our production was high again. We overcame the challenge and solidified our niche. It was a wonderful experience."

**Professional and personal involvement...**

During his many years in the Wisconsin turf industry, Alan has been professionally involved as a director for the O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research Foundation. "It's a labor of love," he says. "We've seen our ability to fund basic research grow tremendously in the last eight or nine years. We've grown our corpus from a couple hundred thousand dollars to \$600,000. That allows us to fund more research on investment income only. We have some neat projects going on around the country. And we've helped fund the education for a lot of graduate students. We're very proud of that."



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Until recently he was also very involved with the Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium, helping to line up speakers and more. But he resigned these duties last year. "The committee felt that the make up had gotten out of balance, as former superintendents like Danny Quast and our dear late friend Wayne Otto had retired and moved to the commercial side of the industry. Since the program really is primarily for the education of superintendents, someone had to step aside and let a superintendent come on board, so that was me."

When he's not working - and sometimes when he is working - Alan still enjoys his game of golf; and he's got a low handicap to show for it — about 5. "I play on the weekends for sure, and occasionally I'm able to get out another day of the week with a superintendent buddy or with a business associate," he says. "I do travel pretty extensively and I enjoy golfing when I can."

"One of the neat things about my career is that I've been on many of the Top 100 courses in the country," he continues. "I've played Medinah, Oakmont, Pinehurst II, Whistling Straits — just a bunch of really top notch courses. I wouldn't trade that experience for anything."

But he did trade in another competitive sport - curling - so he could attend his son's swim meets the past four winters. "I used to curl fairly competitively, especially when I was in Appleton," he says. "It's just a fascinating sport. There are really a lot of parallels between curling and golf. You're in the same mental state. There's a pendulum motion, a rhythm. There's a touch, a feel. This is true all over the world that good golfers tend to be good curlers. There are a lot of professionals in Canada who are at the top of the curling world in winter and are professional golfers in the summer."

Alan and his wife, Susan, have two sons. Kyle, 20, is a junior at UW-Eau Claire. Tim, the swimmer, is a senior at Brown Deer High School and will turn 18 on April 1, no fooling. Susan works in product support for the Metevante division of the M&I Bank. They've lived in Brown Deer since Alan started with Milorganite in 1989.

Alan closes with these parting thoughts for Wisconsin golf course superintendents. "With the ability I've had to travel all over North America, interact with superintendents, see and play at many golf courses across the country, let me tell you, Wisconsin golf courses are second to none. Wisconsin superintendents are good. They're really good. The product that they produce here — the playing conditions and surfaces — are just superior."

"Where I really give them credit is for the fraternity that they've formed," he adds. "They're willing to work with each other, to share information and ideas and techniques. In other parts of the country superintendents aren't always so open with each other. Wisconsin has a good professional group of superintendents." 🌿



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