

WAYNE OTTO: Inspiration for the Wee One Foundation



By **Mike Handrich**, Golf Course Superintendent, Racine Country Club

When you are faced with the daunting task of writing about a legend like Wayne Otto, where on earth do you start? For the record, Wayne served as the golf course superintendent of Ozaukee Country Club from 1969 through 2002. He was president of the WGCSA in 1977 and 1978. On November 12th, 2002, Wayne became the 12th recipient of the prestigious WGCSA Distinguished Service Award. After a very successful career as a golf course superintendent he became the spokesperson for the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District and formed his own business, Turfgrass Support Services. In addition, Wayne co-authored a book with Danny Quast titled "Turf Management — Tools and Techniques. After a courageous battle with pancreatic cancer, Wayne was taken from us on October 21, 2004.

Long time executive director of the Wisconsin State

Golf Association Gene Haas said it best about Wayne in his newly published book, *Caring for the Green*: "Wayne was one of the most sharing golf course superintendents in America. It didn't matter who you were. If you had a problem, call Wayne and he would jump at the chance to help you out. He was a true legend and a nice guy. Wayne was a good friend and mentor to a countless number of people."

It surprises me how many times during the summer I am going about my daily business on the golf course that I recall profound statements made by Wayne through the years relating to virtually all aspects of golf turf management and even about life in general. Most "Waynisms" were short and to the point. Many pop into my head time and time again, and they have prevented me from doing the wrong things to my golf



Fundraiser memories from Pine Hills.



course. I cannot tell you how many times Wayne said to me, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Wayne always had an answer for everything and most of the time he was right. I am not afraid to ask questions, and I am glad I had the chance to ask Wayne many, many questions. Most of Wayne's responses reflected his philosophy of managing turf. Ironically, shortly after graduating from the UW-Madison turf program and assuming my first position as a golf course superintendent in Milwaukee, I was told that Wayne and Danny Quast pretty much stuck to themselves and most likely would not be much help to a UW-Madison grad. I took the chance of calling both men, and the rest is history. If I ever ran into a problem and needed help, either one of them or both would be there on that same day.

Wayne was a true pioneer of our industry, and he was never afraid to take chances to find a better method or way of accomplishing something. This is just one reason why he knew so much about turf. Some of his experiments turned out less than successfully, but that never stopped him from embarking on the next one. As we all know, it takes a very bold man to conduct experiments in this business, and Wayne was

as bold as they come. We continue to reap the benefits from this curiosity and innovation yet today.

Wayne was the Energizer bunny of golf course superintendents. He was never shy about asking questions himself. I pose this question to you: In the last 20 years who asked the most questions at educational conferences and seminars in Wisconsin? If you ever needed to find Wayne during an educational seminar or lecture, you most assuredly could find him in the front row, dressed neatly, listening intently and feverishly taking notes. After the presentation, you generally would find him asking more questions of the speaker until the session monitor, the next speaker or the janitorial staff would have to end it! Later you could find him enjoying a beer and still talking about the same topic.

His cup was always half full. I cannot recall a single instance when Wayne was down or depressed. He was always smiling, happy to be around his peers, and always anxious to talk to you. I was fortunate to make a few trips with Wayne to various turf conferences. On one occasion I rode with Wayne, Danny Quast and Jim Latham to a Mid-Am Turf Conference in Indianapolis. We drove down in a snowstorm, and the ride lasted

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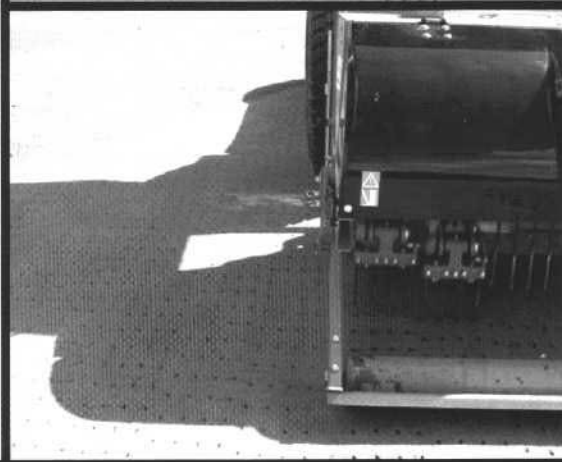
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about five hours. I think I learned more about turf-grass management in those five hours than at any other time in my life. Not once was there a silent or a dull moment, and we only talked about turf! The five-hour trip seemed to last about an hour and a half.

I always looked forward to rides to conference and back with Wayne and friends. At any conference, state or regional or national, you couldn't walk down one city block without someone from somewhere stopping Wayne and striking up a conversation with him. These reunions could last anywhere from five to ten minutes, and if the guy was lucky he may have ended up having dinner with Wayne that evening.

Wayne's sense of humor is truly legendary. I was managing ryegrass fairways during that first year I spent in Milwaukee and had the tendency to use lots of fertilizer. Wayne referred to my course as "Zebra Country Club." Needless to say, my fairways were the brightest in all of turf management. My members frequently carried cameras and took pictures while they played golf. We had a wet and icy winter that first year and, predictably, my fairways were virtually dead in the spring. I was in trouble, so I naturally called Wayne and Danny. As we were all kneeling and looking at the



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dead turf, Wayne became very serious. He looked at me sternly and asked me what alcoholic beverage I liked the most. When I said brandy, he suggested I should get the biggest bottle I could possibly find. I never laughed so hard; Wayne had an answer for everything!

Earlier I referred to quotes and one-liners as "Waynisms." JoAnn Otto has heard so many of these so often that many are now a part of her everyday vocabulary. Here are a few of them:

- "You're trying to put ten pounds of mud into a five pound bag."
- "I was born at night, but not last night."
- "Put a fork in me; I think I'm done."
- "The best color on the golf course is white and about 12 inches deep."
- "She's so ugly, she would make a 100-car freight train head for a dirt road."
- "Don't let your battleship mouth take over your rowboat tail."
- "I'm so hungry I could eat the southbound end of a northbound skunk."
- On gaining weight: "Just like the State Fair, I get bigger and better every year."
- On filling up your plate too full: "These plates need sideboards."

Wayne was truly the king of the one-liner, and he had many more of these truisms than I have noted here. I always thought if Wayne had been born much earlier in life, he would have made a great philosopher.

But Wayne's passion was turf, and it was only equaled by his passion for life. His love of tacos, beer and sports is widely known throughout the country. Once you loaded up with tacos and beer, look out. This is when Wayne would start talking about topics other than turf, things like the Packers, the Bucks and the Brewers. He loved conversation about college sports, the hottest peppers and politics. Wayne also loved to play golf, cribbage and a variety of other games. Wayne was a true competitor, but win or lose, he always had a great time and the camaraderie was always more important than the outcome of the match. Wayne was tagged with "The Wee One" nickname on a golf trip to Scotland when one of the caddies decided to put his money on "The Wee One." Legend has it that the caddie made lots of money that day!

Wayne touched the lives of many people. I will remember Wayne as an extremely intelligent man without an ego, who showed great respect and regard for his fellow man. He was a generous person who you enjoyed being around and associating with. Wayne was the consummate professional. Though small in stature, Wayne had the tenacity of a tiger and a heart made of pure golf. "The Wee One will never be forgotten."

Through the Wee One Foundation we have a great opportunity to keep Wayne's legacy alive forever. The Wee One Foundation was established in 2004 as a tribute to Wayne Otto to assist golf course management professionals or their dependents that incur overwhelming expenses due to medical hardship and are without comprehensive insurance or adequate financial resources.

To make the Wee One Foundation a true success, we need a strong "grass roots" support. I challenge every superintendent to become a member during our spring membership drive in March. Memberships are \$50 a year and with your membership you will receive a Wee One Foundation membership pin you can wear with pride. In addition to memberships, we hold an annual golf fundraiser in the fall. Pine Hills Country Club and Rod Johnson have been gracious and generous hosts the past two years. Please consider joining us for this fun outing at a marvelous venue.

Already the Wee One Foundation has gifted \$81,000 to people in need. As time goes on, the need for help will only increase. We need your help and support.

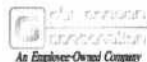
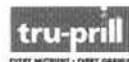
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