

# The Grass Roots

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## About Our Cover:

Our cover features the new turfgrass management faculty person in the Department of Horticulture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Dr. John C. Stier. The superb artwork is presented by our newly married artist, Jennifer L. Samerdyke.

*When the golden rod has faded; and the bees have ceased to hum.*

*When the trees have changed to golden; and the chilling days have come.*

*When the frost is sparkling brighter; and has changed the green to gray.*

*When the northwest wind reminds us; that it's soon Thanksgiving Day.*

— **THANKSGIVING DAY**  
By Wirt Monroe, farmer poet  
from Mt. Hope, Wisconsin

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(Left to Right): Mike Semler, Kris Pinkerton, Charlie Shaw, Dave Smith, Scott Schaller, Gary Tanko, Dave Brandenburg, Andy Kronwall, Mark Kienert.

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# "Where have all the Old Timers Gone?"

By Mark Kienert



It was the last time we played golf at Lawsonia when I first heard the phrase, "where are all the 'old' superintendents?" The words were directed toward the group I was with and came from a saleswoman, whom, when looking around the room, was surprised at the relative young age of those attending.

As you know, this is a young man's occupation. A demographic survey I reviewed listed the average age of a golf course superintendent in the United States as 38. (This is one year older than the similar survey conducted two years previously.) This I'm sure has to do with the marching toward retirement of the "baby boomers."

But as I look over a group attending one of our monthly meetings, I cannot help noticing the youth of our group. So many new and unfamiliar faces are present at today's association gatherings. There was a time that I knew everyone by name. People know me by name because of my presidency, and all the while I'm at a loss knowing who they are.

I am reminded and sometimes haunted by my recollection of a conversation I had with the late Bill Sell and his playing partner of the day, Mr. Irv Johnson. Earlier in my career, when I found time and actually enjoyed knocking the cover off a golf ball, I would make it a point to play golf with a new group of WGCSA members at every meeting I was able to attend with the thoughts of learning as much as I could. I recall a question I put to them as we walked up the eighteenth fairway at the Bull's Eye Country Club, a club that I would one day call home. It was there that I asked both if they had to do it all over again, would they choose to become golf course superintendents. Without a moment's hesitation, both answered me simultaneously, NO! They weren't kidding.

What shocked me was how rapid and convincing their words were. It wasn't quite the response that I wanted to hear nor expected to hear, especially since I had graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison just three years earlier. It does sadly remind me of the fact that two of the four superintendents I wish to call mentors are no longer employed as golf course superintendents.

So now it is my turn to fade into the background. It was at this point that I was going to insert some startling statistics as to the time and miles I spent behind the wheel traveling to board of directors' meetings and WGCSA monthly meetings. I choose not to because I do not wish to leave a negative impression on anyone considering running for the board. I must thank the members of the Bull's Eye Country Club for allowing the privilege to serve in various capacities.

I feel I have grown and matured. I have been asked why I ran for the board and committed so much of my time. It can be distilled down quite simply, for me, the WGCSA was my hobby. My passion was to learn and to imitate how other chapter leaders thought, organized, acted and reacted to the issues affecting the WGCSA. It was my goal to better myself in public settings by speaking and to build confidence and self esteem.

Mentors like Monroe Miller, William Roberts, Danny Quast, Randy Smith, Carl Grassl, and Jim Belfield will be remembered for their important leadership roles in helping to shape my policies and convictions. My most memorable experience was watching Rod Johnson simply blossom with self confidence during his tenure on the board. I really must thank Roger Bell for the second chance to succeed when he placed me once again on the ballot after I

fell victim to a political backlash after one earlier two-year term. Most of all, I would like to thank Bob Musbach for allowing me, an assistant golf course superintendent, the opportunity to serve on the board. I believe that I'm only the second assistant golf course superintendent to have served on the board. That is something that I'm proud of.

I was asked if I accomplished all my goals as your president. My answer simply is "yes and no." I would still like to have that one "identifiable golfer" within the state become the association's spokesman, someone who would represent us and our ideals at allied association events. I'll be keeping my eyes and ears open. I had no hidden personal agendas or a grand intention

*(Continued on page 5)*

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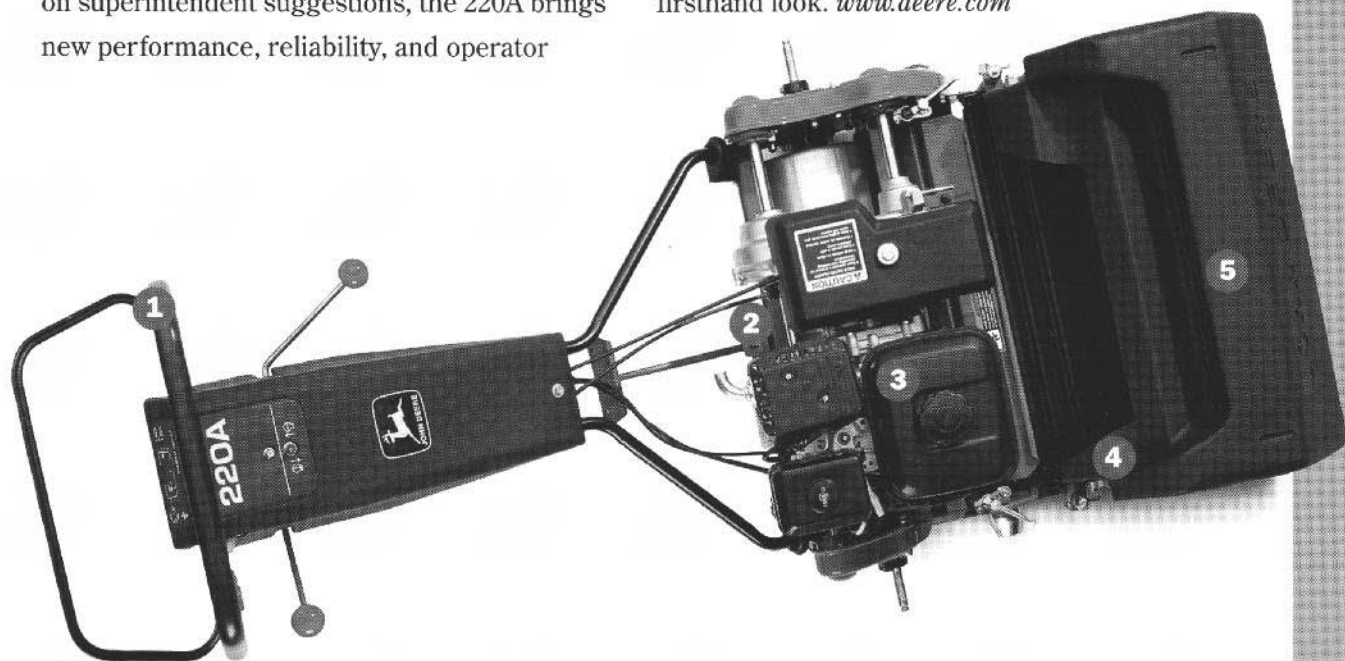
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(Continued from page 3)

of remaking the WGCSA into my image. My plan was to simply move forward into the unknowns of tomorrow. It is my belief, you accomplish your goals during the time you spend on the board. Policies and procedures that are implemented and fine tuned as you proceed through the chairs are the issues that will determine the course of the association history. I believe in nine people

focused on getting the job done. Were their disappointments along the way? You bet. Having good friends and fellow board members criticize you over decisions made or having the board labeled as a whole as "spineless" for having not stood up to the GCSAA's dual membership initiative are the things that "toughen the leather" of your hide. Peace.

So now it is my turn to join the ranks of "old timers" and fade from view as I hand the gavel over to

Scott Schaller. Your association, my friends, are in great hands. Earlier I mentioned that I learned and awful lot from our predecessors; let me be the first to tell you how impressed I am with the present lineup of leadership waiting in the wings. These guys know their stuff and are prepared to lead the Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Associations into the next millennium. I've enjoyed being and serving as president.

Happy trails and godspeed to all. 🌿

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## Finding answers to the unknown

By Lori Ward Bocher

There's no doubt about it. John Stier, the new turfgrass specialist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was born to be a scientist. "I like the challenge of finding answers to the unknown," he admits. He lists his various research jobs and projects like a teacher calls roll. And his list is just as long as any teacher's roster.

Maybe it was his farm background that opened the door to his scientific career. Born in 1964 on a farm near Mt. Clemens, Mich., his family moved to the suburbs of Troy, Mich., when he was only 4 or 5 years old. "But I spent most of my summers on my grandparents' or uncle's farm," he relates. He also worked for the Youth Conservation Corps and, as a senior in high school, for a Soil and Water Conservation District.

"After high school, I received a scholarship to attend the Agricultural Technical Institute in Wooster, Ohio, where I studied laboratory science and technology and got my associate degree in 1984," John explains. "While I was there, I also worked at the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center in the laboratory

for environmental studies on an acid rain project."

After earning his associate degree, he started working on a bachelor's degree in plant pathology at Ohio State University. When he needed to take some time off to earn money for college, he once again found scientific jobs as there, I also worked at the g the effect of herbicides and insecticides on corn and soybean field plots in Iowa, and at the University of California-Riverside department of plant pathology working with tobacco soils and microbes.

Back at Ohio State University, he worked in the turfgrass plant pathology lab studying the epidemiology of Pythium blight on turfgrass. This became the point in the young scientist's career when he decided that turfgrass would be his major emphasis. "I liked the people who I was working with in the turf industry, mostly at the Ohio Turf Foundation at that point," John says. "I saw a lot of opportunities for good science to be brought into the turf arena."

In 1988 he began his master's degree program in plant pathology at Ohio State. "While there I helped

develop a monoclonal antibody-based ELISA test to identify *Leptosphaeria korrae* and *Magnaporthe poae*, root-rotting pathogens of turfgrass that cause necrotic ring spot and summer patch disease, respectively," John explains. He also taught the laboratory sections of the introductory plant pathology course for a couple of years.

The busy student found some time for romance, for in 1990 he married Valerie, also a student at Ohio State.

And the list goes on. After earning his master's degree in 1991, John stayed at Ohio State to work as a research assistant in the agronomy department. He worked on a soils physics project, studying the effects on soil when sewage sludge that contains the fat substitute, Olestra, is spread on fields. This study was needed in order for Olestra to gain EPA approval. "It was a stinky project," John adds.

A more exciting — and less stinky — project took him back to Michigan in 1992. "I was hired by Michigan State University to conduct research on and supervise the construction and maintenance of the world's first

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portable, natural grass athletic field," he says. This field was needed to cover the artificial turf at the Pontiac Silverdome for the 1993 US Cup and 1994 World Cup soccer tournaments.

"My role was multi-faceted," John explains. "I was responsible for conducting research to learn management techniques to grow grass indoors. I was also responsible for getting designs for building the portable field, for overseeing the construction of the portable field, and for managing the field for two years.

"We had steel hexagonal modules built for us, six inches deep and 7-1/2 feet across with removable side walls," he continues. "We filled those with a sand-based root zone mixture and sodded that with grass grown on plastic. Volunteer labor was used to fill and sod the modules. The golf course industry and the green industry in general was extremely helpful in donating lots of equipment and labor for this project.

"We grew the grass modules outside for a month, and then moved them inside in June of 1993," John explains, adding that there were approximately 1,994 hexagonal units to move and piece together. The nat-

ural grass was in the stadium for a month, and then moved outside until it was needed again in 1994 for the World Cup soccer tournament.

Another part of John's job was to provide write-ups on the status of the project and to conduct newspaper, radio and TV interviews. "I liked the exposure and the recognition that I got," he relates. "I also liked the challenge. Almost everyone said it would never work, and we proved them wrong. We made it work very well. We generated one patent (methods for growing turfgrass in covered stadiums under reduced light conditions) and had several articles published."

After the World Cup, John began his PhD program at Michigan State where he:

- researched the effects of plant growth regulators on turf growth
- researched photosynthesis in reduced light conditions
- conducted field studies with a new grass, Supina bluegrass (*Poa supina*) for use on high-traffic areas of athletic fields and golf courses
- taught the advanced turfgrass management and physiology course for two years
- finished his PhD in January of 1997.

But the highlight of his Michigan State years undoubtedly was the birth of his son, Thomas, in 1995.

"After I got my PhD, I continued working on some projects, including one in Argentina for growing grass inside of a covered stadium that they're building down there," he points out, adding that the turf will be inside on a permanent basis. "I've also been involved with an athletic field renovation in Spain. And I've traveled to England, Germany and Austria for turf related projects."

In January of this year, John started interviewing for faculty positions. In addition to the UW, he interviewed at Michigan State, South Dakota State, Montana State and the University of Kentucky. "I chose Wisconsin partly because the turf organizations appeared to be very well organized and have good, solid histories behind them," he points out. "And I saw more opportunities for building the turfgrass program here at Wisconsin than at any of the other universities. I also saw opportunities to develop my own research program with very good support from staff and a very free, open-handed department and college."

*(Continued on page 9)*



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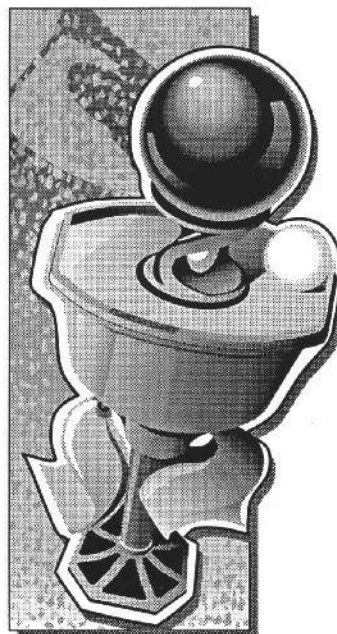
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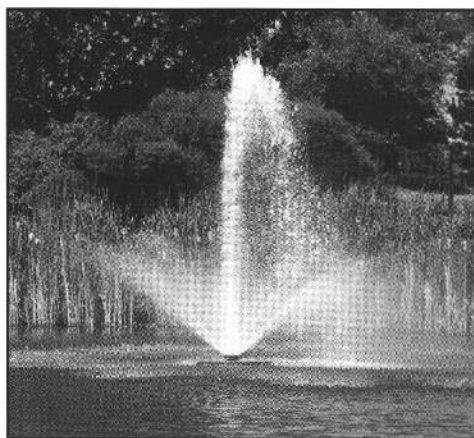
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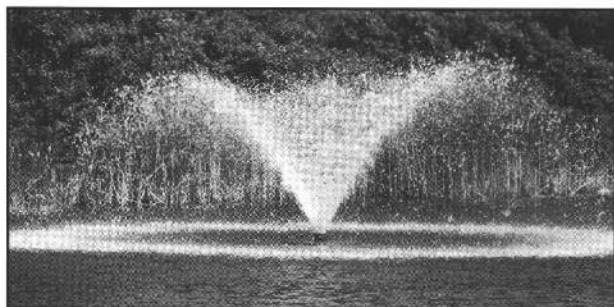
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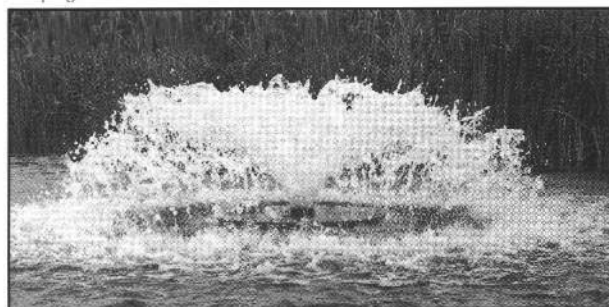
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(Continued from page 7)

He was very impressed with the OJ Noer Turfgrass Education and Research Facility. "That facility is the marquee facility of the country," John believes. "Delegations from other Midwestern states have been coming up here since it was built in 1992 to look at it and try to emulate it back in their own home states.

"It's well planned, well constructed, aesthetically appealing, and very functional," he continues. "It has a good conference room, a good classroom, offices, and bathrooms. My wife, who has been with me at many turf research facilities over the years, is very impressed that it has both a men's and a women's bathroom!

"The research plots are very well laid out," John adds. "And we have wonderful support from the equipment, chemical, fertilizer, and seed dealers in the green industry in terms of donations. That's very appealing — something not all states have."

John began his duties here on April 11. He resides in the horticulture department and also has an office at the Noer Facility. His position is 70 percent Extension and 30 percent teaching (Horticulture 261, introductory turf), with research expected. "So I have a 150 percent appointment," he jokes. He has definite goals for each area of responsibility. These include:

#### Teaching:

- add an advanced turfgrass course
- add a turf pest management course which will combine weeds, insects and diseases.

#### Research:

- thatch degradation and disease suppression using specific microbes
- cold tolerance in turfgrass
- shade management for creeping bentgrass greens
- athletic field management.

#### Extension:

- provide training to the local horticulture agents so they can better handle turf-related problems in their counties or areas
- expand the existing support base enjoyed by golf courses and lawn care companies to the athletic field industry, too
- continue Turf Expo and the turf school in the winter months
- continue and improve on field days
- eventually meet all of the golf course superintendents and become better acquainted with the green industry organizations.

With so many things that could or should be done in turf education and research, how does he decide where to put his energy and time? "Partly, I have to keep in mind that I have to meet the tenure requirements, which rely heavily on publication of research in refereed journals," he answers. "So, right away, part of my time is designated for that.

"Then I look at the importance of a project," John continues. "For example, if Lambeau Field has a problem, I would consider that top priority because of the national and international recognition that field receives." This summer he provided some help for the Lambeau Field renovation.

"I also look at projects where I feel I can really help out," he adds. "For example, if someone needed some advice in the pre-construction or construction phase when building a soccer field, I could make a big impact with minimal effort and perhaps save them a great deal of frustration and headache in the future.

"I also want to be involved with things that will bring recognition to the turf program and turf industry in Wisconsin on local, state, national, and international levels," John says. "One of my long-term goals is to make the Wisconsin turf program one of the leaders on an international scale." He presently sees Michigan State and Penn State as the leaders, with Rutgers University fast rising in prominence.

John and his wife, Valerie, are impressed with Wisconsin. "We bought a house between Stoughton and Oregon. We love it here!" he says. "We like it better than Michigan. We like the people that we interact with, either in the stores, at work, or in our neighborhood. We love the beauty of the countryside. It's much more interesting than flat Michigan."

Valerie is at home with their 2-year-old son, Thomas. Together, John and Valerie enjoy gardening, camping, hiking and bicycling. John also enjoys golfing and soccer. For an indoor activity, he likes to read history and English literature.

The next time you need a turf scientist, someone who likes to find the answers to the unknown, give John a call. He was born to be a grass-roots scientist — pun intended. 🍷







## THE WISCONSIN IDEA

By Monroe S. Miller

I received the following note from Gary Tanko in early September. Gary has been the golf course superintendent at SentryWorld for a lot of years now, and he is a member of the WGCSA board of directors. His note went like this:

9/8/97

Hi Monroe,

*I just thought you may want this picture. Dr. Maxwell and his wife are looking at our snaps in the photo. We had some disease problems that were a big concern and it took some lab tests to figure them out. Dr. Maxwell was very helpful with this; he is a good person to work with. His wife really enjoyed coming to SentryWorld to look at the flowers.*

G. T.

It occurred to me that Gary's note and the obvious gratitude he felt for Dr. Maxwell's help was a perfect example of The Wisconsin Idea at work for a Wisconsin golf course superintendent.

The Wisconsin Idea is a phrase that was coined early in the 1900s by a professor of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Dr. Charles McCarthy. McCarthy was also director of the Legislative Reference Library in the Legislature. Our state back then was passing a lot of laws and programs that were beneficial and helpful to her citizens—workman's comp, for example. Education received a lot of attention and there was an attitude by lawmakers and some leaders that cultural and educational opportunities should be available and "extended" to the people of Wisconsin. Dr. McCarthy worked for the establishment of University Extension and in 1907 the state legislature greatly expanded UW Extension (it had actually been established in 1885).

Dr. Charles R. Van Hise was president of the University at that time.

He was a world renowned geologist, but will likely be remembered mostly for his attitude about educational democracy. His leadership advanced the principle of University service and help to the people who desired it.

Is there a Wisconsin citizen who doesn't know about Robert M. LaFollette, Sr.? LaFollette was our governor in these years, and through his youth and early adulthood he developed a concern for the citizens of the state. With Van Hise (a classmate of his at the UW) and McCarthy, LaFollette played a critical role in defining what became known then, and still is today, as The Wisconsin Idea.

The best description of The Wisconsin Idea I've read was written by E.E. Slossan in 1910; it applies today just as well. "It is impossible," he wrote, "to ascertain the size and the location of the University of Wisconsin. The most one can say is that the headquarters of the institution is at the city of Madison and that the campus has an area of about 56,000 square miles." Someone else described The Wisconsin Idea by



Dr. Doug Maxwell and his lovely wife Martha check on plant diseases in a SentryWorld flower bed.

saying the University was kind of a consulting engineer in the public life of the state." I can relate to that, too.

A little more history: the University had developed a loyalty among agriculturists in 1890 when Professor Stephen Moulton Babcock developed an easy, quick and accurate way to determine the fat content of milk. It was extremely useful and Wisconsin



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