

customer's specifications," Bill explains. "We have specialized in greens grade fertilizer. We private label greens grade products for several of the national distributors. We built a special plant that makes nothing but greens grade. There's only one other like it in the world, as far as we know. The greens grade is a major part of our business and our growth for the future because we've invested a lot of time and money into our plant.

"We also make a lot of fairway fertilizers and weed and feed products," Bill adds.

"Another huge part of our business is in ice melt products – the stuff you throw on your sidewalks," he continues. "We sell Professional Ice Melter to the janitorial/sanitation market. We don't sell much of that to the retail market."

Local, national and international sales...

Today, Spring Valley has three main channels for sales: direct sales to the golf course, landscape and lawn care market in Wisconsin only; national sales of turf fertilizers and ice melt products to distributors across the U.S.; and international sales of fertilizers.

Bill never intended to get into the export market 10 years ago. "But we had several customers who wanted our product and kept pestering us for it," he recalls. "It was a lot of work to get into exporting; the amount of paper work required is tremendous. But, now it's a lot easier. Now it's an important part of our business." Spring Valley has one salesman selling to distributors in the United Kingdom and Belgium and another covering the Pacific Rim.

The Wisconsin market has access to the most products and services offered from Spring Valley. "We have six salesmen who sell in the Wisconsin market, direct to the lawn care, landscape and

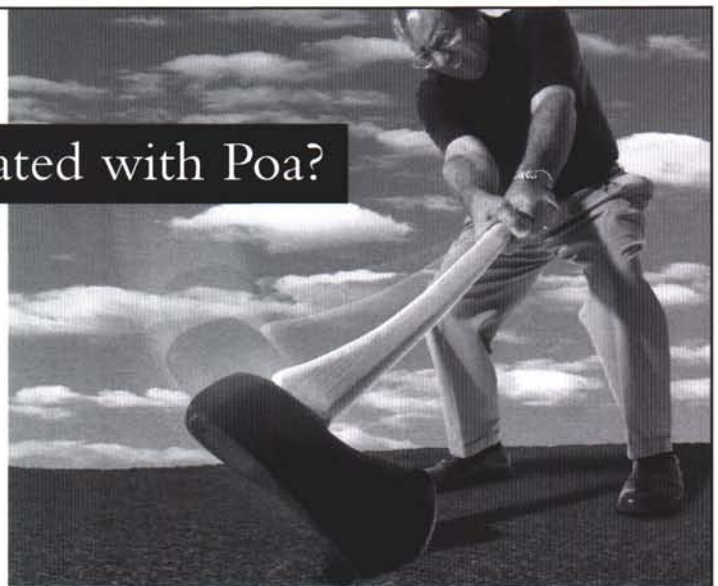
golf course people," Bill explains. "In Wisconsin we sell seed and chemicals along with our fertilizer. And we have an applicator truck for golf courses that takes 1.5 hours to fertilize an 18-hole course. It's a high flotation unit with big balloon-type wheels so it doesn't compact the soil."

Outside of Wisconsin, their two salesmen sell only to distributors – no direct sales or ancillary services.

Marketing strategy...

Since starting Spring Valley in 1976, Bill's marketing strategy has been focused and effective. "At first, we were a regional fertilizer supplier. We realized the Midwest was our market," Bill points out. "But we had aspirations to grow the company in the future. How could we do that? How could we compete in the marketplace? We said, 'Let's find a customer need out there that isn't being filled, and let's try to go after it.' We try to lis-

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ten to our customers, find out what they really want, and make a product that will help them solve their problems.”

That's how greens grade fertilizer became a major part of their business. “We looked around and found that there were a lot of other fertilizer companies that didn't like to make greens grade and wanted somebody else to do it for them,” Bill recalls. “So we said, ‘OK, we can do that for you.’”

“With the ice melt product, we were looking to see how we could keep our labor busy in the winter-time,” Bill explains. “We looked at several options, but an ice melt product worked well with our equipment and sales staff, so we went with that. We use a lot of the fertilizer equipment to manufacture it.”

Over a two-year period, Bill himself derived the formula for Professional Ice Melter, which is a blend of four chlorides. “We looked for a combination that would give the maximum melting capacity with minimum plant damage,” Bill says. “We're very proud of the result. It's very effective.”

More to come...

The company is poised for future growth. “We now have a plant in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that makes the same products as our Wisconsin plant,” Bill points out. “We wanted to be closer to our market on the other side of Lake Michigan. And right now we're putting up a 7,000-ton storage facility in Jackson. We're also looking at other locations across the U.S. to find sites that would work well with our distribution system and help the company grow.”

Spring Valley is a 50-50 partnership between Bill and his brother, Randy. “Randy is in charge of production, shipping and building,” Bill points out. “I'm head of sales and marketing.” The company employs about 50 people.

His pride shows...

When it comes to turf, there are a few pieces of ground of which Bill's especially proud. “We are the official fertilizer choice of the Green Bay Packers, which is really exciting for everybody here,” he says. “We don't get any game tick-

ets, but it's fun.

“And our golf product line has been used on some of the premier courses in the area,” he adds. “Milwaukee County uses our products on their courses, including for the Greater Milwaukee Open. And when the PGA championship was

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played at Medina down in Chicago a few years ago, they used a lot of our products.”

Bill is also proud of, and thankful for, the support his wife, Joyce, has given him over the years. In addition to screen printing those individual bags in the beginning of Spring Valley's history, she has managed the payroll and written a newsletter – from the convenience of the home while the kids were growing up.

Bill and Joyce have three children: Larry, 25; Julie, 22; and Daniel, 20. “As a family, we love to snowboard,” Bill relates. “In fact, I'm director of snowboarding at Sunburst Ski Hill in Kewauskum. My son Daniel and I compete in snowboarding. Daniel has qualified for the last three years in the Boarder Cross event at the nationals. We go out East and out West to

different competitions. It's a lot of fun in the wintertime.”

Still enjoys people and plants...

For someone who started out in the turf industry because he liked the people and the way they artistically turn a piece of ground into a thing of beauty, Bill hasn't been disappointed. “Golf course superintendents are great people,” Bill believes. “Being born and raised on a farm, I like down-to-earth people, and that's what golf course superintendents are. Like I said earlier, that's one of the reasons I enjoy this business. It's like a big fraternity. Everybody understands what it's all about and we all help each other out.”

Bill does his part on the professional scene. “I was fortunate to be on the WTA board when they were planning the O.J. Noer Center,” he

says. “It was good to see that come to be.” He resigned from the board when he was elected vice president of his church and needed to focus his attention there.

“Now I've gotten involved with the Wisconsin Landscape Federation,” he points out. “I'm currently vice president. I do a lot of legislative monitoring for the industry, which is very important. There are a lot of bills in Madison that affect our industry. I also set up the web page for the organization, which was a neat project.”

Bill is also secretary of the Grounds Maintenance Association of Wisconsin.

“The industry has given me a lot. I want to give back everything I can to the industry because it's been so good to me. And I enjoy doing it,” Bill concludes. ♣

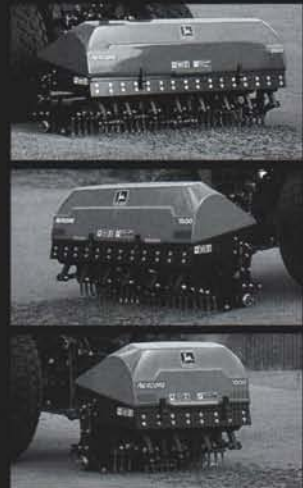
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The Golf Stud

By **Pat Norton**, Golf Course Superintendent, Nettle Creek Country Club

There is a moral to every story. There are underlying themes to almost any essay or short story...otherwise, why read it or write it in the first place? These essays or short stories are different from op-ed pieces in that the readers are challenged to interpret the writing...and then possibly express themselves using the written or spoken word.

It's especially fun to have a younger person...name-ly a 10 year old fifth grader or a 14 year old eighth grader...come to Mom or Dad with their questions concerning their English or Literature reading assignments. Challenging them to answer the questions correctly is usually pretty straightforward...but usually there is a final question asking them to really "Think"!! about the underlying meaning or reasoning of the author's writing.

With this story...the wisdom of every reader's accumulated experience in the world of

golf/business...should be enough to point the way toward the correct interpretation of the writing...

This whole situation started a few years ago...1994 to be exact...when nameless individuals formed a partnership group and purchased Stinging Creek Country Club...then a struggling golf course/real estate project yet in its infancy. Stinging Creek...like so many other such golf/real estate developments...was also available at an absolute bargain price!

The group wisely decided to purchase only the golf course...not wanting to touch all of those empty golf course home lots. The group also had the wisdom to bring in competent staff people and sweeten the pot by offering these key individuals stock ownership...albiet in a minority position.

Now, what superintendent or golf professional wouldn't jump at the chance to develop a new golf course and be compensated with salary, benefits, and stock ownership...in a situation where...the value of the golf course/corporation stock should rise dramatically over the years? Well, these two young gentlemen jumped at the chance to be involved and worked their butts off to make sure that Stinging Creek became a viable, well conditioned, reputable public golf club!

Along the way...they developed the motto that 'dedication to detail defines the difference' with an accompanying creed of delivering outstanding customer service and totally friendly service to the public golfer/member/outing guest...all at a value packed price!

And...beginning in '94 and stretching through the '98 golf season...this philosophy worked like a charm! It worked so well that Stinging Creek became a standout course in south ChicagoLand for its course conditioning...its value pricing...and especially its great customer service! Stinging Creek had five great seasons in a row...and the group thought that the gravy train would just keep on rolling indefinitely!

There were, however, some undercurrents of discord within the ownership group...mainly having to do with differences of opinion in the proposed new clubhouse that they were planning to build. The original GE Modular Space three wide trailer had served them well...but was seriously deteriorating...with a new lease needing to be signed...

So...in September of '97...everybody agreed that it was time to expand into a permanent clubhouse building...which is about the time that the troubles began for

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them all! There was never a unanimous agreement among them all as to the type of clubhouse to be constructed nor as to the type of clubhouse operation they would offer to their patrons! There were many disagreements during the construction and the first year of new clubhouse ops that led to some definite cases of hard feelings and serious management burnout!

By the end of the '98 golf season...the fabric of the group was beginning to not only fray a bit...it was beginning to seriously unravel. There was lots of talk about selling the course...and lots of rumors about certain partners buying others out...and partners wanting out...and ultimately...sticking to the original five year plan of developing the course and then selling it off at a huge profit!

It emerged through the winter of '98-'99 that there was one partner that wanted to stay involved...and indeed in the end...bought everybody else out and owned the course in its entirety.

Soon after acquiring Stinging Creek, this new owner formed a management team that...over the course of the '99 golf season...morphed itself into the "B squad." No longer did they have an "A squad"...of committed, serious, experienced managers. Like the B squad of any athletic team...our B squad looked and talked like the first stringers. But out on the golf court, they proved again and again that they simply did not know how to win at the business of golf!

By September of 1999 ...it was painfully obvious that further management changes would need to be made in the quest to regain the reputation that 'the Creek' had once enjoyed. The management staff was almost entirely dismissed just before the holidays of that year...which caused lots of hard feelings, finger pointing, and accusations.

Curiously though...there was precious little soul searching or self-examination by those involved. There's a saying by some that when these management dismissals happen...there's usually good reason...and that part of the exit interview should be a forced standing for 10 minutes in front of a full length mirror...

As the holidays of '99 receded into memory...it became time to try to rev up the dormant engine that Stinging Creek had become. We had a membership that was really wondering about the status and stability of a golf facility that they'd all come to love and patronize. As is usual with these situations...everything is blown out of proportion and lots of questions are asked...

Taking the bull by the horns...the ownership/management group that remained focused on rebuilding our golf staff through the hiring of a new golf professional. It was probably very interesting for their superintendent to be totally involved in the hiring of this new PGA guy...who very much resembled a golf stud.

A golf stud...according to many golf superintendents

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that I know...is that breed of animal who is totally into golf...and himself. He feels that he's got the name and the game...and all he needs is to do is be himself...a totally hot, totally tough, totally arrogant, totally defensive(when questioned), totally offensive(to fellow members/guests/golfers)...sort of guy!

He's a new age golfer who doesn't differentiate golf from any other sport he's ever competed in! The gentlemanly instinct was bred out of this animal a long time ago...which makes him an ideal golf stud! If I offend anybody out there at Stinging Creek...too damn bad!!! All of which is somewhat tolerable in a golfer/member...although it gets really old after awhile, eh??

It was a different sort of problem when the golf stud described above happened to be the very same PGA guy that was hired to revive and polish up the golf program at tradition laden Stinging Creek Country Club. Problem was...nobody understood his personality at the time...and everybody thought that this guy was the second coming of Christ!

For the veteran superintendent that had worked closely with some excellent PGA types over the years...the realization that the golf stud wasn't fitting in very well at Stinging Creek began shortly before the first of three letters of complaint from members or league chairman concerning the golf stud and his

newly imported staff.

It was probably a very sinking feeling for that same superintendent to understand long before the majority that things were a)not happening, b)not going to happen, and c)never would happen...properly...with the golf stud at the helm of the golf program.

Basically...the differences were...and are those of basic attitudes towards golf and the people who play it. If a golf manager has a hard core attitude towards public golfers...and doesn't understand or believe that catering to public golfers...is part of the job and...leads to lots more revenue for the club...a huge problem arises.

Halfway into the first year of the golf stud...huge problems did begin to arise. Ownership expectations were to have things revert back to the days here of special treatment for all golfers...especially the core members who had patronized them for those many years.

Over the next few months...ownership slowly began to realize that the golf stud was the stereotypical PGA golf stud of days gone by...who cared too little about all of the little details that make a public golf operation hum.

They were concerned that he seemed to be much more concerned with his own personal golf game...and the treatment of his special golfing buddies...instead of making sure that all was well with little old Stinging



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Creek. He seemed to be a throwback to those arrogant golf professional types that used to dominate the PGA ranks...but have been thinned out considerably in the last decade or so.

The ironic part of this story is that the golf stud did not see the problems that were arising as being at all serious. He was an individual who pretty much saw things as black and white...you're with him or against him...members who write letters of complaint are definitely against him...and fellow staff members who may have contributed to his ultimate downfall were definitely all part of the plot. Et tu, Brute???

There were definitely plenty of clues...plenty of inklings...and plenty of chances for the golf stud to modify his performance and become the type of golf professional that any public golf course definitely needs. There were also numerous instances of defiance, denial, and disagreement that further fed the initial differences of opinion...ultimately resulting in a sort of standoff...that resulted near the end with him operating things pretty much his way...and being unresponsive to any suggestion for change or improvement.

One problem that did erupt during the weeks of trial and tribulation was that there was no clear cut performance review given to the golf stud to clearly warn him that things weren't so good.

However...things do cut both ways. Should an established manager need such a review? Should this sort of review be required with an established, experienced manager...and would it do any good given his coarse, toughened attitude? People do get pretty set in their ways and become quite stubborn concerning change...

The golf stud knew quite clearly just what type of golf operation we were trying to operate...upscale, service oriented, friendly, and attentive to detail. The problem all along...was that he simply did not agree with that approach. The stud was a 'public golf guy' in the worst way...with somewhat of a 'screw them' attitude.

In the end...it was a matter of people just being on totally different wavelengths concerning the level of service and commitment to the membership, the club, and to their work in general. And it was a tough thing for all concerned to tell an established PGA golf professional that his services were no longer needed by Stinging Creek...

Maybe people should be more responsive to what others are trying to tell them...

Maybe they shouldn't wait for somebody to hit them directly over the head...

Maybe people should spend more time standing in front of that mirror...



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