

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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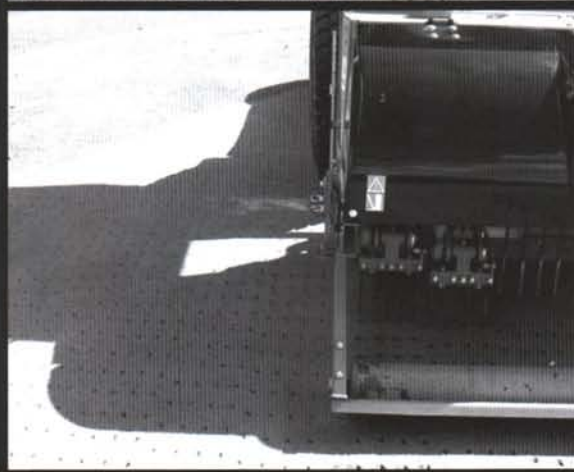
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thing about Dennis hasn't changed: The way he treats his customers. "I take a lot of pride in not just being a salesman, but in really being a person who can be a problem solver," he says. "I'll sit down with superintendents and discuss what they're 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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2004 WGCSA Fall Business Meeting and Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium

By **Dave Van Auken**, Golf Course Superintendent

There was something for everyone at this year's Golf Turf Symposium and WGCSA annual business meeting. Whether your interest lies in the research being conducted above ground as presented by Dr. John Stier and Dr. Geunhwa Jung at the annual business meeting, or you are intrigued by what's going on under the ground, "SOILS - Managing the Pressures," resulted in a "can't-miss" event.

Although attendance at the Symposium was as strong as ever, precious few opted to hear what their organization has been up to this past year and the direction they are charting for the future. This is good stuff, important stuff, and each and every one of you should make a conscious effort to attend. The executive committee and the board of directors works diligently on your behalf, researching, debating and voting on issues that have a direct impact on you and your chosen profession. Do you know the financial state of your association? Do you know where all the research dollars are going? Do you know the WGCSA mission as it relates to the national organization? Apathy abounds at a time when there should be unprecedented support and involvement. Time to get with the program folks.

Okay, enough soap box orating for now. I'm sure the opportunity to continue on this tirade will present itself in the near future unless the majority of you are willing to do something to stop it. Let's recap the outstanding program many of you did choose to attend, and rightfully so. I've been fortunate enough to attend the Golf Turf Symposium for the last 17 years and unbelievably, it just keeps getting better and better. The tireless efforts of the Symposium



It was entirely fitting that Dr. Wayne Kussow served as the keynote speaker in his final year at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Committee, consisting of Shelly Biro — Milorganite, Dave Brandenburg - Rolling Meadows GC, Rod Johnson, — Pine Hills CC, Mike Lyons — Old Hickory GC, (The Late) Wayne Otto — Turfgrass Support Services Inc., Danny Quast — DHD Tree Products, Pat Sisk — Milwaukee CC, Bob Vavrek — USGA Green Section, Terry Ward — Brillion Turf Division and Bruce Worzella — West Bend CC should be noted by each and everyone of us. It's above and beyond the call to duty and they deserve our gratitude. So next time you bump into one of these talented and generous individuals, thank them. The list of speakers and the breadth of information they presented was truly outstanding. Whether you consider yourself a seasoned veteran or you are relatively new to the trade, there was a lot to review and learn this year.

Dr. Wayne Kussow set the tone on the first day with the complexi-



A favorite Symposium speaker, the USGA's Jim Moore.

ties of our terra firma environment. Basic information presented by Dr. Kussow in Soils 301 revealed just how complex this science is. Jim Moore of the USGA Green Section let us know that there is so much more to know. Common practices and construction guidelines are constantly being updated and amended for our benefit. I personally thought this was great material. We were privileged to have Dr. Bob Carrow of the University of Georgia join us and share with us some of the newer ideas surfacing in the world of organic matter. I also thought there were some interesting concepts exposed by Dr. Jim Murphy of Rutgers University. Some of what he said was different from what I have heard in the past but it certainly reinforced the importance of open-mindedness.

The second day brought us just as an impressive list of speakers and topics. If you missed Dave Swift's breakfast talk, you missed any excel-

Dr. Bob Carrow shared a lot of his research in soil science issues from the University of Georgia.



Rutger University's Jim Murphy brought great expertise to the Symposium.

lent lecture. Needless to say, it was interesting and I'm grateful Dave took the time to share with us. Phil Brown of Clemson University spoke on compaction and gave us some additional information to use in our ongoing battle to features of the golf course in order to make it better. In retrospect, how many of you wished you had brought your owner or

green committee chairman with you for this meeting? Dr. Jim Murphy and Dr. Bob Carrow each graced our stage a second time to speak on organic and inorganic amendments and topdressing respectively. What a privilege to have these educators come to Wisconsin and share their insights with us.

Finally, some of our fellow super-

intendents braved the stage to discuss issues involving aerification and different approaches to this task. I took something home from each one of these talented individuals and when I got home I ran my electric pink highlighter over their names in the directory for quick future reference. I was personally grateful for

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their contribution to the program. I hope you were too. Bob Vavrek put it all in a nutshell for us and, as always, with his own running commentary. Bob is also a gift to our area and an undeniable resource. Use him wisely.

So there you have it. This year's annual business meeting and golf turf symposium. Let's hope it took some of the pressure off each and every one of you who attended. ♣




Phil Brown shared his research work from Clemson University.



The Whistling Straits staff that made the 2004 PGA Championship so memorable: L to R — Jeffrey Rottier, Kyle Jacobsen, Al Bancroft, Dave Swift, Grant Davey, Michael Lee, and Tony Rzdski. Mike spoke about the PGA before the lectures started and introduced his staff at that time.



The always popular roundtable discussion included golf course superintendents Mark Pettigoue, Kurt Thuemmel and Pat Sisk.




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