

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

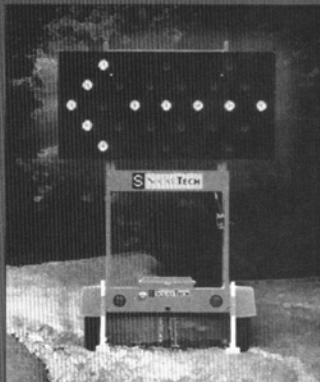


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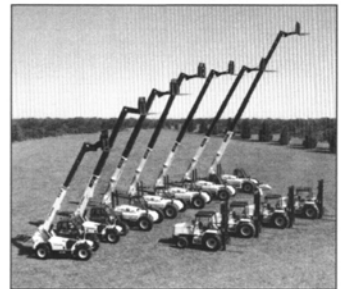
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with growing turf. I saw this as a chance to further broaden my knowledge and expertise.

"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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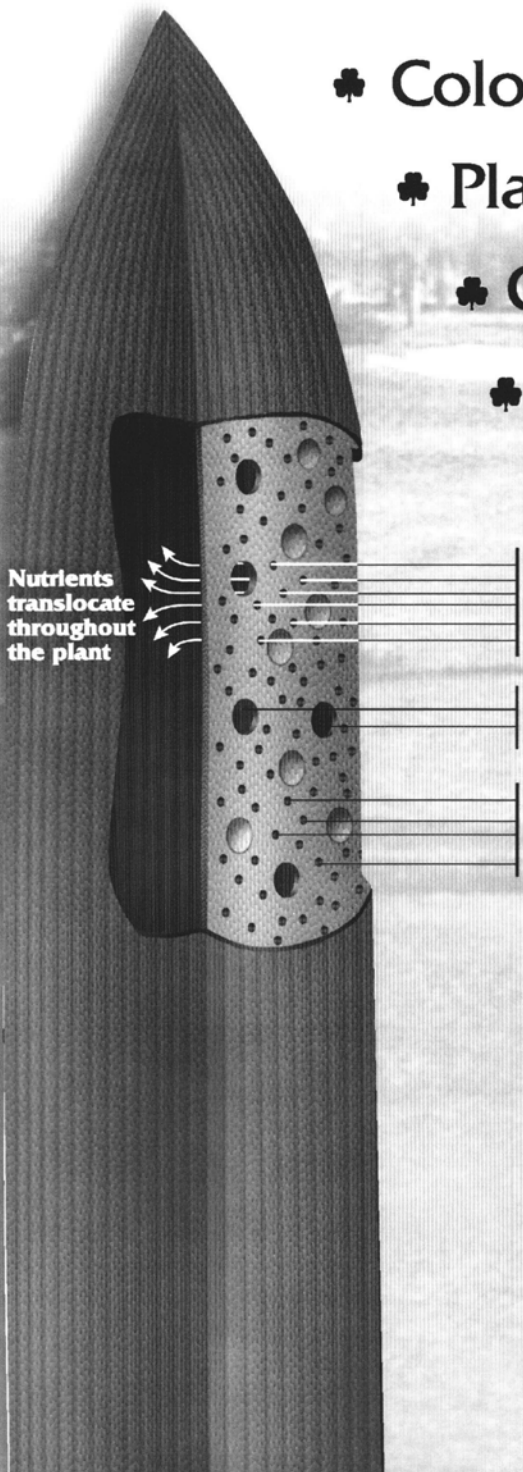
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Until recently he was also very involved with the Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium, helping to line up speakers and more. But he resigned these duties last year. "The committee felt that the make up had gotten out of balance, as former superintendents 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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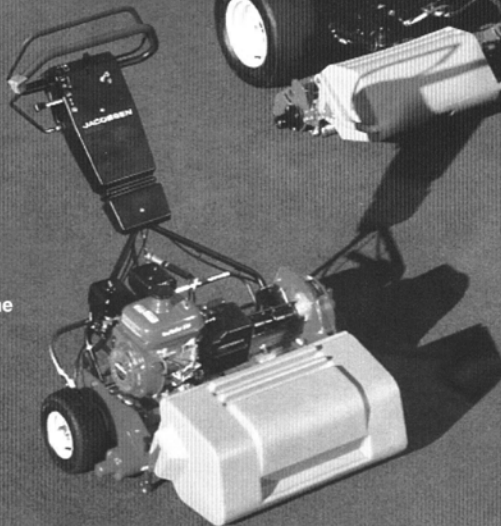
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Another Perspective

By **Monroe S. Miller**, Golf Course Superintendent, Blackhawk Country Club

Bogey Calhoun called early one morning last week to see if I wanted to ride along with him, Tom Morris and Steady Eddie Middleton up to Coon Valley to look at a tractor for his golf course

"Sure," I said, "as long as I can ride in the front seat."

"Fight it out with Tom Morris," he replied. I right then reconciled myself to the back seat of Bogey's "extended" cab pickup - tight quarters even for a fit and trim guy like me.

Calhoun has been looking for a decent used front end loader/backhoe for a couple of years, and his brother-in-law got a whiff of one that was available in west central Wisconsin. A landscape contractor had it advertised in the local shopper stopper that sounded to be in good condition with reasonable hours. Windshield time had been minimal for us this past winter and we were ready for a road trip and the good conversation that went along with it.

"They must trust me at the club," Calhoun said, "because the bookkeeper gave me a signed blank check!"

We had a great trip west and north of our home area. Although it was cold and there was still considerable snow on the ground, spring was in the air. It might have been the clear sky or the crisp air. Maybe it was the angle of the sun, or just maybe it was the watercress we stopped to harvest from the banks of Basswood Creek. My favorite salad green — a member of the mustard family — is at its prime when picked on one of the earliest days of spring. We had coolers along to keep it fresh until it made it to a salad bowl and drench with vinegar.

We made good time, found the contractor and the loader tractor. The loader was in unbelievable condition, so much so that Tom Morris was envious and would have loved seeing it parked in his shop. Bogey wrote out the check and negotiated a delivery time with the landscaper. He was elated over his used equipment coup, and he should have been.

"I am buying lunch," Bogey announced as we pulled into the small village of Nottingham, still buoyed by the great deal he had made for his course. We parked in front of the Brown Saddle Café, one of many pickups parked on the main street through town.

The Brown Saddle claimed to have the best hamburgers in Wisconsin, and that claim made it easy for the four of us to order. Deep-fried curds were brought out as baskets of hors d'oeuvres.

The conversation started on a subject we'd avoided on the trip up - winterkill. We all had ice on greens, as did nearly every other golf course in Wisconsin. Fear of

injury was running high all across the state and we started talking about what we were doing individually on our own courses.

The collective experiences and the literature on the subject of winter damage to turf are all over the place and our conversation reflected that. It wasn't long and some of the other Brown Saddle patrons were listening to our discussion (and debate).

Of course, in that part of the state, with small towns and villages and a predominantly rural culture, golf isn't as popular as, say, bowling or curling or softball. But the guys there in the café knew about winterkill.

"You guys could just as well be talking about alfalfa," said a man who introduced himself as Gene Stillmunkes. "Many of us up here in the boondocks are really worried about the hay crop we'll have this year. We don't know yet, but conditions for serious injury to hayfields were with us a lot of the winter. Some farmers are worried

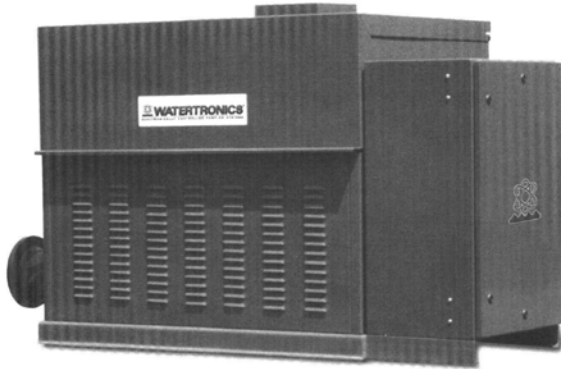
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how they'll feed livestock herds next winter."

The four of us - Bogey, Tom, Eddie and me - listened closely as the conversation in the little restaurant turned to winterkill of crops other than bluegrasses and bent-grasses.

"What happens to a golf course when the winter weather takes out a crop?"

Bogey seemed really taken by the friendliness and curiosity of the locals and answered right away.

"Usually, if the damage is to putting greens and if it is serious enough, we mow a temporary putting area in the fairway," he said. "There isn't much you can do with tee or fairway damage, other than cultivate somehow and overseed."

"Can they still play golf then?" came the question from a table in one corner.

"Well, yes," came the somewhat reluctant reply from Calhoun. "But the product isn't what they are paying for and that causes problems."

"Doesn't seem as serious as losing your crop for the whole season," replied an older man who introduced himself as John Stone.

"Well," Bogey started, "when golf is your business, it is a serious setback."

"You are lucky you don't have to depend on an apple orchard," a man in bib overalls said from the lunch counter. "My brother owns an orchard down near Gays

Mills and the cold winter and early spring weather ruins his income about one year in five, somehow or other."

"Are those golf courses ruined for the entire year?" came a question from the next table.

"No," said Tom Morris, who wanted to get into the conversation. "We usually have the winterkill area back to 100% by Memorial Day or shortly after."

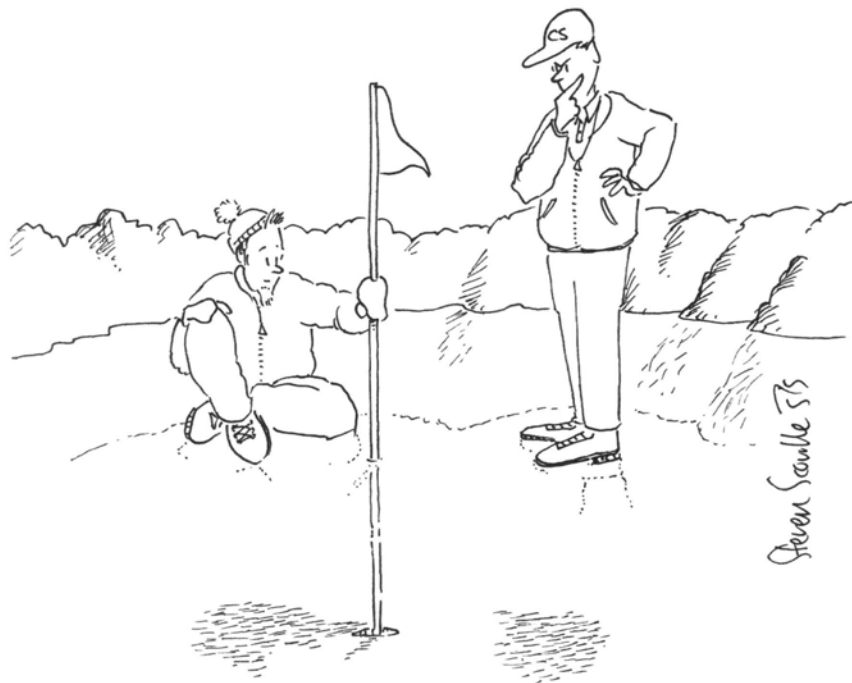
"That doesn't sound too serious to me," observed yet another of the guys in the café. A waitress busily filled coffee cups all around. "It isn't like losing all your hay crop or apple crop."

"Well, it has cost a few superintendents their job over the years," Calhoun said.

There was a moment of silence before one of the old boys said, "If you lose your job for something God did, that probably wouldn't be a very good job anyway."

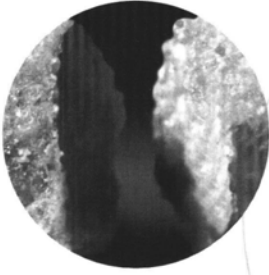
We kind of looked at one another, nodded and agreed he had a point.

The chow was great, and we headed back after apple pie and cheddar cheese. We talked some more about our plans for spring, but with a little less worry than we had before lunch at the Brown Saddle. Sometimes you have to get a ways from home to get a good perspective on circumstance and problems, and in rural Wisconsin, that perception is pretty well grounded in common sense. We felt better about spring, regardless of what it might bring to us. ♣



Steven Seauke '75

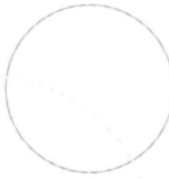
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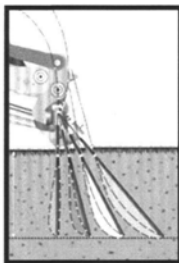
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