

# The Tao of Turf

By Dr. Frank S. Rossi  
UW-Madison; Horticulture

*The Tao.* I will be writing a semi-regular column for *Hole Notes* and like to have a by-line that encompasses the theme of my articles. For example, my by-line for *Grass Roots* (Wisconsin's publication) is *Gazing in the Grass*. It came to me as I was writing my first article for Monroe and after having read his work over the years, I wonder about many things in our profession and remember finding many answers to my questions on the golf course by paying attention (or gazing) at the grass. I thought I might provide some background this month on how I came to deciding on my theme for *Hole Notes*.

Tao (pronounced dow - rhymes with how) simply stated means "the way of things." The beauty and elegance of this philosophy is its simplicity. Each of us has a way of being who we are: golf course superintendents, scientists, extension educators, parents, spouses, volunteers, fishermen, hunters, etc. For each aspect of our life there is a way of being that is most pleasurable when we follow the path of least resistance.

*The Tao of Turf.* Many of us have watched the incredible growth in the turfgrass industry over the last 20 years and wonder if we really have improved things that much. Expectations are higher, demands on our time are greater and more new technologies are available. I thought that new technology was supposed to make our lives easier? For example, sophisticated mowing equipment has enabled us to lower cutting heights to where we are mowing fairways in some areas as low as we used to mow greens. A golf commentator in speaking of the greens at Augusta suggested that "the greens were mowed with hair remover wax."

I wonder, is this the way (or the Tao) of turf? Is this a path of least resistance that leads to a well-balanced environment? Sometimes I am amazed as the level of complexity that many people speak of regarding golf course management. Please don't misunderstand, I am not against new technologies. On the contrary, I firmly believe that acceptance and **integration** of new technologies could simplify our management programs. However, successful integration is very different from diversification, in other words just having more tools rather than better tools. Also, integrating new technologies demands a thorough understanding of the advantages and limitations of each technology. My hope for these articles is to provide information that you can use when deciding whether certain technology is right for you.

*Perspective.* I started my turf management career at the ripe age of 11, pushing a lawnmower around the neighborhood, then working on a landscape crew at age 13 and ending up on the local golf course pushing a rotary and dragging hoses at age 15. As a kid from a working class



Dr. Frank S. Rossi

home, I always wondered where people found all the time to play golf? My dad had to work, my mom worked part-time and raised the kids; even I had to work!

One of my most vivid memories of my first golf course job was being yelled at for syringing fairways while people were playing. We had a quick coupler manual system and my job on hot summer days was to syringe the fairways. I would carry eight sprinkler heads and run down the fairway inserting them. After I hooked up the last head, I ran back and unhooked the first one until the entire fairway was watered. We had annual bluegrass with no root system and the fairways would turn blue if they weren't cooled off. The superintendent understood this, he helped me understand it, but I could not help the golfers understand it. I was called names that, up to that point in my life, I had never heard.

Why would the members of the country club be mad at me for doing something to help their golf course? Why was I being yelled at for trying to keep the grass alive? For a 15-year-old these are very confusing issues. I asked our foreman, a former boxer for the Haitian Olympic Team, came to the states in the late '60s with an eighth grade education. He told me two things: 1) not to let it bother me because no matter what we do we cannot please everyone and 2) to the members, what is best for the grass is less important than what is best for the golfer. Ah ha! The way of things!

(Continued on Page 24)

## Tao of Turf —

(Continued from Page 17)

I made it through my formal education and became an assistant superintendent in Greenwich, Ct., at one of the original dozen golf courses in the USA, an old Seth Raynor design. There were over 70 golf courses in a 10-mile radius! I lived in a converted office trailer behind the maintenance shed and for two years ate, drank and slept that golf course. Our membership was paying between \$50,000 and \$75,000 per year to play golf and they demanded championship conditions on a daily basis. Because I was a golfer, I lacked some general perspective to the job. My passion was the piece of land and all that made up the beauty of the course. I believe now that it was at this point in my career I knew I wanted to help golf course superintendents, who struggled with their love for the land and the needs of the golfer. Off to grad school I went, and I began to view this profession in a different light.

**Northern Golf Courses and the Tao of Turf.** I left the east coast three years ago and thoroughly enjoy being a Northern Midwesterner. The pace of life seems slower, and I think expectations on our golf courses are more realistic. Still, many superintendents are under pressure to provide championship conditions and experience many feelings I am familiar with. Yet, the Tao of turf management in the north seems more at peace than in other places I have visited. Many of you enjoy the great outdoors and understand the balance of things in nature. I find many people with healthy skepticism of management fads, relying on proven technology. I might call this a more conservative way, but I still see new technology experimented with, facts sought out investigating the technology and a clear goal in mind when integrating the technology into the management system. Reading over back issues of *Hole Notes*, speaking at the Turf Conference and knowing several of you, I think I've got a feel for the audience.

My colleagues and I at the UW-Madison are committed to providing the turfgrass industry in the Northern Midwest with the facts about new technology (grasses, fertilizers, chemicals, equipment, etc.) and their integration into existing management

systems. We operate as a team that relies on the expertise of each scientist to address specific aspects of a project.

My intention is to provide you with information regarding the work on-going at the O.J. Noer Turfgrass Facility and throughout the region. For instance, my graduate student will be starting his Ph.D. research with winter injury this year. We hope to find some mechanisms of how the plants are killed and possible management systems to avoid injury. Still, specifics aside, my hope is to be an objective resource for turfgrass managers who care for the land. For me, the Tao of turf for golf course superintendents is a desire to maintain a balance among the environment, the people, and the game. Here we go...

When It Comes to Turf Management ...

NOBODY KNOWS  
LIKE YOUR  
WILBUR-ELLIS PRO

"Clipping Reduction"



CIBA

PRIMO® says it all

Call for Details on Primo!!!

Primo registered trademark of CIBA

Your one-stop shop for all turf management needs. Ask about our complete line of chemicals, fertilizers and seed.

Wilbur-Ellis...dedicated to quality, customer service and environmental stewardship.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

LARRY THORNTON

800/642-2736 or 612/723-0151



IDEAS TO GROW WITH®

®/™ registered or applied for Wilbur-Ellis Company. ©1993 WECCO