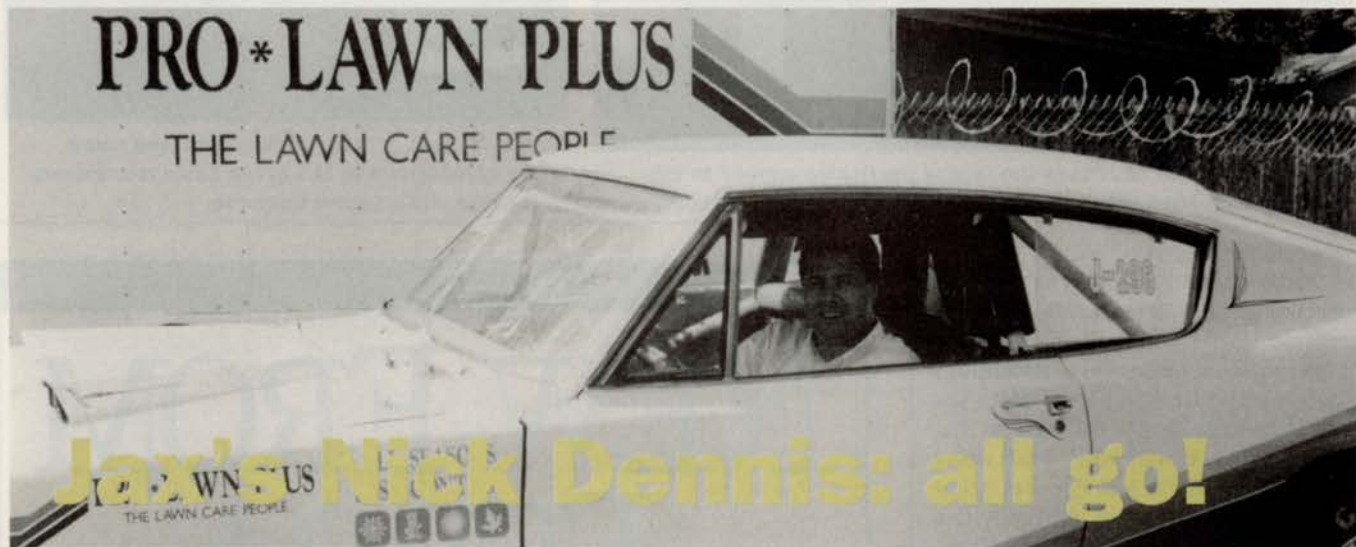


LAWN CARE INDUSTRY



Incoming FTGA president on fast track with lawn care business and automobile racing.

■ Drag racers call the metal pole with its row of colored lights "the Christmas Tree."

It signals the start of each race.

It flashes yellow, yellow, green!

Reflexes uncoil like a great spring. Hands grip the wheel. The right foot slams down so hard on the accelerator it's a wonder it doesn't burst through the firewall. Headers belch so loudly as to split your skull. The driver launches his car and, in less than 10 seconds, rockets past and triggers an invisible timing beam.

"Stress relief," says Nick Dennis, weekend driver and car sponsor, and full-time family man and lawn care pro, as he describes his involvement with drag racing—"But it's really not.

"Racing is perfect for you, a friend told me," says Nick. "He said, 'You're the most impulsive person I've ever met. If you don't like something, you'll tear it apart and rebuild it because you love to experiment.'"

Nick Dennis operates Pro Lawn Plus, Jacksonville, Fla., with

partner and former college roommate (U. of Georgia) Mike Feely. You'll recognize Mike immediately. He's the calm one. "I'm always in everybody's face," admits Dennis.

Nick Dennis started his lawn care business almost 14 years ago after visiting Atlanta and noticing, really noticing, ChemLawn trucks for the first time. "I started snooping around, looking at their trucks, talking to their people," he recalls.

Within a few months, he'd told his wife that he was quitting his pest control job and starting his own lawn care company in Jacksonville. She urged him to go for it.

Nick's timing turned out to be pretty good. He caught the industry moving up.

Florida home owners, long used to professional insect control in their homes and in their yards, also started to realize their lawns could be even nicer with regular fertilization and weed service. Adding to the demand was the steady stream of retirees, Yankees from the North buying homes in Florida and wanting nice lawns too.

Nick, however, believes the industry's heyday is over in north-east Florida.

He points to severe price cutting in his market as proof. Also, the ever-growing amount of lawn care regulation.

"As an industry, we've brought a lot of this scrutiny on ourselves by sloppy work and sloppy marketing," says Dennis, "by hiring warm bodies and throwing them out there and saying they're trained when they're not trained."

He says lawn care business owners now *must* be more responsible and responsive to customers if they want to survive.

To be profitable and have their companies grow, their service



Pro Lawn Plus crew with production leader Mike Feely, rear center, and Nick Dennis, kneeling.

'The mentality that it's a fastbuck industry, that it's an easy mark for money—that really bugs the hell out of me.'



'Just show me what needs to be done. Give me some guidelines and leave me alone. Don't ask me how I'm going to do it. Just let me do it.'



'Price cutting is a big threat to the industry. It's like telling homeowners that we're going to sell them a new Lincoln at a Geo price.'



quality and/or delivery, *must* be markedly better or different from competitors.

"The only way we (Pro Lawn Plus) can hope to out-distance ourselves from everybody else in the marketplace is to be different from the others, more flexible than everybody else," says Dennis, who says his company grew by 7 percent during 1992.

That's one reason why Dennis is so involved in the Florida Turfgrass Association, regularly making the 2-hour-plus drive to Orlando while working on various committees. In September he becomes the first lawn care business owner ever to serve as FTGA's president.

"Being involved with the association has allowed us to keep a sharp eye on all the turfgrass research taking place in Florida," says Dennis. "We know all the latest on nematodes and mole crickets. We know about the updates on the herbicides, the hybrid grasses as they're being developed.

"A lot of this is information we can use on our customers' lawns. Sometimes it's information they should know, and we can



Pro Lawn Plus is using Isuzu trucks this season with 600 gallon main, 100 gallon drop tanks.

pass it on in the newsletter we leave with each service round."

Dennis admits his schedule is just about as full as it can get.

"I like what I do, but when I get tired of it, I have other things, other diversions. Maybe that's how I keep such a strong interest in this business. When the men and women come here every morning, they see that I'm still excited about what we're doing," says Dennis.

"I guess I look at this as kind of like a NASCAR race team, and I'm the car owner.

The sales guys are out there getting us sponsors when they sign up customers. The people in the office, they're the pit crew. Our drivers are the men on our trucks. Would I put an unskilled, untrained driver in a car that goes 120 mph? No, I'm not going to put an unskilled, untrained applicator in my trucks either.

"This is a very intense race, but we're going to win the race. We're going to win a lot of races," says Dennis.

—Ron Hall

1993 a big, big year for Florida turf

■ This promises to be a milestone year for the 41-year-old Florida Turfgrass Association (FTGA).

Sometime this summer or early fall—perhaps in time for the FTGA Conference and Trade Show Sept. 25-30 in Tampa—the 1,000-member association will help:

- ✓ unveil the first Florida Turfgrass Survey since 1974. It promises to have some eye-opening numbers. There were only about 400 golf courses in the state in 1974 and an estimated 1200 (and still counting) in 1993.

- ✓ dedicate a state of the art turfgrass research facility at the University of Florida, Gainesville, the Envirotron. The Envirotron was funded by private support from the FTGA and by matching funds contributed by the state. It has been under construction since March 11, 1992.

FTGA Executive Director Robert J. Yount says Florida's turfgrass industry is justifiably excited as the two projects near completion.

Results of the survey should give state lawmakers proof of just how vital turfgrass is to Florida's economy. "Legislators keep asking how big turfgrass is in the state, and now we're going to be able to tell them," says Yount. "This will be extremely

important as the state continues to deal with issues like water."

Also, by surveying and categorizing the industry, suppliers can more accurately and comprehensively match their products with the markets, says Yount.

The Envirotron, being built on the U. of Florida campus, will consist of a research laboratory, a greenhouse, a study/living area and a rhizotron—a glass-walled laboratory which allows researchers to study roots and soil.

"Turfgrass is so important to Florida that we have to continue to recruit excellent students," says Yount. "It's almost like recruiting a top quarterback. And we think the Envirotron will help the

University of Florida get top-flight students."

In an unrelated matter, Yount reports that its *Turfgrass Friends* coloring and activity book has been a big hit with youngsters. The FTGA had distributed almost 15,000 by the beginning of summer.

For more information: FTGA, 302 S. Graham Ave., Orlando, FL 32803-6399; (407) 898-6721.

—Ron Hall



Bob Yount: FTGA membership is diverse and growing fast.