

STMA Profile:

GIL LANDRY BUILDS PROFESSIONALISM THROUGH COMMITMENT

By Bob Tracinski

It takes only a minute of talking to Dr. Gil Landry to recognize that he's a true southern gentleman. Yet behind his soft southern accent and apparently relaxed demeanor lies a strong commitment to the turfgrass industry and an intense drive to bring the Sports Turf Managers Association to the forefront of that industry.

Ask anyone who knows Landry to describe him and you'll hear many of the same terms — intense, dedicated, energetic, hard-working, on top of things, and more. Those attributes are more than admirable; they're essential considering the many varied responsibilities he juggles as extension turf specialist for the University of Georgia and STMA president.

Part of his ability to handle so much comes from his commitment to turf. Landry is quick to point out that the turfgrass industry touches all of our lives in various ways.

If turfgrass happens to be growing in Georgia, it's Landry's responsibility. In his extension turf specialist role, he serves as the overall coordinator for all turfgrass management programs in the state. That covers turf from home lawns to golf courses.

Based at the university's Griffin, GA, facility, located just south of Atlanta, Landry puts on educational programs throughout the state, helps turfgrass managers solve their turf problems, and coordinates the programs for the state's Annual Turfgrass Conference and Trade Show and the biennial field day.

Landry serves as a resource person for county extension personnel, primarily in training to develop their expertise in turfgrass management and in the development of educational materials, slide

sets and presentation packages for local seminars.

Large Territory to Cover

Georgia is the largest state east of the Mississippi River, with 159 counties and 158 extension offices. Fortunately for Landry, the majority of those counties are rural, with little demand for the turfgrass assistance. The focus of his attention is around the urban centers, with the heaviest concentration in the metro-Atlanta area.

Still, with Savannah and Brunswick about 250 miles away, Landry does spend considerable time on the road. And he's not content to devote a trip to a single problem or agenda. On a recent trip to Savannah, he conducted a combination classroom and hands-on education session for 35 county agents from the part of the state, surveyed the turf at Cardinal Stadium, the Class A affiliate of the St. Louis Cardinals, and checked out the turf problems at the local golf courses.

Then there's the not-so-little project of the Annual Turfgrass Conference and Trade Show held each winter. Last year, more than 1,300 people attended and exhibitors filled the 48,000-square foot trade show area.

Just 10 years ago, the conference was strictly for the golf course industry. About that time, Landry moved to expand the program to encompass all of the Georgia turfgrass industry. Six years ago the conference was moved to Atlanta to draw a larger crowd and provide adequate room for trade show space. At the same time, the Georgia Turfgrass Association was formed as an umbrella organization for the industry. The conference was then cultivated as a profit maker to help support the association.

The conference, which prior to these changes could be organized by two to three



Landry: "Any association is only as effective as its leadership, and depends on the support, guidance, and involvement of members."

people, now requires three large committees to direct the facility arrangements, trade show, and educational faculty. Pre-conference workshops are held and the conference has expanded to include both general and concurrent sessions to accommodate all turf areas.

The University of Georgia, Georgia Turfgrass Association, and GGCSAA co-sponsor the conference. Allied associations, such as the Georgia Sod Producers Association, Georgia Irrigation Association, and Metro-Atlanta Landscape & Turf Association also support the program.

All of this rapid growth is connected in part to the rapid growth within the state. In conjunction with the expanding population, especially around Atlanta, the turf industry made comparable growth. Home lawns, golf courses, schools and parks, and recreation facilities sprang up everywhere.

"The university has done a good job of recognizing that growth and making accommodations to serve the people's needs," says Landry.

In 1979, when Landry first joined the University of Georgia as extension turf specialist, there were three full-time people in turfgrass research or extension and a total of six people involved in some facet of the program. Today, there are still three full-time positions, but there are now 13 faculty people involved with the turfgrass program.

But, as Landry says, "Everything is cyclical." In 1991, the state had mandated a balanced budget due to the economic slowdown, and resolved to trim the extension service by 44 percent. "The governor had even announced where the budget cuts should be — and one of them was my position," Landry explains. "But because of the response from the people of the state and in the industry, that recommendation in that proposal was reduced by 28 percent."

Still, the extension service was trimmed by 130 positions.”

As it happens, at the same time the budget-cutting moves were taking place Landry was being elected president of the national STMA. “It was one hectic week,” says Landry, now serving his second term with the organization.

His involvement with STMA was a natural. He’s always enjoyed sports and played baseball, football, and basketball throughout high school. In his present university position, he became aware of STMA and its activities through the former field manager for the Atlanta Braves. Always looking for additional sources of quality information, Landry became a member.

“Before I knew it, I was on the board,” he says. “Then I served as secretary for two years. In 1991, during a period of rapid changes in the organization, I became president by default — on one else could devote the time to the job.” Landry’s “spare time” was a boon to STMA — his strong leadership was just what the organization needed during the transition period, as other officers and board members are quick to point out.

Since then, STMA has made considerable strides. “STMA has cleared every hurdle placed in front of it these last two years,” says Landry. “Renewal of memberships has been better than ever in 1993, and total membership is showing growth — but never as fast as we’d like it to be.”

Even with all Landry’s experience with other organizations, he’s been surprised at the amount of time and money it takes to maintain an organization like STMA, much less to initiate new ideas and activities and do the necessary promoting.

“I don’t think the membership really knows what the board has to juggle,” he says. “Any association is only as effective as its leadership, and its leadership’s effectiveness depends on the support, guidance, and involvement of the individual members. As with any volunteer organization, it’s vital that the members take on challenges and then carry through with what they have committed to.”

Building a Born Leader

Landry learned about commitment at early age. He grew up on a farm in Louisiana, and helped his father with



In addition to his other responsibilities, Landry puts on educational programs throughout the state.

crops and livestock. He watched his mother, a registered nurse, turn into a community activist to initiate educational programs to assist his retarded older sister and others with limited capacities. He and his two other sisters picked up on the positive image and developed a “pitch in to makes things happen” attitude.

Landry attended Louisiana State University. After starting out in pre-med, he settled into the general agriculture curriculum with an agronomy major and a focus on soils and soil chemistry. After earning his masters, he was offered a position to go for his Ph.D. and completed his doctorate in three years.

He then taught agronomy at McNeese State University in Lakes Charles, LA. After two years he decided that classroom teaching was not for him and that he didn’t want to concentrate on “traditional agriculture,” he joined the University of Georgia in his present position in 1979. His first 10 years were spent in Athens at the main campus, where in addition to his current responsibilities he was in charge of maintaining the 10 acres of turfgrass research and demonstration area. “It’s the nature of an extension position to juggle lots of responsibilities,” he notes.

Landry says when he looks back over the last two years his most enjoyable experiences have been in connection with STMA activities, and he is quick to credit other STMA members with the continuing success of the organization.

“My terms as president have been a lot easier because President-elect Greg Petry has put in as much time and effort as I have, and Executive Director Bret Kelsey has been dedicated and easy to work with,” says Landry. “Other board members and committee members also have chipped in. I really appreciate the assistance of Dr. Henry Indyk. He’s done a tremendous job as co-chair of the national conference with Greg Petry. Jim

Watson, Steve Cockerham, and Steve Wightman have always been willing to provide time, suggestions, and help to deal with tough issues.

“My wife has been very understanding and supportive of my commitment to STMA,” he adds.

Landry believes that any association governed by a board becomes a democratic body when there are many views of what needs to be done. “Compromises must be worked out that are palatable to the majority and meet the basic needs and agenda of the group,” he explains. “Though everyone comes from their own realm and brings their own viewpoint to the table, the good of the organization is the driving force.”

Landry doesn’t admit to any pet peeves. However, he does have a “common irritant. “It bothers me that people ask what they will get from STMA,” he says. “Certainly the burden is on the association to provide educational opportunities and materials, but I feel individuals should ask themselves, “What can I do for the organization?”

“The main challenge of the turfgrass industry in general, and sports turf managers in particular, is the development of professionalism and the identification and acceptance of the responsibility that comes with being a professional. If anyone is working in the turfgrass industry and intends to be involved for more than a year or two, they should become involved in a professional organization. STMA offers the best opportunity for people in the sports turf industry for professional improvement. At the same time, association leadership recognizes the challenge that comes with that and is trying to do what is necessary to make STMA even more valuable and challenging for sports turf professionals.”

Landry sees excellent long-range potential for STMA. “There’s no reason that STMA can’t develop as the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America has, with a broad-based, active, professional membership,” he concludes. □

Editor’s note: Bob Tracinski is the manager of public relations for the John Deere Company in Raleigh, NC, and public relations chairman for the Sports Turf Managers Association.