

# 1993 Man of the Year

## Educator and Organizer Kent Kurtz

By Bruce F. Shank

Twenty years ago, professional sports turf managers often hid behind a cloak of secrecy. They dazzled coaches and players with superior field conditions produced by a series of tricks and secrets. Their disguised version of plant and soil physics was more craft than science.

Unfortunately, these conditions weren't being matched at most hometown fields. Games were regularly cancelled because of poor field conditions, athletes suffered unnecessary injuries, and fans were deprived of watching their favorite sports.

Some of the most fervent sports fans are those of the Chicago Cubs and White Sox. One big reason is that Wrigley Field and Comiskey Park are two of the best maintained diamonds in baseball.

One of their loyal fans in the late '50s was a kid from Arlington High School (Arlington Heights, IL) who was not above skipping school to see an afternoon doubleheader. Kent Kurtz has sports in his blood, something he inherited from his dad, formerly a sales manager for Atlas Cement Company in Chicago. Kent, his dad, and brother Kerry memorized the stats on the sports page of the Tribune and watched Cubs and White Sox games on black and white television. There was no doubt where the Kurtz boys were on summer Sunday afternoons.

Little did Kent, who didn't hesitate to sit in the bleacher seats if he had to, realize that one day he would be asked to organize an association to make spectacular, safe, and true sports fields available to everyone in the U.S. He could not possibly imagine that the groundskeepers of the finest sports fields in the country would ask him to help them remove the cloak of secrecy from sports turf management. Nor could he imagine that the most skilled groundskeepers in England would invite him to Great Britain to share their knowl-



Kurtz served as consultant for the Rose Bowl from 1984 to 1989.

edge of soccer, lawn bowling, and cricket pitches. Therefore, he could not possibly predict that he would become *sportsTURF* magazine's Man Of the Year for 1993.

Many people enjoy sports without thinking for a moment about who or what is to credit for the condition of the playing surface. But a few do notice and they, for various reasons, get hooked forever on the behind-the-scenes efforts that make sports, as we know it today, possible. We are indeed spoiled by their dedication, curiosity and creativity.

Just as I document this story in words for readers, Kent Kurtz dissected the sports turf industry for science. In fact, this editor owes much to this persistent professor and taskmaster. I know there are hundreds more like me who have been pushed to the limit to make a contribution, especially if it is for the good of kids playing on millions of acres of grass across these 50 states.

### A Different Kind of Agriculture

Arlington Heights, IL was part of the escape from the inner cities after the Korean War. Veterans wanted the best for their families. Part of their dream was green space where their children could, in a small way, experience the agricultural heritage of their forefathers. That meant a game of baseball on grass instead of dirt. It meant picnics in parks that were big-

ger than a city block. And it meant yards that were spacious and neighbors that wanted something better than city life for their children. They wanted gardens in which to grow their own tomatoes, roses and tulips. They wanted yards of Kentucky bluegrass growing like carpet around dogwoods, crabapples and rhododendrons. In a big way, it was a return to the agricultural roots of the previous century, yet in a suburban form.

Kent Kurtz grew up in the middle of this transition. He mowed the sickly bluegrass

lawn, planted the new "Zoysia" plugs his father purchased from the Sunday newspaper, dug out the crabgrass and dandelions and raked leaves in the fall. While some kids dreaded these tasks, he enjoyed them. A big reason was the Kurtz ancestors were farmers who settled in Pennsylvania Dutch country around New Holland, PA. One can still find the inscription on an old stone barn on a farm now owned by the Amish near New Holland which reads "Abraham & Barbara Kurtz 1740". His grandfather, Martin Kurtz, was a rural mail carrier who delivered mail first with a horse and buggy and later in a 1941 Ford in Davis, IL.

There was something special about Davis near the Wisconsin state line with the rolling hills and miles of corn, oats and soybeans that captivated the teenager. The country gave him a new purpose, especially since his high school days were running out. He played sports—basketball, managed the football team for 3 years and lettered in track 2 years in the 880 and 2-mile relay team. He saw no future in athletics beyond high school as a participant. Therefore, he turned to agriculture on his own terms, which meant urban horticulture. The question was how to adapt agriculture to fit his personal situation.

Kurtz tried to enroll in the vocational agriculture program at his high school but was rejected because he didn't live on a





**Professor Kurtz has always believed in field demonstrations and on-the-job training for students.**

farm. Never tell a teenager that he can't do something for some weak reason. He fought back by getting a job at Charles Klehm & Sons nursery during summers hoeing weeds and planting peony roots. This was production agriculture in an urban setting. He realized that he wanted *applied* horticulture.

He found what fit his vision of urban agriculture nearby at Rolling Green Country Club, where he caddied and later worked on grounds maintenance. He also worked summers for the Arlington Heights park district under Tom Thornton, the director of parks, and further for the Village of Arlington Heights mowing grass at the well sites. He also mowed the 3 acre Elk Grove cemetery for a total of \$10.00 per mowing plus had to furnish his own mower and gas. It was not uncommon for Kurtz to work two or three jobs during the summer to earn money for school. However, a job taking concrete samples during the construction of the Illinois Tollway between his senior year in high school and freshmen year in college almost destroyed his goal before he got started. Kurtz severely injured his back, beginning what has been a lingering disability for the active and inquisitive outdoorsman.

Still recovering from his back injury and not able to accept a scholarship for the track team, Kurtz entered Southern Illinois University intending to major in horticulture. The university did not have a turf or landscape program so he selected plant industries. The one professor who taught field crop production and later weed control was Dr. Herbert Portz. Kurtz worked

for Portz in the Agronomy lab and also in the greenhouse. They formed a close bond and still remain close friends today even though Portz is retired.

The lack of college turf program and a discouraging experience on a golf course during the summer of his freshman year directed his studies toward an interest in fruit and vegetable crops. A professor at SIU (Dr. John Kelly) directed Kurtz into interesting research for the Campbell Soup Company on breeding tomatoes for mechanical harvesting, a major advancement in the early '60s. He went on to refine fertility programs for tomatoes using the first plastic-coated fertilizers now know in the turf field as Osmocote.

After graduating in 1963 with a degree in Plant Industries, he began the active duty portion of his commitment to the National Guard at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri. From the fort, he sent out letters and resumes seeking employment. The National Grape Cooperative Association, parent company of Welch Grape Juice Company, hired Kurtz as a field representative to work with grape growers in southwestern Michigan. He became involved in converting the first vineyards in Michigan to a new trellis system known as the Geneva Double Curtain System.

While in his final quarter at SIU he met Patricia "Trish" O'Hara. They were married in 1964 in Kalamazoo, MI where they lived in a house rented from one of the grape growers. After Trish finished her



**John Souter giving tour of Celtic's Pitch in Glasgow, Scotland.**

degree from Western Michigan University she taught English and history for the Decatur, MI school system.

One of the grower's daughters kept her horse at the farm where Kurtz was living and one evening encouraged him to take a ride on the horse. During the ride the horse was spooked and threw him at full

speed against the barn. The accident resulted in the compression fracture of six vertebrae which disabled him for a year and changed the whole course of his life. Since he was unable to work and not being one to just sit around he applied for admission to the masters program at Western Michigan University in Biological Science. Welch's offered to pay his disability for one year while he retrained for a less grueling career. It was his chance to get back into turf.

Since Western Michigan did not have a turf program he took advantage of several resources to develop his own program of study. He took all of the soils and agriculture classes from Dr. Lee Baker, plant physiology classes from biological science, an intensive turfgrass class from Dr. William Daniel at Purdue (driving back and forth to West Lafayette, IN for 4 weeks), and then contacted Michigan State University where Drs. James Beard and Paul Rieke, two of the leading young experts on turf at that time, assisted him with setting up and conducting his thesis study. While at Western he encouraged the owner of the Hampshire Country Club in Dowagiac, MI, Rolfe "junior" Wells, to also take classes in soils, etc. and they rode together to Kalamazoo.

As Kent began to feel better he managed the greenhouse for the Biological Science Dept. and also worked as the farm manager for Paul Todd, a multi-millionaire who owned 5,000 acres of

farmland near Kalamazoo where he raised peppermint, spearmint, potatoes and corn. Todd also owned a 300 acre piece of property in the center of Kalamazoo where he had a lawn bowling green and several greenhouses which inspired Kent and recharged his dedication and enthusiasm in turf.

In order to conduct his masters thesis field work Kent worked out a special arrangement with Roy Peck, superintendent of the Kalamazoo Country Club. For the privilege of using a site on the Country club grounds Kent had to work 20 hours per week mowing greens and doing general maintenance. Kurtz set up trials using Merion Kentucky bluegrass



with various rates of nitrogen fertilization to test the strength and durability of sod. This was a project suggested by Paul Rieke to aid the sod growers in Michigan with their fertility programs. The help of these professionals, Beard, Daniel and Rieke, at a time when there were few turf programs in the country gave impetus to Kurtz's career.

Kurtz finished his masters in December of 1967 and in March of 1968 was hired by O.M. Scott and Sons as a Golf Course Consultant with the Proturf Division. Driving 1,500 miles per week, Kurtz called on golf courses, schools, parks and municipalities selling the Proturf line of fertilizers, seed, pesticides and equipment. He was as much a problem solver for his customers as a salesman and became a trusted friend rather than an annoying order taker. Kurtz took every opportunity to speak or demonstrate his products at community colleges with turf or ornamental horticulture programs. Teaching seemed to come naturally to him.

The miles and long work weeks took their toll on his sensitive back. As the pain once

again incapacitated him, doctors diagnosed a rare disease, Rheumatoid spondylitis, in which spinal discs fuse together. Taking medication became part of his daily routine. Strong ties with his customers carried him through. From his home in Hasting, MI, Kurtz sold over the phone when he could not stand to drive. His only long term solution was to redirect his energies within the turf industry.

Teaching and helping others had struck a chord with Kurtz. The classroom was not as physically challenging as the field.

Triton College in Chicago had already offered him a job when he read an ad in a trade magazine for an assistant professor position in turfgrass management at Cal Poly, Pomona. The president of the University was a former professor at MSU. The technical college wanted to begin a turf educational and research program in addition to strengthening its park program within the Department of Horticulture. Kurtz fit the bill and arrangements were made for him to teach his first class in the fall quarter of

1969. Trish was expecting to deliver the couple's first child by summer.

Cal Poly professor Jim Griffin became ill. Kurtz was asked to join the faculty in two weeks instead of six months. He left his pregnant wife in Michigan with instructions to pack up their belongings and sell the house. She did both in her characteristic style of reliability and responsibility.

### The Cal Poly Connection

Having built a reputation in northern Illinois and Michigan, Kurtz now had to do the same in Southern California. Fortunately, men such as John Madison, William Davis, Vic Youngner and Hamilton Williams had already laid a foundation. The academic turf support system in the state would grow stronger with the addi-



**Kurtz with Ken Irons (center), who is the Los Angeles Raiders turf manager, and exhibitor during early Cal Poly Sports Turf Institute.**

tion of Vic Gibeault, Ted Stamen and John VanDam.

From Cal Poly, Kurtz created an effective network to get many things accomplished. He molded a golf and turf program which previously had not been offered. To do this, he enlisted the support of suppliers and employers who wanted to hire such types of college graduates. He set up research plots on campus to demonstrate the latest technology to students, area superintendents and coaches, and any interested taxpayer. He consulted golf courses, parks and schools throughout the area to build a reputation for the University of service and support. He strongly encouraged work study programs for his students. And he worked with local and national associations to lend them the resources of Cal Poly to their cause.

When an associate professor slot opened up in 1972, Kurtz was selected over 11 others, providing he earned a Ph.D. Since Cal Poly offered no Ph.D. of its own, he enrolled at the University of California in Riverside

under the wing of Dr. Vic Youngner. His quest for applied research over scientific exploration led him to the University of Arizona under the counsel of Dr. Bob Kneebone. Using summers and sabbatical leaves from Cal Poly, it took him eight years to complete his Ph.D.

These were, however, some of the most productive years of Kurtz' academic career. At UA, he worked with Kneebone on creeping bentgrasses for desert climates. He vividly remembers rating plots of 1020, a bentgrass now in production by Seed Research of Oregon, Inc.

He built the first Purr-wick golf green in the West at Cal Poly, Pomona. His friendship with Purr-wick creator, Dr. Bill Daniel at Purdue, came into play. Kurtz took a trick used by movie studios to make the lawns of their outdoor sets green during the winter by painting the dormant bermuda with special turf colorants, but not just any colorants. In 1971, and again in 1981, he researched and sampled every turf colorant available on the U.S. market, rating and ranking the products according to effectiveness.

When a lumber company asked Kurtz to create a use for waste sawdust, he designed a method of growing sod on polyethylene, using the waste sawdust as a growing medium. The famous sod producer Ben Warren told Kurtz he was years ahead of his time. He was right. The lightweight, fast growing sod eventually gained popular use 15 years later.

In 1981 he finished his dissertation on the effects of iron fertilization on zoysiagrass and was presented with his doctorate from the University of Arizona.

By the late '70s, Kurtz faced a tremendous challenge that he continues to address, the unnecessarily poor condition of most athletic fields. He now had a son and daughter in sports leagues. He knew there was a solution to the problem of unsafe fields, but the support just didn't exist. He started on a local level, working with local leagues and expanding his curriculum to his students to include sports turf management.

Not one to be shy, Kurtz contacted the groundskeepers of many college and professional sports stadiums to get more information on the care of sports fields. He found them very willing to share their techniques with others if the result was increased safety for athletes.

Top groundskeepers, George Toma at Kansas City, Dick Ericson at Minneapolis, Harry Gill at Milwaukee, Roger Bossard

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at Chicago, Barney Barron at San Francisco, Don Marshall at Anaheim, Steve Wightman at Denver, Tony Burnett at Washington, and David Frey at Cleveland, realized they needed an association—not so much for their own benefit, but for the benefit of parks, schools, minor leagues and colleges. Kurtz saw the chance to build something that could make a difference to others in sports and offered to help them organize. In 1984, in a hotel room in Denver, the Sports Turf Managers Association became an independent entity with Kurtz as executive director. For five years, he built STMA from 60 members to more than 900. He then became education director when a full-time association manager was hired.

In 1984, Kurtz organized the first Sports Turf Institute at Cal Poly. More than 300 groundskeepers from Southern California and those who had built STMA attended. The event is now ten years old and has been duplicated in Chicago, New England, Florida, Colorado, and Baltimore. These sites became the first regional chapters of STMA.

Between 1984 and 1990 as STMA was growing by "leaps and bounds", Kurtz continued to teach turfgrass management full time at Cal Poly and also advised and consulted for the L.A. Raiders, the Rose Bowl, the Fiesta Bowl, the Freedom Bowl and Wrigley Field. He supervised the reconstruction of Anaheim Stadium from motocross to baseball when Don Marshall received his heart transplant. He was also involved with the 1984 Olympics which were held in Los Angeles. Beginning in 1985 and several times since he has attended and participated in judging exhibits at the World Sports and Leisure Exposition in both Windsor and Peterborough, England. There he cemented relationships with the Institute of Groundsmanship and established lasting friendships with John Warner, Eddie Seaward (Wimbledon tennis), Brian Robinson, John Souter (Scotland) and many others to make the cause of sports turf a world issue. Through all of this, his personal life saw much sadness and tragedy with the deaths of his father and mother, aunts and uncles and the lingering illness and eventual death of his wife, Trish in 1991.

Kent Kurtz is still much involved in sports turf management and has a new and invigorating purpose in life. He married an old acquaintance in 1993, Dr.

Marilynn Filbeck, who is an associate professor in home economics at Cal State University Northridge. He continues to train students to become golf course superintendents and turf managers (over 400 since 1969) and receives great pride and satisfaction in seeing these former students go out into the world to shape the future of the industry. According to former students, he is not an easy teacher but is able to recognize the potential in individuals and motivate them to become successful leaders who give back to the profession more than they received. This year Kent will take a sabbatical to complete a book on sports turf management, return to England for the Expo, and continue to serve on the San Bernardino County Parks Commission. His latest work involves recycling rubber tires by incorporating crumb rubber into the root zone of athletic fields. A test installation in a softball field in Lancaster, CA, has already shown progress with accelerated turf establishment and root depth. The potential for this idea approaches the need for better and safer sports turf. The trade name of the rubber product, Rebound, ironically reflects upon Kurtz's career.



Kurtz attended Dr. William Daniel's retirement party with (left to right) Michael Schiller, who is currently with Schaumburg Park District, and kilted John Souter from Scotland.

We are proud that Kent can add the *SportsTurf Magazine's* Man of the Year award to his long list of recognitions and accomplishments, including STMA life Member and the Lawn Ranger Award (now the Harry Gill Award). His current project may be his most important, writing a greatly needed book on sports turf for the individual in the field. Like the small group of groundskeepers who founded STMA, share your thoughts, ideas and expertise with Kent to make the book a valuable tool for others in an effort to make athletic fields safe for everyone. □

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