

STMA in action

Heat doesn't wilt success of Regional Conference and Exhibition

By Steve Adams

Best known for the cultivation of corn and soybeans, Iowa is no stranger to green growth of a more subdued variety. Thus, STMA members from eight chapters came to Iowa State, known for its premier turf research program and pristine sports fields June 24-25 to talk turf at STMA's Midwest Regional Conference and Exhibition.

Nearly 150 members from the Gateway, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, MO-KAN, Nebraska, Ozarks, and Wisconsin Chapters joined their peers for 2 days of national conference-level education, professional

development, and networking, in addition to a trade show featuring the latest in turf products, technology, and equipment.

As Dr. David Minner, Iowa State professor in horticulture and leading turf researcher summarized it, "The sports turf managers are a practical group of people; they work with budgets, grass, and soil. So we've tried to hook them up with distributors so they can see the current equipment and products that are on the market; show them the latest information on our research plots; and give them lots of information on

everything from budgeting and time management to improving their personal skills. And of course all the tricks of the trade in dealing with grass, dirt, and soil. STMA has a national conference, but it's in the winter, and this regional conference provides the opportunity to actually get outdoors and see some things hands on."

Minner was one of the main men outdoors, where he led what seemed like every attendee—scorching-hot heat-index be damned—on tours of his sports turf-specific research plots. The diverse plots, along with

» IOWA STATE hosted 150 attendees to STMA's Regional Conference and Exhibition last month.



Minner's understandable and well-delivered words, offered a wealth of information regarding such diverse turf topics as seeding and nitrogen application rates in high-traffic areas; growth outcomes of various seed pre-germination methods; fading differences among paints; field evaluation using the STMA Playing Conditions Index (PCI); sod installment preparation and turf maintenance; and fertility establishment trials.

The tour definitely registered with Dennis Martin, an attendee who came to Ames from Blue Valley, KS, where he works for the school district.

"This is the first turf conference I've been to, and my boss had me come up to try to learn some things that I could take back and we could apply to improve our fields," said Martin. "I just went on Dr. Minner's turf tour, and really learned a lot. Sure, I might not understand exactly what's going on when something is making the grass look bad, but now I can at least say, 'OK, if the grass looks this way, it really is a problem and really does need to be taken care of.'"

For many other attendees, another tour was the main draw of day one. Led by Mike Andresen, CSFM, STMA's past president and Iowa State's Athletic Turf Manager, dozens worked up a sweat and logged a few miles while visiting the university's soccer complex, softball complex, cross country course, and Jack Trice Stadium. Putting up with the heat was well worth it for Warren Stropes of River City Turf, who called the stadium's football field "absolutely amazing."

While not checking out the turf work of Minner or Andresen, attendees had nearly 8 hours to check out Wednesday's trade show, which included 50 distributors of all types and sizes.

As one of the largest exhibitors, Toro had its newest equipment on display. Numerous attendees were interested in the Infield Pro 5040, an infield maintenance machine whose 25 attachments representative Dale Getz was more than happy to display. From its lip broom to its scarifier bar, Getz showed how every attachment could be detached or installed easily by one man, serving TORO's "overall goal to increase productivity."



» ATTENDEES and exhibitors braved the heat to talk shop.

A similar goal was offered by Rain Bird's Brent Neubauer, who remarked that efficiency is just as much about positively impacting the environment through "the intelligent use of water" as about saving money. Neubauer stressed that Rain Bird aims to help its clients do both, currently offering free water usage audits and advice on how to make existing systems more efficient without the high cost of a completely new system.

KeyPlex's Gerald O'Connor made clear that water conservation is not the only way those in the turf trade are trying to show the environment some love. In a nutshell, he explained that KeyPlex's products boost turf growth, health, and vigor by delivering a blend of secondary and micronutrients which elicit the production of a plant's natural defensive proteins. And, since the blend is biodegradable, O'Connor emphasized that KeyPlex offers "a socially conscious product to the community," allowing for great-looking turf without potentially harmful fungicides and pesticides.

While the message of efficient and environmentally friendly turf technology was echoed by virtually all trade show attendees (and definitely registered with STMA members, many of whom reported now operating under tighter financial budgets and water restrictions) the conference's first day ended with everyone in agreement: the time had come to kick back, cool off, and have some fun.

Although a tasty barbecue, cold beer, and (very gradually) falling temperatures made for a relaxing atmosphere, a softball game heated a number of members right back up. The Iowa and Minnesota chapters continued their long-standing Chapter Clash with Minnesota prevailing 19-16 after the game was tied entering the ninth inning. The highly competitive yet sportsmanlike matchup displayed the quality of both Dr. Minner's turf and STMA members' competitive spirit.

Any bruised arms, elbows, or egos produced by the game were forgotten by Thursday morning, as attendees convened for coffee in Iowa State's conference center, a location offering the highly valued creature comforts of flushable toilets and air-conditioning. The highest value, however, was produced by the diverse educational sessions from which attendees could pick and choose.

One of the most notable among these was "Turfgrass 101," a presentation covering turf selection, mowing, fertilization, irrigation, and disease and pest control. The lecture was delivered by Dr. Andrew McNitt, associate professor of soil science and turfgrass at Penn State University and nationally renowned synthetic expert. He offered STMA members a broader look not only at management practices of standard grass but also at the advantages and disadvantages of synthetic athletic surfaces.

McNitt said, "In hard economic times, STMA is bringing the conference to the membership, saving them money while still exposing them to the information and expertise that is found at the national conference." While proving his own expertise, McNitt offered information to help every type of field manager improve his everyday operations.

Both the turf and synthetic break-out sessions did the same, as panelists took practical questions from attendees. A major focus was on doing more with less, as turf managers from throughout the Midwest attested to the budget cuts that tough economic times have created.

One of the most notable suggestions was adhering to Minner's "field within a field" concept, which states that different areas within a field are unique and call for unique and disparate treatments (including seeding, fertilizer, and aeration), and thus allows managers operating under tough budget constraints to commit their resources to the most important or damaged parts of their most important fields.

Another sound piece of advice came from Mike Tarantino, a panelist who, as field manager for San Diego's K-12 school district, recently lost 41 out of 165 personnel and \$800,000 of his budget. As he reminded the audience, "You guys are taking care of the public's first view of that school, and that's something you need to always remember."

In full agreement, Minner stressed that field managers need to demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of how they use their resources and just how great a field can look when it receives the maximum amount of them. To stress the value of these resources, Minner added that managers should also "have a dog—a really bad field." With both ends of the turf quality spectrum on display, Minner's last recommendation was for attendees to show on paper, in dollars and cents, just what it would take to bring every field to the level of quality they desire. Doing this, of course, takes professional-level communication, an ability the importance of which Andresen hoped would be conveyed to every attendee.

In fact for Andresen, the conference's chief purpose was to bring national conference-level speakers and the level of high-

quality information and knowledge they offer to the regional school and park district members who might not be able to fit a trip to Florida into their budget. "We want to bring a more professional mindset to our non-professional membership," Andresen said. "The most important part of this is helping them know how to really excel at the soft skills, the communication skills."

This was no more evident than at Thursday's "Communicating with coaches, user groups, administrators, and other nefarious characters" session. Headed by Dale Getz, former head turf manager at the University of Notre Dame, this SRO-only session offered advice on how better communication can improve the professionalism, and perhaps even the budgets and fields, of any and all turf managers.

Getz said, "The greatest problem of communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished," a quote borrowed from George Bernard Shaw. "Things can be interpreted very differently," he said, "because we all process information in our own way." He stressed that clarity is really the key to communication, and that turf managers "need to make sure they discover and understand what customers [including one's supervisor, every coach, and taxpayers] expect and they understand what economic resources are required to meet those expectations; it's vital for both sides to communicate that."

Delving deeper, Getz said, "You didn't go into the turf grass management business to be a salesman, but you really have to be, because managing your user groups and selling your expertise, what you can do, and your vision is actually the most important part of what you do in this business. So let them know you're passionate about managing those fields and that you really want to work with your user groups in order to provide them with the best possible surfaces to play on."

Drawing on his own experience at South Bend, Getz said the best way to demonstrate one's passion is to offer a vision, both on paper and in reality. He recalled that Notre Dame's coaches loved his monthly newsletter, which included a brief update on his turf management practices, and that administrators were more willing to work with him thanks to the 3-year plan—with

every intended expenditure detailed—that he offered them from day one. Getz added that showcasing the Fighting Irish's football field, his top priority, was key to illustrating his "line of sight" and proving just what he and his staff could do with no expense spared.

Larry DiVito's led the afternoon session on managing the construction of the Washington Nationals' new stadium field a few years ago, and his present experience as the head groundskeeper for the Minnesota Twins as their new park is being built.

Jeff McQueen, a sports turf manager in the Branson (MO) school district, said it well. "The regional conference is a great concept, especially from an economic standpoint. "For me, networking is really the most critical aspect. The trade show is very important because it offers information on where to get [equipment, fertilizer, seed, etc.], and being around so many peers offers the opportunity to find out what they are doing and what the best practices are. Add the various educational sessions from the experts, and coming here is basically all about how to become a better sports turf manager."

Yes, many of the region's members would surely like to attend STMA's national conference, scheduled for next January at Disney's Coronado Springs Resort in Orlando, when the Midwest's temperatures hit the teens in January. But as attendees' comments made clear, Ames offered an equally educational opportunity for less money.

The STMA Chapter Relations Committee is developing an "Interest Form" for chapters to submit if they are interested in STMA hosting a regional event in their area next year. See www.stma.org for more information.

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Steve Adams is a freelance writer and graduate student at Iowa State's Greenlee School of Journalism.