

Vanini hikes unmarked career trail



How did I get my business going? This was the question posed to me by the editor of this magazine.

Truth be known, the idea of New Dimensions Turf (NDT) actually started in graduate school at Michigan State University. I was brainstorming about the next step in my life after completion of my PhD program, and I was thinking of becoming a professor or starting a consulting business. If I started a business, “What would I name it?” For me, the beauty of research is about “possibility”; it can take you in directions you never considered. In this case, I had to move into a new possibility or “new dimension” of thinking in order to solve the PhD question at hand, “How do you get a sports field ready in 70 days?” So why not think about problem solving or new possibilities in the business world? This concept is more and more abundant to me as a consultant, an educator and a business person, and it starts with one conversation after another with whomever.

It’s been my experience that help is always there if you ask for it. When I started my business in July 2009, the first thing I realized was life was not going to revolve around an academic calendar. Life was going to change. I was starting a business, and was stumped on where to begin. So I started networking and asking questions about this transition into setting up a turfgrass research and consulting business in Buffalo. I discovered that a Small Business Development Center was just down the road from me, and here was the best part, it was free.

My contact, Marilyn Roach, aided me on the path of thinking of my professional life from a business point of view. At our first meeting, Marilyn asked me questions that were not

difficult and yet I had no answers, such as “What is your cash flow?” and “Do you have a marketing strategy?” I had nothing. Even though these items were in the back of my mind, they were quickly brought to the front of my mind. Using my experience from playing sports or attending graduate school, I had to go to work. And more importantly, be willing to do things differently. I had to start viewing my world differently. I had to think in a New Dimension.

One example of this came early on. When I first started taking on the business full-time, I was working on a business deal that ultimately fell apart. Needless to say, I was disappointed. Here I am trying to get my business and really, my life, off the ground and it wasn’t happening the way I anticipated. I shared this with a friend of mine who said, “Tim, it’s been my experience that when one door closes, two doors open.” This axiom has aided me many times until I finally “got it” and miraculously, I walked through the doors and business started happening. Hence, a New Dimension.

THREE TENETS

It’s my belief a sports field manager’s philosophy should consider the following three tenets. These come from my formal education, research background, people management and life experiences. They are: understanding turfgrass fundamentals, collecting data, and continuing education with research and technology. By using these tenets, a sports field manager gets access to providing a well-conditioned sports field. Here’s the catch: it’s also only, in my humble opinion, 20% of the job. The other 80% has everything to do with continuing communication with your crew and superiors. The 80% is the “other stuff” and this seems to be

the case no matter the job.

So what am I talking about with education, background, and experience? Growing up, I played soccer, ice hockey and lacrosse at a very competitive level. I had the good fortune of playing 4 years of college hockey (played in every game possible) at Cornell University and afterwards moved onto

Michigan State University to earn my 2-year certification degree as a golf course superintendent. While finishing up that degree, I became interested in attending graduate school and later earned a master’s degree in turfgrass science focusing on the utilization of crumb rubber in a variety of turfgrass situations. From this project, Dr. John N. Rogers, III and I received a US Patent for topdressing crumb rubber on natural turfgrass.

After completing my master’s degree, I decided to get into coaching college hockey (ask me when you see me at the STMA Conference in Long Beach, CA) and for most of my coaching tenure, I coached at Cortland State (NY) while finishing with Coach of the Year Honors after 4 years.

Once I got the coaching bug out of my system, I earned my PhD at Michigan State University in 2005. Then I went back to my alma mater in Buffalo, NY, Nichols School, where I was appointed Director of Sports Fields, taught math and coached hockey and lacrosse.

DATA IS IMPORTANT

I believe I have a unique perspective for the turfgrass industry because I have a PhD, AND I have managed sports fields with unlimited and minimal budgets. At Nichols School there was a limited budget. Two things came out of this: I had to be creative and I had to have some tough conversations.

By having knowledge of good soil and turfgrass fundamentals, I could allocate my budget items to the practices that were critical for a successful sports field; mowing, overseeding, fertilizing and core cultivation. Notice there is no irrigation in the last sentence.

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In essence, I had to use the three tenets; turfgrass fundamentals, on site data, and cutting edge research. First, there were times we didn't have the equipment or the proper equipment to complete the job such as implementing a core cultivation strategy. The core cultivation fundamental and strategy was crucial for the success of the sports fields at the school, and a way had to be found. So, I talked to a golf course superintendent and fellow Michigan State alum, and he helped me out, and I had to ask him more than once.

By having knowledge of good soil and turfgrass fundamentals, I could allocate my budget items to the practices that were critical for a successful sports field; mowing, overseeding, fertilizing and core cultivation. Notice there is no irrigation in the last sentence. Timing of the applications with rainfall was critical...like I said a minimal budget. Going through this process, I continually had to educate the crew and coaches why we were doing what were doing? The constant question was "Why?" "Why overseed so much?" "Why do you have to core cultivate?" and my favorite, "Why can we not go on the field today?" It was a new en-

vironment for them, and within a short time, THEY reaped the benefits and eventually understood "Why." I simply knew from my education the fundamentals.

As play continued on the sports fields, I was also collecting data. At the time, an important question to answer was, "How many hours was the field in use?" At Nichols, we had five fields and not all of them were used equally. By answering this question, I had information to make wiser decisions on materials and strategies on where to improve the sports fields, and it was information our chief financial officer could understand. This one example of a particular piece of data was language that BOTH the sports field manager and a budget administrator could identify with and could make meaningful choices moving forward.

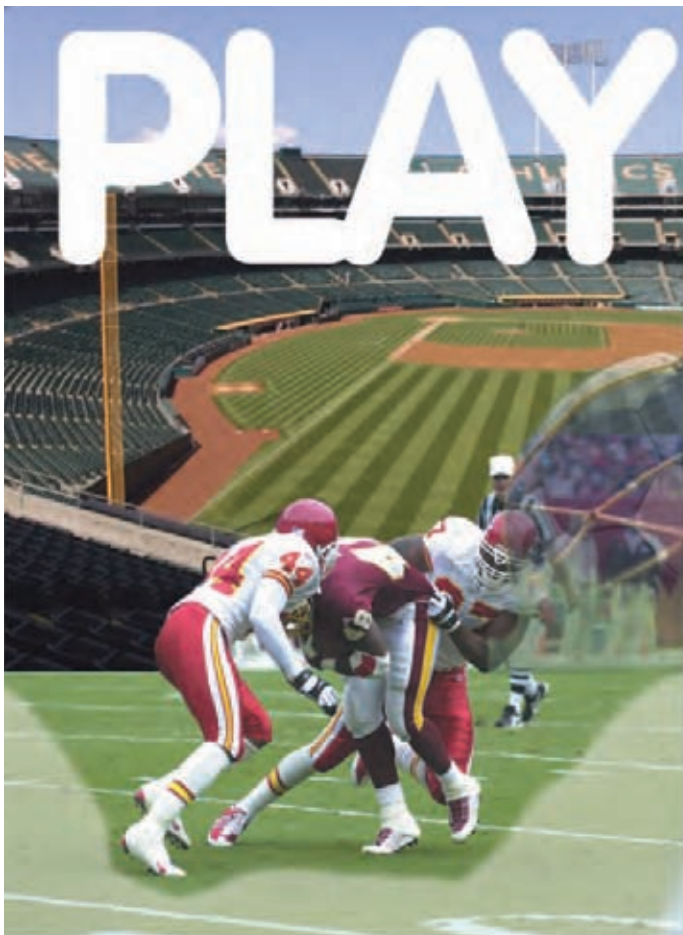
My athletic management (and coaching management) experiences have taught me to be persistent and continue to present as much data as I can, with less emotion. I have been guilty of not adhering to this and have learned over time, from people smarter than me, to have data in order to state your case whether it was turfgrass or ice hockey. It may

take time, and yet if you have empathy for the other person across from you and keep a level head, then maybe you will be able to help each other meet the goals that are in the best interest of the entity you represent.

CONCENTRATE ON WHAT'S POSSIBLE

Surprisingly or maybe not surprisingly, many people (not so much in this industry) are shocked when I discuss with them that a sports field is not a golf course. Once I layout the options for them, and they consider what is possible (typically based on budget), they consider new possibilities which can move them into a "New Dimension" of thinking. Never was this more clear was when I was working at Nichols School. In the summer of 2008, school officials discussed with me a renovation project for the baseball field. Approximately 3/4 of an acre had to be reestablished for this project. [Editor's note: You can read about this project in the November 2008 issue of *SportsTurf*, "How to get a sports field ready in 70 days."]

Continue on page 45



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Continued from page 23

Before starting this project, I explained what could be done to get the field ready for the fall season, and that it could be accomplished in 70 days. One administrator objected and insisted it couldn't be done. Why? He replied that a golf course superintendent told him it couldn't. I explained my proposal had been researched and sports fields use different grasses than golf courses. I explained the fundamentals and a few intricacies. In this case, my proposal was approved, and the duration of the project was June 23 to August 25 (63 days). The field was delivered on time, and we proved it could be done. Furthermore, I applied cutting edge research to the problem at hand.

See the article; the 20% part of growing grass was easy; turfgrass fundamentals, on-site data and implementing cutting edge research.

It was the 80% to get the approval that was the most challenging. Everyone in the conversation had a different opinion starting out and over a 6-week time frame, with continued conversation, the project received approval. That 80% was working with everybody to view the "grass situation" differently. The school ended up getting the product they wanted, they were pleased, especially the athletic director, and we all moved into a "New Dimension" after it was completed.

Today, NDT is involved with everything in turfgrass; residential lawn care to research to consulting about the best construction and management approaches for sports fields and golf courses. Within this gamut, we have been educating homeowners to decision makers about the fundamentals (and intricacies if they have a burning desire) of turfgrass and soil sci-

ence, and the most effective and efficient way to implement them. I have been blessed to have worked with extraordinary people on projects geared toward low maintenance sports fields to the 1994 World Cup with portable turfgrass inside the Pontiac Silverdome. And just recently my company was the architect and project manager for the new practice field for the Buffalo Bills. I am grateful for the turfgrass background that allows me to have this business and look forward to growing it. I'm here to help. ■

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