

# Kentucky-grown Mike Goatley brings mix of academia and farm upbringing to STMA



**G**ROWING UP ON A CATTLE AND TOBACCO FARM IN CENTRAL KENTUCKY in the 1960s, a young Michael Goatley Jr. was sure of two things: He wasn't interested in becoming a farmer, and he thought golf was the "silliest sport on the planet."

Fast forward several years and these certainties sure seem foretelling, considering that he would go on to help broaden the field of sports turf management as a potential career for his youngsters at Mississippi State University (MSU), Starkville, while he worked as a professor of plant and soil sciences there from 1988 to 2004.

Fast forward even further to present day, and Goatley, 50, professor of crop and soil environmental sciences and extension turfgrass specialist at Virginia Tech University, Blacksburg, is now president of the association dedicated to sports turf managers. Last month he moved into the top leadership position of the Lawrence, KS-based Sports Turf Managers Association.

## LIFE ON THE HOMESTEAD

Silly or not, golf is the sport that gave Goatley his first real paying gig in high school, at the course where Abraham Lincoln's parents wed—Lincoln Homestead State Park Golf Course, near his small home-

town of Springfield, KY. Having first hopped onto a tractor to load tobacco around age 6 or 7, he had all the necessary job requirements.

"I was hired because I knew how to drive tractors and operate mowers in a reasonably responsible and safe manner," Goatley said. "I had no idea about turf management. It was just what you did as a farm kid. You couldn't wait to drive tractors."

Golf didn't strike Goatley as anything more than a summer job, but he hadn't a clue what to do next. Still, he knew he would attend college because his parents insisted, having never had the opportunity themselves.

So to get his feet on the ground, he enrolled for one year at St. Catherine Junior College in his hometown. After getting some elective coursework out of the way, he transferred to the University of Kentucky with the intent of going into computer science.

"That was when we used punch cards to write programs," Goatley said. "A single mis-

## Three (potentially) little-known Goatley facts:

➤ It'd be hard to know Goatley and not know of his undying love for all things Kentucky basketball. In addition to UK hoops, he was known to dole out brownie points to students who knew about his other favorite "sport," professional wrestling.

➤ Goatley has been married for 22 years to his wife, Lisa, a licensed professional counselor who's taught some programs for STMA. The couple has two children: Rachel, a freshman at Virginia Tech; and Adam, a sophomore at Blacksburg High School. "Neither one wants to have anything to do with turfgrass management," Goatley said.

➤ In the late 1990s, Goatley wrote a book (with co-authors Jim Puhalla and Jeff Krans) called "Sports Fields: Design, Construction & Maintenance." It's exactly what it sounds like, said Goatley: A "user-friendly, easy-to-read sports turf book that covers the design and goes up all the way to installation and maintenance." The experience gave him the confidence to volunteer for leadership positions through STMA.

take on a punch card meant your program didn't work. I spent hours in the computing center trying to figure out mistakes on punch cards. That's why I never became a computer scientist."

After two semesters confounded by punch cards, Goatley switched to agriculture economics, but admitted he still had little direction. He didn't find his calling here, either, a fortunate event, it turns out, for his colleagues and students at MSU and Virginia Tech.

"I started to realize (ag econ) wasn't what I was called to do because in simulations of the stock market, I was the worst one in the class," Goatley said.

Finally, when filling out his schedule, his advisor suggested turf management.

Goatley agreed, and his Dad thought he was crazy. But he had finally found his calling, and Goatley knew it on the first day of class with A.J. Powell Jr., Ph.D. "I quickly became a convert," he said.

His first class as a turf management student ended up leaving a lasting effect on Goatley. Powell Jr. became one of Goatley's most admired and revered mentors who inspired him to go into academia.

In 1983, Goatley earned a degree in turf management but had only spent one year studying the field and had no pertinent experience. So, on Powell's recommendation, he stayed on to pursue a graduate degree.

Once that feat was accomplished in 1986, Goatley once again asked himself, "Now what?" And once again, it was Powell's encouragement that sent him to earn a doctorate at Virginia Tech University. Powell knew the faculty at Virginia Tech and helped Goatley secure an assistantship. He even asked a couple he knew from his own days spent as a student at Virginia Tech to put up an incoming doctoral student for a night or so until he could find a place to live.

The couple, Hillard and Irene Collier, invited Goatley to stay with them as long as he needed. He rented a basement room with a kitchenette from them for \$50 a month (including utilities) while he earned his doctorate degree. And he also happened to fall in love with the university and town and ultimately, his future wife, Lisa, who was from Blacksburg.

"It's one of the prettiest campuses with a certain type of limestone that's mined in this area," Goatley said. "I fell in love with the campus, which is in mountains of southwest Virginia. Dr. Powell said I should go here, and I thought, 'Well that sounds like the place for me.'"

At Virginia Tech, Goatley found another mentor whose style differed greatly from Powell's, but who had just as big an impact.

"(Professor Dick Schmidt) had a very dry science of humor, a good one," he said. "He was a great resource for me as a Ph.D. student. He trained me to become an independent thinker and to pursue ideas and research on my own. I knew early on in my Ph.D. program that I wanted to become an academic and do research and teach someday."

### TEACHING MOMENT

With a doctorate as well as a fiancée in tow, Goatley next headed to Starkville to start his first real job at Mississippi State as a faculty member. Lisa initially balked at the thought of Mississippi, but it turned out to be a life-changing career stop.

"I went for the interview, and MSU turned out to be the absolutely perfect place for us as newlyweds and for me as a young faculty member," Goatley said. "The position was very heavily involved in teaching and research, and teaching was the primary focus. I really had very little training as far as formal teaching goes, but Dr. Powell and Dr. Schmidt had served as the models for the kind of teacher I hoped to be."

Cue the third mentor figure in Goatley's life—Jeff Krans, Ph.D., the professor at MSU who oversaw the school's turfgrass program, which was growing so rapidly they needed an additional faculty member to help.

"With Krans' direction, that program at MSU exploded to more than 100 undergraduate majors," Goatley said. "Jeff was the trendsetter that saw where a program needed to go before many others."

Krans also brought in Don Waddington, Ph.D., a retired professor from Penn State, to teach a special sports turf class for the students. "I suspect I learned more sitting in on Don's class than did our students," Goatley said.

During his 16 years at MSU, Goatley got married and started a family with his wife, taught hundreds of students as they pursued careers in turf, and first learned how he could give back to the community from a sports turf perspective.

Through a student project administered by Krans and his church, Goatley and the MSU turf club were called out to East Oktibbeha, a small county high school whose football field was in such poor condition, infested with fire ants, hard as a rock, and covered in weeds, that the team played its homecoming game on its opponent's field. The janitor at the school (where NFL great Jerry Rice played football as a youth) doubled as its field manager and used diesel fuel to create yardage and sidelines.

The turf club and Goatley put in many volunteer hours, got companies to donate chemicals and fertilizer and arranged for the team's logo to be painted in the center of the field (a touch that was never a consideration for the kids) as they worked to get the field back into shape for the beleaguered squad. On hand for the first game of the season on the spruced up field, "The students and I were as proud as the players," Goatley said. "The school was so appreciative."

A few weeks later when Goatley returned to the field to see how it was holding up, he was mortified to see more dead lines in the grass. The janitor assured him to not worry, that he was no longer using diesel fuel to mark the lines. "Instead, he told me that they had found a wonderful new product called Roundup that took its place," Goatley said. "I immediately realized to never take anything for granted."

In 2004, Goatley and his family got a chance to move back to their beloved Blacksburg, but it meant a change in pace. His job shifted from teaching and advising to serving as an extension specialist at Virginia Tech, a job that requires more travel as he conducts educational programming across the state.

"I take what my colleagues discover in their research programs and relay it to Virginia's turfgrass industry folks," Goatley said.

He still practices what he calls "old school extension."

"With digital media, and Twitter and Facebook, times have really changed in how information is delivered," he said. "I'm trying to adapt, but I'm not there yet. I really believe in shaking hands and meeting face-to-face. That's what's really neat about sports turf managers—how freely everyone shares their information. It doesn't matter what level you are, there are no egos."

While he's content in his current position, he admits there are days he misses being a teacher.

"The interaction I had teaching and advising was the part that I enjoyed the most," he said. "I wanted the respect of the kids, but for them to feel comfortable and learn a lot."

No one has to guess Goatley's effectiveness and success as an instructor; you can let the awards and accolades do the talking. Goatley received the MSU Undergraduate Advising Award in 2001, MSU College of Agricultural and Life Sciences Excellence in Teaching Award in 2002, and the National Academic Advising Association's Advising Award in 2002. In addition, he received STMA's William H. Daniels Founders Award in 2008 and the Virginia Tech Alumni Association's Excellence in Extension Award in 2011.

Goatley's background in academia is nearly unique to the post of

STMA President as he's only the second president in the group's history to come from the field.

It's a background that brings a fresh perspective to the job.

"People gravitate to Mike's easy nature and natural teaching ability," said Kim Heck, CEO of STMA. "His style is more coach and collaborator. He's not afraid to make difficult decisions...and being in academia he understands processes, which are very crucial to the operations of an association."

A leader from an academic world brings a tremendous amount of knowledge to the membership regarding turfgrass, agreed Troy Smith, outgoing STMA president.

"He is one of the brightest guys I know, and I hope our members will take the time to ask Mike some of their turfgrass questions as he will probably have the answer," Smith said. "Mike has also dealt with government bureaucracy and understands the need for great governance and standard operating procedures. I feel he will be able to lead our association in the right direction with our newly updated strategic plan."

### WHAT'S IN STORE

Executing the association's strategic plan happens to be at the top of Goatley's agenda this year.

"We've got a great plan in place, and we're going to follow it," he said. "Our board is committed to growing our membership, increasing membership services, and continually improving sports turf manager recognition for all they do."

Two new committees are also listed among Goatley's priorities for 2012.

"Under Troy's leadership, we started an environmental committee and international committee, and those two areas remain on everybody's radar," he said.

Goatley holds high hopes for SAFE (Safer Athletic Fields for Everyone), the fundraising arm of STMA whose mission is to seek funds to support research, scholarship and association outreach efforts.

"We're going to champion that fields should be safe and sustainable at all levels, and urge leaders and the public to understand how important a role athletic fields play in building community pride and spirit," he said. "As an academic, I'd love to have a breakthrough. The SAFE board now has a plan and direction and focus. It's really promising to see how the group has re-engaged."

But Goatley places the biggest importance of all on serving members.

With regulations on the rise from agencies at local, state and federal levels, STMA members need a voice, and it's one Goatley wants to make sure STMA provides.

"Every day that passes, our members are facing more challenges," he said. "STMA has to be the resource for them and offer them the expertise and science-based approach when these challenges arise."

"The biggest (objective) of all is, how do we better serve our membership," he continued. "Promoting the value of being an STMA member so when it's time to renew, there's no questions asked."

No one can doubt Goatley's ability to take on the task. According to his predecessor, Smith, "Mike brings wisdom, logic and a true passion for our profession that will help him to be a successful president for STMA." ■

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