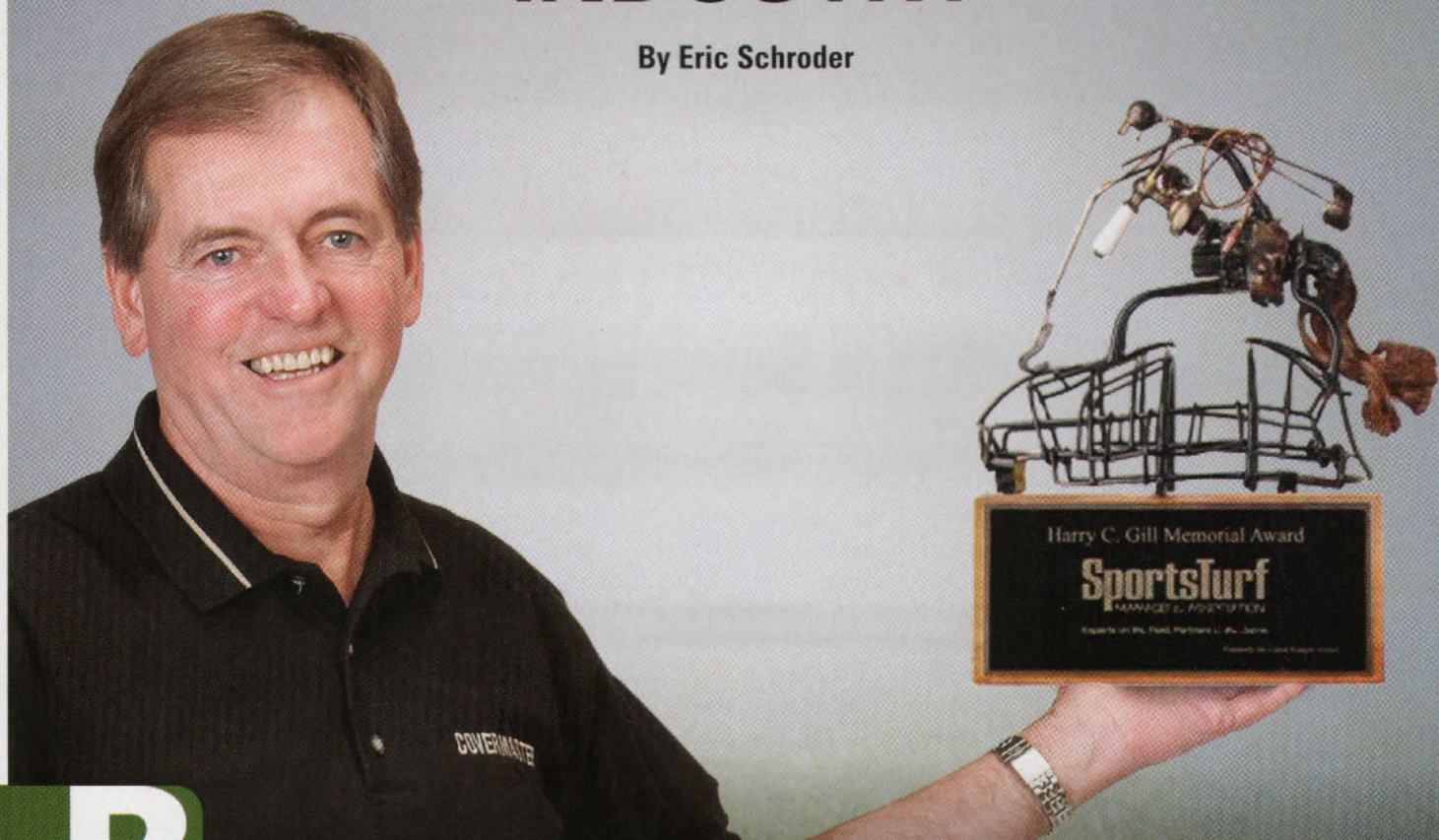


# CURRY RESPECTED AS "QUIET GIANT" IN SPORTS TURF INDUSTRY

By Eric Schroder



**B**ob Curry had an early start in the turf business. As a Toronto teenager in the late 1950's, he was one of the grounds crew who walked the turf track at Woodbine Racetrack repairing divots by hand after each race day. "We would check the Daily Racing Form each morning, hoping there wouldn't be any races on the turf that day," he laughs.

Ironically, Curry has come full circle

from those early days of safeguarding turf to where he is today; the president of Covermaster, Inc., one of the world's leading suppliers of multi-use tarps and flooring systems to protect sports turf.

In January the Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) presented Curry with the organization's most prestigious honor, the Harry C. Gill Memorial Founders Award, which recognizes long-time service and commitment to the organization.

In STMA's lean early years, he paid board members' expenses to board meetings to help out the cash-strapped organization and played an integral role in the STMA headquarters transition from outside management to its own staff, devoting much of his personal time to making the transition seamless.

"I'm indeed honored to be recognized by receiving the Gill Award. I am proud to say I have personally known all the



previous recipients of this award and it is a privilege to be ranked with them," Curry says. "Most important to me is all the friendships I've made through STMA."

"Looking back at those early years, there were challenging times for STMA. Then Steve and Suz Trusty became the management team," Curry says, "and some dedicated board members set goals and delegated responsibilities. Not long after that things started to take shape."

"I remember at my first board meeting asking Steve where to submit my expenses and he said commercial members were asked to pay their own," Curry recalls. "Those were the good days!"

Curry sat on the STMA Board for 4 years and continues to serve on committees today.

Curry began his career right out of high school when he went to work for Laidlaw Lumber as the office "go-fer." (Later he attended university at night.) He quickly climbed the company ladder with stops as a warehouse laborer, inside salesman, and outside salesman. "I'm not a natural salesman," he says, "but I enjoy meeting and talking to people. Getting feedback from customers is something I learned a long time ago."

Eventually he became a product manager in the marketing department; that's where he first involved himself in the tarpaulin and covering business. In the mid-1960's Laidlaw partnered with a Finnish company that manufactured tarps to start a "covering" business in Toronto and Curry was chosen to run this new division. At the time this Finnish concern was the only manufacturer in the world that was producing a 12-foot wide raw material



Curry tees off in windy San Antonio at a past SAFE tournament.

**"Bob Curry is definitely the 'Quiet Giant' in our sports turf industry. I could not imagine a more deserving recipient of this prestigious award. He has helped this industry to no end, but never seeks publicity for his generosity and time; so few know how much he has done for us. All the while, he has developed his business to be one of the most quality-minded, service-oriented businesses that I've come across during my 24 years in this industry. If you like the STMA, Bob is one of a few select individuals that you should thank personally. He's the kind of guy who will beat you on a golf bet for a cold drink afterwards, then buy it for you anyway before you have a chance (I speak from experience here). Thanks again, Bob. You have helped more sports turf managers than you will ever know."**

—ROSS KURCAB, CSFM, DENVER BRONCOS

for tarps.

"In North America at the time there was available only 5-foot wide material," he recalls. "The larger size's advantages included fewer seams and that it could be made faster and cheaper. We had a unique product that allowed us to fabricate larger tarps."

While he was filling divots, the young Curry dreamed of being his own boss, and says now this new division was a real challenge, "almost like having my own business." During this time, he travelled the world and brought concepts and ideas back to North America.

"Our first big order was for a 200,000-square foot tarp to protect the artificial turf during concerts in Montreal's Olympic Stadium, and then we sold 80,000-square footer to the Kansas City Chiefs," says Curry. "That's where I met George Toma, one of several STMA founders with whom I soon developed relationships."

"Gil Landry got me involved when he suggested in 1995 that I join the board as a commercial member," Curry says. "He said it was 'only a few meetings a year' and that I would greatly benefit from it."

"Gil greatly understated the meetings but he also really understated the benefits," says Curry. "The true benefit, and this is an important point with me, is the friendships I've made through the years. They are something I will never forget."

Curry says today STMA is on the right track for future growth. "Their purpose in the industry will be further recognized. I think the SAFE Foundation will play a major role in that growth," he says. "These efforts will enhance the association by attracting new members, the



sports turf managers of tomorrow."

## Ambition realized

In 1980 the Finnish partner decided to divest itself of the tarp business and Curry made them an offer. Covermaster Inc. was

**"Bob is truly one of the kindest, most generous, caring people I have had the privilege of knowing. He has been a backbone of STMA, carrying the organization's word throughout the world."**

—MIKE SCHILLER, CSFM AND FORMER STMA PRESIDENT

born and his ambition of being his own boss realized. With this change, Curry began to pursue the new market of large field covers, using his knowledge of new materials like polywoven fabric that could be used in wide-width applications. Covermaster was the first company to make covers from this material for sports turf applications, mostly baseball at first; it made the covers at one-third the weight and one-third the cost of old canvas or vinyl tarps. Today 90% of NFL and MLB teams use Covermaster products.

"We reduced the cost to teams because they needed fewer crew members to handle these tarps. Before, minor league clubs would need to bring front office people down to help handle the tarps," Curry says. "It was a huge factor; now five or six people could roll up the tarps instead of a dozen."

It took time to infiltrate the market



A portable rolling device for covers marketed by Covermaster.

though; in those days rainouts were just an accepted part of the business, he says, and

when these covers were introduced it was a sizable purchase for most clubs. But word-of-mouth spreads quickly and the referrals started coming.

"Joining the STMA was the best move I ever made," Curry says. "Attending trade shows and meetings was the greatest source of feedback. I discovered what groundskeepers needed and wanted and what they didn't want. And spending time in warm Florida during spring training didn't hurt either!"

"This kind of insight led to our developing a

lightweight plastic roller, for example," he says. "It was a safety issue mostly; the galvanized steel rollers being used didn't have end caps and guys were forever cutting their hands."

David Frey, former Cleveland Stadium groundskeeper and a founding member of STMA, had built a portable rolling device with revolving tires that used a tractor's PTO system to roll tarps across a field—a one-man operation. Curry visited Frey numerous times and left feeling that a similar machine could be re-designed,

**"Bob is a very successful businessman and his expertise has greatly benefited STMA. I don't know how he has been able to sustain such an active role in organization with his extremely busy schedule, but we greatly appreciate and have benefited from his involvement. I don't know anyone who deserves the Gill Award more than Bob."**

—KIM HECK, STMA CEO

manufactured affordably and then sold to any level stadium.

"We saw the market potential and asked Dale Getz, then the groundskeeper at Notre Dame, to try one on his baseball field," Curry recalls. "Dale said it worked well so

we started marketing it for David and we are still selling them. In fact recently Andre Bruce of the Chiefs purchased one, as have numerous other teams."

Curry thinks every association has to grow to survive. "STMA continues to meet that challenge through Kim Heck and its current leadership," he says. "The dedication of volunteers, and the entire organization, makes the STMA a real success story."

## Research and development

"The upside of this business is the time we can spend with R&D," says Curry. "Anyone can make a tarp, there are all kinds available. We've had success in product development and new material technolo-

**"Having served with Bob on several committees and the SAFE Board, I know he can be counted on to analyze a situation and provide a well thought out solution always, with the STMA and SAFE at the forefront of his decision."**

—DALE GETZ, CSFM, STMA COMMERCIAL VICE PRESIDENT

gies and systems to handle materials more easily.

"We see the chores turf managers face and input from them helps us come up with innovations."

Curry now is working on an inflatable tarp that can be operated by fewer people. "We're close now; we've been working on this for the past 6-7 years, conducted some trials, but there's been a lot of going back to the drawing board," he says.

Another innovation Curry mentions is Armor Kote, a clear-coat surface finish that is undetectable but makes for a much stronger abrasive surface and better seam strength.

"We're always looking at new things in this industry. Our mandate is 'What would work better?'" he says. "We face copycat competition and that is what drives our R&D efforts. We want to make more affordable and more lightweight products than anyone else." ■