A Great Man of Turfgrass Remembered

An appreciation of Dr. Marvin H. Ferguson

BY HOLMAN M. GRIFFIN

Few men had more influence on the agronomic aspects of the game of golf than Dr. Marvin Ferguson. He was instrumental in introducing the USGA's "Method of Putting Green Construction" in 1960.

In considering agronomists who played important roles in the development of the turfgrass industry, Dr. Marvin H. Ferguson was one of the greats. This article is an attempt to introduce personal information about Dr. Ferguson for those who may not have known him and to refresh his memory for his many friends and colleagues.

Born in Buda, Texas, on June 16, 1918, Marvin often rode a horse or mule to the local school, about a mile and a quarter from his home. During high school, he lettered in all sports (baseball, football, basketball, and track), for a total of 16 letters. Following graduation from high school, Marvin attended Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College and received a B.S. degree in Agronomy, accumulating enough hours to continue, after spending a year at manual labor, straight to a Ph.D. from the University of Maryland in 1950.

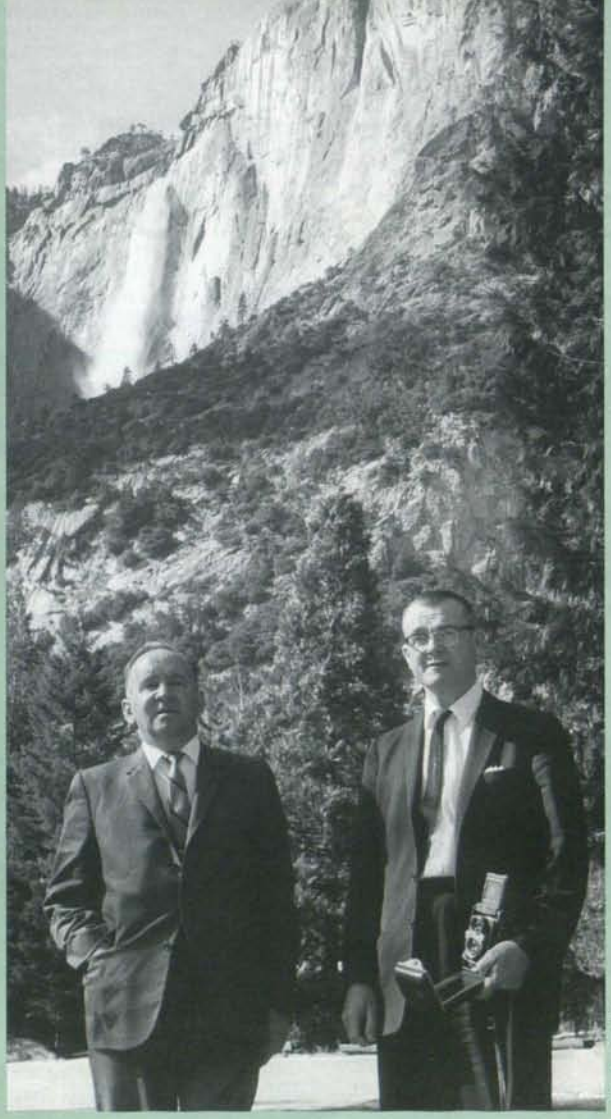
Marvin married Floy Bugg on April 3, 1941, and two children, Judith and Mark, were born of that union. Both children followed their father's interest in agriculture, as did his grandson Eddie Hodnett. In 1943 Marvin served in the U.S. Navy as a Medical Corpsman and was stationed in Carona, California. He served mainly in the burn ward and participated in some of the earliest attempts at plastic surgery.

Following military service, a young Marvin Ferguson began work for the United States Department of Agriculture at the turf plots in Beltsville, Maryland, where he evaluated many strains of zoysiagrass and was instrumental in the release of Z52, later known as Meyer zoysiagrass.

Being so close to Washington, D.C., he became acquainted with people in the Military Air Transport Service and became a consultant for that organization from 1951 into 1952 and traveled to many foreign places such as Tripoli, Libya, and the exotic island of Hawaii. In Hawaii, Marvin obtained a sample of a phyxotrophic soil, which has the properties of a solid until shaken and then becomes a liquid. This unique soil caught his interest and may have been the root of the techniques he advanced in later life along with his observations of the military bombers landing on airstrips with stabilized soils disguised as grassy fields.

In 1953, Marvin began work with the USGA Green Section and continued working from his home in Bryan, Texas, until 1968, when he left the USGA and founded AgriSystems of Texas. During his 15 years with the USGA, his office was housed in the Agronomy building at Texas A&M at College Station, where Marvin served part time as a teacher and graduate student counselor.

Few men had more influence on the agronomic aspects of the game of golf than Dr. Ferguson, who was instrumental in introducing the USGA's "Method of Putting Green Construction" while he was Mid-Continent director and national research coordinator for the United States Golf Association in 1960. He is rightfully



Dr. Ferguson traveled to San Francisco to speak at the 1965 USGA regional meeting with Al Radko, director of the Green Section's Eastern Region. The picture shows them during a visit to Yosemite National Park.

Dr. Marvin Ferguson received the 1973 USGA Green Section Award for his contributions to golf through his work with turfgrass. The award was presented by Edward C. Meister, Green Section Committee Chairman (left), and Lynford Lardner, USGA President (right).

known as the father of the USGA green construction method.

Dr. Ferguson collaborated with Leon Howard, then a graduate student at Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College, to build the first USGA green at Texarkana Country Club in 1959. The procedure was much disputed, but the basic principles, which are not subject to change because they are physical laws of nature, have stood the test of time and have become the foundation for modern turf management's use of modified soils as a growth medium. Marvin was among the first to note the importance of sand particle size, angulation, and silica content, as well as its worth as a major component of soil mixes.

Physical measurements of soil characteristics were little used until Dr. Ferguson and Leon Howard advanced their technical description in 1959 and 1960. This method of physical analysis was to revolutionize the industry and allow turf managers a chance to examine the acceptability of soil materials in advance of their use in practice.

Dr. Ferguson was a quiet man who could politely disagree, but to my knowledge never argued. He told people once, maybe twice, and then left them to their own devices. One example of his wit and wisdom came when he was visiting with a pathologist on a golf course. The pathologist said, "Hey, Marvin, look at the Septoria on that fescue." Marvin never missed a beat when he came back with, "You may be right about that being Septoria, but that is not fescue."

Dr. Ferguson authored hundreds of articles on turf management and was in great demand as a speaker. He received many awards, including the USGA Green Section Award, and he was a Fellow of the National Association for the Advancement of Science and received the first Blade of Grass Award from the Southern Turfgrass Association.

Marvin passed away on January 10, 1985, from a massive heart attack while picking up the mail at the post office. This is just a brief glimpse of such a great man's life, but there is no doubt that his contribution to golf turf will live forever.

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