

THIS IS OUR TURF

CALS turfgrass alumni are a cut above

By Vanessa Beeson

FROM THE COAST of Mississippi to the coast of Japan, the roots of Mississippi State's turfgrass program reach far and wide.

Housed under the agronomy major in the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, the golf and sports turf management concentration has been around for more than 50 years. In that time, it has become nationally known for its rigorous curriculum and innovative research, which has produced unique varieties of turf used on lawns and athletic fields across America.

Established in 1965, the degree program includes 10 turf courses and requires three semesters of cooperative education. Assistant professor **JAY MCCURDY** said this comprehensive education makes Mississippi State alumni highly sought after in the field. He estimates there are nearly 500 Bulldogs working in the industry around the world.

"Our graduates are diverse in background and experience," McCurdy said. "The opportunities in turf management go far beyond golf courses. We have alumni working in areas like municipal turf, lawn care operation, and sports field management. Our motto is 'stay in the game.' While many high school athletes will not have the opportunity to play at the collegiate or professional level, this concentration allows them to still be involved in sports by managing the field of play."

Melodee Fraser

MELODEE FRASER grew up on a golf course and thought she'd be a golf superintendent like her dad. Instead, this former Bulldog golfer went from reading greens to breeding them.

Fraser came to MSU in part because she wanted to play golf year-round. She graduated as the first woman in the turfgrass program in 1985, then stayed to study turf breeding as she earned a master's. She said her plan was to manage a golf course, but graduate school showed her a different path.

"I felt that I could do more for golf courses if I was developing new varieties of turf," Fraser recalled. "That's what turf breeders do—we look for improved traits in different species and cultivars."

After earning a doctorate in turfgrass breeding from Rutgers in 1991, Fraser joined Pure Seed, a global seed-breeding company headquartered in Oregon. She was hired to lead the company's

For more about the golf and sports turf management concentration in the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, visit www.pss.msstate.edu/students/gstm.php.



then-brand-new eastern testing facility—a 25-acre research farm in Rolesville, North Carolina.

More than 25 years later, she's helped lead the development of over 120 varieties of turfgrass. Her focus is on improving the summer performance of cool-season grass and breeding warm-season grasses, including tall fescues with improved summer performance.

"It's very rewarding to talk to people who have used the varieties you've developed and been successful with them," Fraser explained. "When a variety has a long life, has traits that make it successful and that people like, that's rewarding to see."

Andrew McDaniel

IT TOOK 21 HOURS FOR ANDREW MCDANIEL to get to his final turfgrass internship. Though he'd never flown before, he didn't let the distance keep him from a semester-long stint at a golf course in Japan, more than 7,000 miles away from Mississippi State University.

The 2001 Mississippi State graduate is now celebrating 18 years in Japan, where he is superintendent of Keya Golf Club and begins each day walking the 18-hole course with his dog, a Rhodesian Ridgeback named King.

"When I accepted the full-time job after I graduated, I never dreamed I'd be in Japan as long as I have," explained McDaniel, who hails from Alabama. "But once you pick up the language, life gets easier, things change, other opportunities arise and, next thing you know, it's been 18 years."

McDaniel has been with Keya for seven years. The 55-year-old family-owned enterprise in Fukuoka City hugs the coastline of the Itoshima Peninsula and

is best known for its zoysiagrass greens.

"Japanese greens were traditionally zoysia because it's a native species. Over time, however, superintendents started switching to bentgrass and bermudagrass greens, which tend to have a better ball roll," McDaniel explained. "We kept it classic. Now, when people think of Keya, they think of zoysia grass greens. They like the challenge, and we've built a reputation on keeping the tradition."

Keya is a stop on the Japan Golf Tour, and McDaniel said the unique turf gets him time in the spotlight.

"When the tournament rolls around, I get to talk about turf on national television," McDaniel said. "It's good for the industry because it helps the general

public see golf course maintenance from a different perspective."

McDaniel has even been featured as a character in a local golf-themed manga—a Japanese comic book. He said he'd like to get more young people engaged with turfgrass in Japan, which he says doesn't have programs like the one found at MSU.

"I hope to collaborate with one of my mentors to create a turf academy at Keya to train the younger Japanese generation on turf management," McDaniel said.



Keair Edwards

AS SUPERINTENDENT TURF MANAGER of the Gulfport Sportsplex, **KEAIR EDWARDS** says he's always on call.

Thanks to internships at the facility and insight from his predecessor—who also happens to be his dad—he had some understanding of the job's demands. Still, he said there was an adjustment period when he took the reins in 2017.

"My first day on the job, my dad handed me the cellphone, and the next thing I knew, it was constantly ringing. I thought, 'Wow, what have I gotten myself into?'" Edwards recalled with a smile.

The 2016 Mississippi State graduate grew up watching his father, Ken, manage turf at the 250-acre Gulfport Sportsplex and nearby 15-acre Goldin Sportsplex. But Edwards said he didn't realize it was something he could study until he was in high school.

"My dad was on the board for the Mississippi Turfgrass Association with

a lot of Mississippi State alumni," Edwards recalled. "That kind of set things in motion for me to follow in his footsteps. Now, I'm actually on the board, too."

All told, Edwards oversees nearly 30 fields, each hosting an estimated 880 games annually at the sportsplex alone. He is also the head groundskeeper for high school and college sporting events at Biloxi's MGM Park.

Edwards said he looks forward to carrying on the work his father put into the facilities, which earned a certification from the Sports Turf Manager Association for environmentally responsible management. The same organization honored the father-son duo for

their efforts with the award for Softball Field of the Year in the Schools and Parks Division.

"My dad built this facility, so his were pretty big shoes to fill," Edwards said.

