John Sorochan passionate about turf, students and QuickSod

(EDITOR’S NOTE: This is one in a series of articles about companies that participated in the recent “Tennessee Venture Challenge” hosted by the University of Tennessee Research Foundation.)

By Tom Ballard, Director of Innovation and Entrepreneurial Initiatives, Pershing Yoakley & Associates, P.C.

University of Tennessee (UT) Associate Professor John Sorochan is passionate about his turf research, his students, and the new company he is helping start that will commercialize a patent pending technology to grow sod faster.

“I don’t ever see me giving up what I do . . . discovery, research, and teaching,” the Canadian citizen says. In fact, he sees the new company – QuickSod, Inc. – providing significant financial benefits back to the university that will help him continue to build a world-class sports turf research program.

The new start-up is focused on decreasing the time it currently takes to grow and harvest sod – now anywhere from 12 to 30 months, depending on the type of grass – to 12 to 16 weeks. The “secret sauce” is a proprietary biodegradable growing medium that not only accelerates the growth, but also extends the shelf life of the sod and requires fewer pesticides.

Sorochan, who came to UT in 2002, took first place in the inaugural Tennessee Venture Challenge sponsored by the UT Research Foundation (UTRF). During our recent teknovation.biz interview, we were continually impressed with the Calgary native’s philosophy and passion.

“When you do something, what’s the end purpose,” Sorochan asks, then quickly answers, “You do something to make a difference.”

In his case, it is about everything from his family – he has two sons who play soccer – to his UT work as a teacher and researcher and his interest in bettering his adopted community. Fortunately for Sorochan, those personal and professional interests clearly intersect in ways that produce multiple benefits.

The QuickSod President and Chief Technology Officer says this entrepreneurial pursuit “betters my program and the students that I put out.” It’s also a way “to do something with a research project to help sod producers make more money.” Finally, it’s a vehicle “to bring royalties back to supporting research and our total turfgrass program.”

During our interview, Sorochan cited an amazing statistic – there are more than 400,000 athletic fields around the country with little, if any budget to maintain their turf.

“We can make those athletic fields safer by telling those with limited budgets where to place their dollars,” he says in describing the broader benefits of his work.

How the son of a farmer turned funeral home owner became so focused on turf is an interesting story in itself. Like many of us, Sorochan’s initial career plans changed over the course of time.

“I wanted to be a lawyer in the oil and gas industry,” he said, laughing that he would be a millionaire today if he had followed that career path.

Instead, an older friend from his teenage years, whom Sorochan described as a “big brother,” got a job after college working for the Robert Trent Jones golf architecture firm. He caught the friend’s passion for the profession and enrolled at Michigan State University (MSU) with the goal of being a golf course architect.

Sorochan even worked on a golf course during part of his college career.

Along the way, he shifted to sports turf research, no doubt influenced in part by the opportunity that occurred when the 1994 FIFA World Cup in soccer was held in the Pontiac Silverdome.

“I got to help put turf in the Silverdome,” Sorochan said, still vividly remembering the event two decades later.

It was while pursuing his Master’s Degree that Sorochan became interested in increasing the yield for sod producers, the focus of QuickSod.

Armed with four MSU degrees when he arrived at UT, Sorochan has clearly been focused on building his research program and providing a great education for his students. He compares the characteristics of active researchers with those of successful entrepreneurs.

“You have to be creative in where you get (research) funding,” he says, explaining that “it leads to being an entrepreneur. You come up with things that have an end use.”

Sorochan has big goals and an aggressive timetable for QuickSod. He says there are nearly 410,000 acres of sod farms in the U.S. and $1.35 billion in annual sales, so it’s a sizable market. The company plans to start its first beta field test in August and show a demo plot during the Turfgrass Producers Field Day in 2015.

“I’m at the point of working with investors,” he says, adding that he is getting valuable help from UTRF and Tech 2020.
Sorochan is clearly on a mission, asking, "As a turfgrass Professor, what else can I do for my program, UT, and the community?" One imagines there are other opportunities to pursue in the future, but QuickSod is the priority right now, considering its multiplicity of benefits.

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