

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



NFL Star Credited with Starting Farmer Building Terraces

Former Miami Dolphins defensive end Vern Den Herder earned many football awards over the years, including two Super Bowl rings and being named to the College Football Hall of Fame. Plymouth County farmer Gilbert Winter says he wants to add one more unofficial award to the list. He names Den Herder as the man responsible for showing him the value of terraces and the benefits they provide to the land.

It was the early 1980s when Le Mars native Den Herder ended his 12-year NFL career and moved back to Iowa. He bought farmland in Plymouth County, installed conservation practices and Winter rented the farm ground.

“Gilbert didn’t really believe in terraces back then,” said Winter’s wife, Pat Winter. “Den Herder installed the terraces on his land and we farmed it. When we saw the benefits they offer on hilly ground we were sold.”

Gilbert Winter says terraces offer many benefits. “They save soil, conserve soil moisture, stop the formation of gullies and ruts that can wreck equipment and they help us with manure application,” he said. “We’ve now installed 80,000 to 90,000 feet of terraces on our land. We believe in them because we see them work for us.”

Pat and Gil Winter have been farming since 1968. They have added farm ground to their operation over the years and now farm 2,000 acres in Plymouth and Cherokee counties.

Winter says he knows a lot about farming, but can’t know it all. He says he counts on others for technical advice, including



Winter stands next to a 20-year-old terrace on one of his farms. Winter farms 2,000 acres near LeMars.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). The manure was applied to the land saving us the cost of buying commercial fertilizer. The banker liked it because he told us we had our own fertilizer factory. It was a win-win situation.”

Jim Lahn is one of the NRCS technical experts that worked closely with the Winters for more than a decade. Lahn is the district conservationist for Plymouth County. “Terraces the Winters built to save soil are also helping them with fertilizer applications. They give farmers like the Winters much greater flexibility in the application of liquid manure because the phosphorus index in these situations is usually very low. That’s good for the farmer, the land and the environment.”

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The phosphorus index is a mathematical tool used to assess the potential for phosphorus moving from agricultural fields to surface water where it can become a pollutant. Too much phosphorus causes algae blooms which deteriorate water quality in lakes and rivers and can kill game fish. Terraces reduce the risk of phosphorus moving off of farm fields.

Terraces are earthen structures that intercept runoff on moderate to steep slopes. They transform long slopes into a series of shorter slopes. Terraces reduce the rate of runoff and allow soil particles to settle out. The resulting cleaner water is then carried off the field in a non-erosive manner.

Winter says one of the complaints he hears from others about terraces is they are hard to farm--they cut up fields wasting time at planting and harvesting. Winter says that doesn't have to be the case. "Terraces are not that bad to farm if they are laid out right. The NRCS guys in Le Mars work with us and make sure our terraces fit our equipment. I don't understand why people don't like them. It's just a mind set."

Not liking terraces is a mind set Pat Winter reminded her husband that he once had. "Once is the key," said Gilbert Winter. "It took a retired professional football star to show me the value of terraces. Now I know it's a conservation practice with a lot of winning benefits."

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On the Side - Vern Den Herder

Vern Den Herder was a defensive end who played 12 seasons for the Miami Dolphins of the NFL. He played in three Super Bowls for the Dolphins and went to the Pro-Bowl in 1973.

He attended high school in Sioux Center and attended Central College in Pella.

At Central, Den Herder made All-Iowa Conference in 1968, 1969 and 1970. In 1970, his senior season, he was team captain, Iowa Conference most valuable player and was named All-America, college division, by the NAIA, the Football Coaches Association and the Associated Press. In 1996 he was selected to the College Football Hall of Fame.

Today, Den Herder lives in Sioux Center with his wife Diane and farms 600 acres in northwest Iowa.

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*Dick Tremain, Public Affairs Specialist
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NRCS District Conservationist Jim Lahn and farmers Gil and Pat Winter check a 20-year-old terrace for maintenance needs.

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