

## The inventor who made millions whacking weeds

**George Ballas**  
1928–2011

George Ballas loved a neat lawn. But the 200 trees

crowding his two-acre yard posed a problem: Unless he got down on his knees and trimmed around their roots with shears, Ballas couldn't achieve the perfection he desired. Then one day in 1971, as he sat in a Houston car wash, Ballas realized that the nylon bristles scrubbing his vehicle could also help tidy his garden. Back home, he rigged up an old popcorn can with fishing wire and bolted it to a rotating lawn edger, and the Weed Eater—now better known as the weed whacker—was born. "It made a helluva noise," Ballas said in 1977. "But it ripped up the turf and tore away the grass."

Born to Greek immigrants who ran a restaurant in northern Louisiana, Ballas served as an Air Force bombardier during World War II and the Korean War. After leaving the service, he married Maria Louisa Marulanda—a dance instructor whom "he met when she taught him the tango," said *The Wall Street Journal*. The couple went into business together, managing several Arthur



Murray and Fred Astaire studio franchises. In the 1960s, Ballas opened his own studio, Dance City USA—a 43,000-square-foot Houston venue that he called "a super-market of dancing with babes and booze and big bands all under one roof."

"But after he perfected his invention," said *The New*

*York Times*, Ballas focused on the newly formed Weed Eater Corporation. With some smart marketing—each new trimmer model bore a cute name like "Weedie" or "Clippie"—and a high-visibility ad campaign, sales rocketed from \$570,000 in 1972 to \$41 million in 1976. In 1977 Ballas sold the booming business to Emerson Electric for an undisclosed amount. "It has remained confidential all these years," his son Corky, a champion ballroom dancer, told the *Los Angeles Times*. "But it was a happy sum."

Ballas continued to tinker with inventions over the following decades, engineering successful gizmos (including tiny engines for leaf blowers) and some notable flops (a football-helmet-sized mobile phone). "A Weed Eater," Ballas admitted in 1993, "comes along once in a lifetime."

## The Dutch soccer star who became a devoted coach in Texas

During his many years as the sharp-minded goalkeeper on the Dutch national soccer team, Jan van Beveren was notoriously bad at remembering people's names. That changed, his

**Jan van Beveren**  
1948–2011

wife, Toosje, recalled, once he started coaching soccer in Beaumont, Texas, where he never forgot a pupil's name. "That told me that he loved it," she said.

Born in Amsterdam in 1948, van Beveren began his professional career as a soccer player in 1965. In 1970, he transferred to PSV Eindhoven, Holland's most prestigious club, and helped it win three league titles in the course of a decade. The 6-foot-2-inch van Beveren was considered a "shot stopper of the old school," said *The New York Times*, and could defend against almost any penalty kick.

Yet van Beveren never played in a World Cup, said Dutch newspaper *Omroep Brabant*. Injured in 1974, he withdrew from contention in 1978 after falling out with Johan Cruyff, the mercurial player-manager who led Holland to the World Cup final match that year. The two men later reconciled, and Cruyff mourned van Beveren as "one of the best goalkeepers we've ever had."

Van Beveren ended his pro soccer career playing for the Fort Lauderdale Strikers and the Dallas Sidekicks in the early 1980s, said the *Beaumont Enterprise*. He spent his final years teaching at the Spindletop Select Soccer Club in Beaumont. There van Beveren never acted like a former superstar, said Spindletop president Kelly Krouter. "We just knew the nice, compassionate, down-to-earth guy who loved soccer and loved teaching kids."

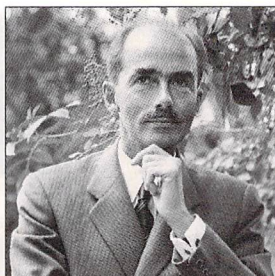
## The last crown prince of Austria-Hungary

**Otto von Habsburg**  
1912–2011

The world first caught a glimpse of Otto von Habsburg in 1916, when the

4-year-old appeared dressed in a fur-trimmed tunic at the 1916 funeral of his great-great-uncle, Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Josef. A month later, when his father, Karl, assumed the imperial throne, the young Crown Prince of Austria, Hungary, Croatia, and Bohemia wore ermine and velvet with a large white feather in his cap. The pomp didn't last. Within two years, Austria-Hungary was defeated in World War I, and the empire was abolished. Yet to the end of his long life, Otto von Habsburg preferred to be addressed as "Your Imperial Highness."

Otto von Habsburg was always "the embodied echo of a different world," said Germany's *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Born in a royal villa in Reichenau, Austria, he grew up in European exile. Habsburg offered to restore Austria's throne in 1938 to stave off the country's annexation by the Nazis, and would likely have been eliminated by Hitler had that bid succeeded. Instead he spent most of the war in the U.S. Only once he formally relinquished his royal



claim, in 1961, was he allowed to set foot in Austria again; there he was known merely as Dr. Otto Habsburg-Lothringen, since the country had banned aristocratic titles. So he became a citizen of Germany, where he could style himself Archduke Otto and retain the aristocratic "von" before Habsburg.

Once the prospect of monarchy faded, Habsburg embraced the idea of uniting Europe within what would become the European Union. In 1979 he was elected member of the European Parliament for Bavaria's conservative Christian Social Union. In his 20 years in the Parliament, Habsburg "proved an accomplished debater with a fluent command of seven European languages," said the *London Telegraph*.

He remained controversial for his archconservative politics and his conviction that Austrians had been Hitler's victims rather than his accomplices, said the Associated Press. But Habsburg's efforts to bridge the gap between eastern and western Europe gained him broad respect. His body will be buried in Vienna's Emperor Tomb, and his heart in a Benedictine abbey in Hungary.