Joe Niebur: From the 'open range' to the fairways

By MARK LESLIE
COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — From cowboy to golf course builder, Joe Niebur apparently has transcended lifestyles as well as the "saddle" he rides in.

Niebur Golf, which the former cow-hand created in 1991, has been named Golf Course Builder of the Year for 1998 by Golf Course News. The announcement followed an extensive survey of architects, developers and superintendents involved in projects for 18 builders nominated for the award.

Niebur will receive the award at the annual banquet of the Golf Course Builders Association of America in Orlando, Feb. 12, during the International Golf Course Conference and Show.

Of a possible rating of 80, Niebur Golf scored 78.675. MacCurrach Golf Construction, Inc. of Jacksonville, Fla., finished second with a rating of 77.96, and Landscapes Unlimited of Lincoln, Neb., placed third at 76.14.

"There are pros and cons on each side of going from a horse to a bulldozer," said Niebur from his headquarters here. "I miss the horse some days. The horse has more personality and doesn't cost $250,000, either." Nevertheless, heavy equipment — and the skill with which he and his crews can create golf courses — are responsible for the company's selection as the best of 1998.

"There are several golf course contractors that are good, but only a few are great — and Niebur Golf is in that category," said Dana Fry of Hurdzan/Fry Golf Course Design, which has worked with Niebur on several projects. "Joe's real fast and has some great people working for him. That's true with all those guys. That's why Landscapes and Wadsworth [Golf Construction] have been so successful for so many years. The companies that have the staying power are the ones that have the quality leadership and the workforce behind them to get the work done. Joe's got that and he continues to get better at it."

Niebur's trail to business success may be unique among his colleagues, however. He grew up on a 13,000-acre ranch in Malta, Mont., riding herd with his horse Lester on 300 to 400 head of cattle.

After a year of college and a period of some time building waterproof decks in Seattle, Niebur received a life-changing call from his father, Mark.

"He inherited some money and said he was going to build a nine-hole golf course, and would I come home to help? The entire family chipped in together, hired course architect John Steidel of Washington and built Merian Hills Golf Club.

"It was awesome and fun," Niebur recalled. "It was the first time any of us had ever done anything like that."

Niebur jumped on a dozer for the first time in his life, and brothers John, Tom and Jim laid irrigation pipe, dug this, plowed that and, voila! Merian Hills Golf Club became a reality in 1982.

"Dad has since sold the course, but that golf course is still running and making money — a great little golf course," Niebur said.

How was shaping?
"It was so much fun I wanted to do it full-time," Niebur said. "And, with some help from his friends — namely, his father, Steidel and John Cotter — he did. Steidel took the lead for Niebur, con-

Fieldstone: One of six projects completed by Niebur Golf in '98

GREENVILLE, Del. — Fieldstone Golf Club, one of six golf courses completed by Niebur Golf, Inc. in 1998, is a "spectacular project," said designer Dr. Michael Hurdzan.

Referring to the "difficult" piece of ground on which Fieldstone was built, Hurdzan said: "Some of the best golf courses come out of the worst sites. That was a very difficult site to work because of approximately 300 feet of grade change, lots of rock, streams and wetland areas.

"Niebur started moving dirt in late April 1998 and had the entire course grassed by Oct. 30," said co-designer Dana Fry. "That is amazing. In fact, I did not believe it could be done. Most important to me was the fact that the quality of the work was outstanding."

The 18-hole private golf club features a classic design, Hurdzan added: "In that there are lots of small bunkers, not big sweeping bunkers; the greens tend to be medium to smallish; and there are a lot of fescues around the bunkers and backdrops."

But, according to Niebur Golf President Joe Niebur, "The most distinguishing factor about Fieldstone is in the name itself. There were lots and lots of rock. We had to do a good bit of drilling and blasting; that rock was used to build stone walls along cart paths and greens and edges.

"The stones walls add such an elegant touch to it that will probably become a signature of the course."

The course was a dream of Wilmington golfers Buddy Reed and Dr. Barry Roseman. Andy Mottel is the superintendent.

Continued on page 48
Niebur

Continued from page 46

"I went from Malta, Mont., being a cowboy, to building a golf course [Salt Creek in Dana Point, Calif.] on the ocean and thinking, I've really been missing out on life," Niebur said.

Although six months later he was laid off, and got a job working for Cotter in Wadsworth's Southwestern region. "John [Cotter] is the best," Niebur said.

"John is the much-anticipated, Rick Smith-designed Millenium, Rebel Sentry, Crossfire II and SR 8210."

Niebur attributes the company's success to his employees, especially brother John, a general superintendent and vice president; general superintendent Frank McGraw; Chief Financial Officer Greg Bartold; and Chief Operations Manager Dyric Snyder.

"I think the employees are so advanced and they take on more responsibility," Niebur said. "Also, sometimes I get focused too much on keeping it going and getting more work, but my guys are focused on building a great golf course. They feel the same way I do about things." Since he can't be on each site every day, Niebur said, "You need good employees, or you can lose control easily and they will do things that will get you in trouble."

Niebur pointed to the other finalists and all companies that are perennially near the top of the Best Builder Awards, saying: "Being in the top three, year after year..."

Furness

Continued from page 47

"Can't say enough about my shapers, can't say enough about my superintendents... They are both very talented. Pete and I did a lot of extras, especially when it came to drainage. We came close within nine holes of winning the championship."

Furness cited his employees for these accolades. "First of all, I wouldn't be here if not for the people working for me," he said. "I can't say enough about my shapers, project managers, the people in the office, our mechanic who keeps the equipment running every day. They're a fantastic group who I wouldn't trade for anything."

About Chris Furness and Bohn, he said: "They're the best. They do terrific work."

Their [Furness'] work went exceptionally well," said Gordon Marmion, PGA professional and director of golf at the city-owned Fieldstone Golf Club. "They did a lot of extras, especially when it came to drainage. We came close within budget, which is not easy in these circumstances, and especially working with municipalities." A supplier in Michigan wrote: "I can't express to you enough how enjoyable it is to have builders like Furness doing business with us." Knowing full well we will be paid in full within terms is a comfort."

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About Chris Furness and Bohn, he said: "They are both very talented. Pete and I started together with the Dyes on the same project. He joined Chris and me as a shaper and his abilities allowed us to expand to the second crew. I'm very fortunate to have..."
Niebur

Continued from page 48
year, means more because it says I'm consistently building quality golf.

"In this economy I could do twice the amount of work. But I want to be consistent. The almighty dollar can get in the way really quick in this business."

In the meantime, developers are demanding more and more from builders, Niebur said.

"The fact is, there is a lot of competition, so the standard has gone up," he said. "And I think there are a lot more management companies, more consultants, and people are more knowledgeable than 10 years ago."

Time deadlines are at the top of the list in higher demands, Niebur said.

"The schedules have gotten so much more difficult," he said. "We're starting jobs later and they want them done ahead of time."

He alluded to a 36-hole project that was to begin construction in New Jersey in late January, on which the developer wants a finished product by Sept. 1. "That would have been a two-year job not long ago," he said. "But we've taken jobs that were bid as two-year projects and completed them in a year."

To whom, specifically, does he owe his success?

"I owe it to my Dad, for his taking a risk and building a golf course in Montana. It wasn't for the money. If he had not done it, I have no idea what I'd be doing today."

Meanwhile, Niebur Golf is diversifying, having constructed some commercial buildings and breaking ground on a golf course in Fayetteville, Ark., which the company will own.

His choice of golf course builder?

"I think Niebur would be appropriate," he laughed.

Furness

Continued from page 48

two guys who I can put in charge of the projects and budgets."

Furness intends to maintain a small operation, not working on more than two projects at a time partly because of the difficulty in finding some one the caliber of his brother and Bohn and partly because he would not be able to give each project the personal attention he desires.

"When you hire Furness Golf Construction, you get Tim Furness, not somebody you never heard of," he said.

The face of golf course projects has changed in his 14 years in the business, Furness said. "I think the demands are higher because there are so many golf courses in Michigan and across the country, and the competition is high. The more competition there is, the better the quality has to be. For a course to be a standout course in Northern Michigan today, you have to do something darn special."

Plus, Furness sees fewer mom-and-pop-type developments.

"There was a day when a number of people decided they could build a golf course without a professional architect or builder," he said. "Due to Golf Course News, GCBAA [Golf Course Builders Association of America], ASGCA [American Society of Golf Course Architects], etc. people now realize that, in the long run, it's as cheap to hire a professional as it is to do it yourself and then hire a professional to come in and do it right a second time."

A scratch golfer while in college, Furness hasn't golfed in years. But he plans to get reacquainted with the game when he retires.

Furness/Fieldstone

Continued from page 48

Fieldstone offers four different teeing areas with course length ranging from 4,932 to 7,002 yards. Typical of Hills' architecture, the landing areas are spacious, but an abundance of mature trees and strategically placed natural areas come into play.

The par five, 524-yard 6th hole best represents the challenges presented by the Fieldstone layout. From a tee box surrounded by trees, drives must lay up to a wetland and a second marsh area confronts golfers as they hit their approach shots into the green.

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