

# SAJO soars to top, wins Best Builder Award

By MARK LESLIE

**R**ICHMOND, Texas — From a \$50 bank account in 1988 to Golf Course Builder of the Year for 1996. That's the tale of Sam Sakocius, whose SAJO Construction has won the Best Builder honor for 1996 following the annual *Golf Course News* survey or architects and developers.

Winning the award, to be presented at the Golf Course Builders Association of America banquet in Las Vegas, Feb. 9, SAJO averaged 9.875 on a 10-point scale in balloting of its 1996 clients. SAJO becomes the fourth golf course builder to win the award, joining Wadsworth Golf Construction Co., Paul Clute and 1995 winner Landscapes Unlimited. Wadsworth of Plainfield, Ill., Landscapes Unlimited of Lincoln, Neb., and Niebur Golf Inc. of Colorado Spring, Colo., also placed high in the 1996 survey.

"So often you get so little praise for what you do," said Sakocius. "The reward is knowing that you've done a good job and have treated the people you're working for right."

His 1996 clients responded in kind. "I have been working on city projects for over 20 years and seldom, if ever, have I given this high a rating," said Bill Hobbs of the Springfield (Mo.) Park Board, whose Indian Bluff Golf Course was built by SAJO. "This site was a very difficult one, with sewer lines, gas lines and other things running through it, and their cooperation in working with all these other contactors was more than I've seen. Their quality of work was extremely good. They didn't camouflage anything. They made it right and when they put their final grade in, it was there to stay."



The 18th hole greens complex at Tanasi Country Club in Loudon, Tenn., designed by Ault, Clark & Associates, is an example of the intricacy of SAJO's construction work. The course was finished in November 1995 and opened last summer.



"SAJO performed all its obligations beyond the required contract. It was extremely helpful in responding to all of the problems."

In fact, he added, "SAJO went beyond the contract and assisted the staff in improving a couple of major problems on the existing golf course."

"This is the third or fourth golf course I've worked with them," said Harry Yewens of Longwood Golf Club here, "and they're absolutely outstanding."

Eight years ago, when the construction company Sam Sakocius worked for went out of business, he and wife Joan incorporated SAJO. Incorporation papers took all but \$50 of their \$400 savings. Their first job was rebuilding the 18th hole from the tees forward at River Bend Country Club in Missouri City, Texas. It paid \$18,000 and, Sakocius remembers, "it was all the money in the world to us then."

Sakocius poured driveways and sidewalks and did maintenance work on golf courses until they got jobs. Enter Mack Brown of Brown, Harris paving and utility company, who joined Sakocius as a partner and who, with son Terry, owns half the stock.

Sakocius, who had started as a shaper, then a project superintendent for his old firm, saw SAJO climb aboard the golf course construction train.

Since 1990 SAJO has doubled in size and then doubled again, growing from 12 employees in 1993 to 80 last summer.

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*"The top builders do great work. The difference is how you handle the problems."*

— Sam Sakocius, owner  
SAJO Construction



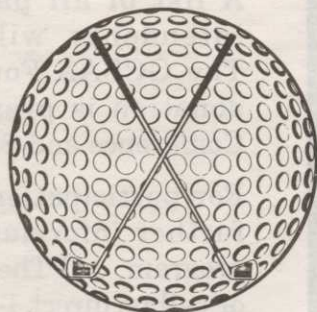
Sam Sakocius

Paul A. Morris of the Sebastian County Parks Department in Fort Smith, Ark., who added nine holes to an 18-hole facility, said: "They were extremely helpful in getting the project in under budget and identifying areas that would not destroy the quality of the construction of the golf course. All the way through the project they were extremely cooperative. Whenever a problem cropped up, they took care of it."

Morris added that, without charge, SAJO crews spent a month deepening a large lake on the property that served as a habitat for beavers. "We had drained the lake before they came on the job," he said, "but we didn't have the resources to get it deepened. They provided equipment and personnel to deepen it so we could put it back in operation. It was fantastic."

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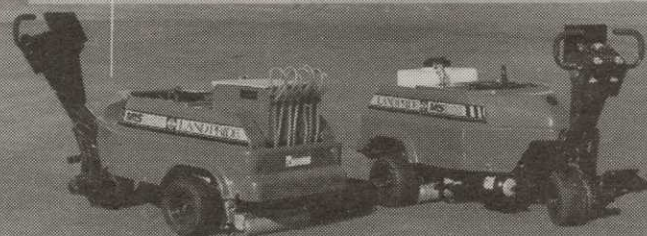
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*'This is the third or fourth golf course I've worked with [SAJO], and they're absolutely outstanding.'*

— Harry Yewens,  
Longwood Golf Club

## SAJO succeeds Landscapes

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Sakocius wants the growth to stop there.

"At one point we looked at doing seven projects at a time," he said. "But I feel there are only so many good golf course personnel out there and you should do only what you have good people for. As you expand, you start getting

spread too thin. That happened once to us. We had mistakes we had to go back and fix. And I think that's why people like us so much — how we treat our problems.

"The top builders do great work. The difference is how you handle the problems."

Company morale is another crucial factor in the SAJO

success, Sakocius said. "We try to get our people home to see their families, or fly their families to see them. That's worked out well.

"If you are going to keep good people, who are going to watch out for your company's interests, you have to help them first."

The biggest reward for Sakocius as a builder?

"To see the finished

product," he said. "I like to see them just before they're planted. They look so good to me when they're brown. That's as good as they are going to look for a couple of years."

Asked if eight years ago he thought he might reach the apex of the business this quickly, Sakocius said: "No. When I first started I thought I should get more recognition and work than I did. That never happens as soon as people want it to happen. I decided at one point to put my head down, keep plugging and be satisfied with a job well done. And hope that some day someone would notice."

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Allan  
MacCurrach

## MacCurrach wins

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during construction of Indianwood Golf & Country Club in Lake Orion, Mich., then got his first job as a golf course builder on his own. It was in 1987 and the project was to rebuild a driving range and chipping area, and a few putting greens at the Coun-try Club of Muirfield in Ohio.

"I was a one-employee show at that time," he recalls. "I made sure I could park my dozer close enough to the tractor so I could jump from one to the other without having to hit the ground."

Now MacCurrach Golf carries 14 to 16 full-time employees, a number that peaks at 60 or 70 during building season.

"I have been absolutely blessed," he said. "Blessed might be a little romantic for your readers, but along the road I've been extremely blessed — with the clients and all the architects I've worked with."

MacCurrach credited a great deal of his success to his wife LeAnn, who runs the office, and his three primary job superintendents, Chris Lepanto, Doug Seldon and Jeff Tourgeau. Lepanto, who is in his 9th year with the firm, is "my foremost 'A' man," MacCurrach said.

And his dad? "I called my father my gray-haired advisor," MacCurrach said.

Without that initial exposure to golf, where would he be?

"When people ask me why or how I came to be, I say it's the only thing I've ever done and the only thing I've ever known, and I'd be lost if I ever had to do something else,"