

Quality Grassing takes home Best Small Builder honors

By MARK LESLIE

LITHIA, Fla. — Question: Which builder jumped into new golf course construction in both Hemispheres at once?

Answer: The same firm that has been named Best Small Golf Course Builder for 1997 — Quality Grassing & Services, Inc.

Golf Course News' named Quality Grassing its second annual Small Builder award-winner after an extensive nomination and survey process that involved voting from developers, architects and superintendents of projects built in 1997 by the Florida firm. Quality Grassing won the honor with an extraordinary 96.973 rating out of a possible 100.

GCN Publisher Charles von Brecht announced the selection and added that the first-ever Honorable Mention Award for Small Builder of the Year will be given to Turf Drain, Inc. of Novi, Mich. Last year's Best Small Builder, MacCurrach Golf, finished third. The awards will be presented during the annual banquet of the Golf Course Builders Association of America in Anaheim, Calif., Feb. 6.

"This is a wonderful award, but I deserve none of the credit. My people do," said President Howard Barnes, co-owner with J.W. Thomas. "We hire good people, pay them well with good benefits and keep them. We treat them like family. The first person I ever hired still works for us, managing one of our grass turf farms."

The company's name has actually been misleading in the last decade. Although it started in 1983 as an agricultural contractor specializing in grassing, the firm began renovating golf courses in 1985. Then,

in 1992, golf course architect Steve Smyers asked Barnes to build a golf course in Australia. It came at the same time the company was awarded the contract to build the Lloyd Clifton-designed West Chase Golf Course in Tampa.

Since then, Quality Grassing's star has been on the rise.



"Actually, word of mouth has been the main factor [in the success]," said General Manager Bobby Price. "We have a very good reputation, and the industry is starting to get to know who we are. In the past when people heard our name they assumed we were a sodding or seeding company. Now we have two or three courses under our belt; the architects are happy with our work; the ease with which we complete the projects is becoming known; and the word is spreading like wildfire."

Indeed, in 1997 Quality Grassing completed work on several major renovations and two 18-hole golf courses — Worthington Manor in Poolesville, Md., and Elks Run Golf Course in Richmond, Va. The results?

Joseph G. Harrison Jr., a board member at Ocean City Golf & Yacht Club, said of Quality Grassing's work on the Ocean City, Md., course's complete redesign and reconstruction: "Given a project of this scope, we anticipated that there would be issues which would come up during the course of construction and would need to be resolved. On every occasion they were resolved amicably, rapidly and to our complete satisfaction."

New course or renovation, the golf work is all satisfying, said Barnes. "We operate a stabilization and sod division. But this



Quality Grassing & Services, Inc. carried out the Lester George design at Ocean City Golf & Yacht Club in Berlin, Md.

is a lot more rewarding. It's a different type of people, highly qualified people, people who don't feel 'get it done at the cheapest price,' but rather 'get it done right.' They want quality and they will sacrifice the cost to get it. Whereas in road work they go with cheapest and don't worry about quality."

It has been satisfying financially as well. Quality Grassing did \$14 million in business in 1997, and Barnes projects \$20 million or more in 1998.

Barnes, a member of the Florida Turfgrass Association board of directors and various committees, puts major emphasis on his employees paying close attention to the job at hand.

Said Price: "On golf courses, you've got to be able to understand what the architect envisions and do that out on the field. We have quality shapers and project managers who have that ability and foresight. So the architect doesn't have to return time after time to correct it. That

makes their job a lot easier, and it makes the project move a lot faster."

Architects agree.

"I can't imagine working with a better firm," said Lester George of Richmond, Va., who teamed with Quality Grassing on four projects last year. "Everything they do is professional, with courteous response and at very high speed. They are the kind of contractor who makes architects look good."

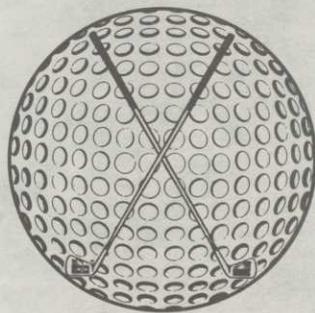
"They did not hesitate to go 'above and beyond' the letter of the contract to please me and the client," agreed course designer Brian Ault of Ault, Clark & Associates in Kensington, Md., who worked with the builder on Worthington Manor Golf Course. "They did a terrific job! I hope they do another one of our projects next year."

The quality work, Price said, is "a team approach." When a new supervisor comes aboard, he oversees one project. He is

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Hurdzan on builders

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national organization, the Golf Course Builders Association of America (GCBA), has greatly contributed to the growth of golf and is celebrating its 25th anniversary.

Having established what they are, we should examine who they are and what they do to earn the

title of hero. Not many firms in the world do only golf course construction. One reason is because the scope of the work is so varied and complex that few companies can organize, equip and train people to handle the work. Not only must the golf course builder be an expert in construction, he must be an astute busi-

ness person to comply with all of the legalities attendant to construction.

Although more courses are being built than 10 years ago, the competition during bidding can be fierce, requiring small profit margins. Once selected, the builder must execute all this work in a tight timeframe, hoping that delays and forced overtime wages will not eat up all the profit. Most contractors find

such bidding and working conditions intolerable and thus they do not enter golf course construction, or they last a very short time.

Further, since golf course projects are so scattered it means that these men and women must be apart from their families for long periods, or develop an almost nomadic family experience.

The obvious question is, why do they persist in golf course

construction? The answer is that these people are true artisans who find reward and take pride in the work they do. To remain in this business and produce high-quality golf courses requires that a builder put a bit of himself or herself into every roll, every mound, every green, every feature. They are creating as they construct and they feel good about each day's work.

But if golf course construction is so creative, what is the function of the golf course architect? The architect plans at a macro-scale and is concerned with about 150 or 200 acres or more at a contour interval of perhaps one or 2 feet. The architect must plan the relationship or elements on a site that may not allow intensive personal inspection, or that have problems not clearly discernible.

On the other hand, the builder works at the microscale of perhaps 1/4 of an acre at a time and contour changes of inches on a site that has been completely cleared. The architect may draw detailed features at a scale of 1 inch equals 10 feet, but the builder must construct that feature at 1 inch equals 1 inch.

No matter how sophisticated the plans are drawn, there must always be field interpretation of those drawings; and it is this ability that separates the great builders from the wannabes. This ability is learned from technical training, repeated experiences, and years of honest constructive criticism. But it is not solely of intellect, for the great contractor has a superb imagination, reliable intuition and good eye-to-hand coordination.

Any dummy can be taught to run a bulldozer, but a precious few can develop the skill to shape an awesome green complex.

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