

Turf Drain's high marks earn first-ever Honorable Mention Award

By MARK LESLIE

NOVI, Mich. — When Geoffrey Corlett and wife Susan started Turf Drain Inc. in 1987 with one trencher, a tractor and two employees, yes, they envisioned success. It was in their marketing plan. Today, it is in their portfolio.

Turf Drain did not win Small Builder of the Year honors, but because it obtained such substantial marks from its clients, Golf Course News will present the firm a first-ever award for Honorable Mention.

"We just could not overlook Turf Drain's high achievement and extraordinary ratings from the architects, developers and superintendents they worked with," said GCN Publisher Charles von Brecht, who will present the honor at the Golf Course Builders Association of America's annual banquet on Feb. 6 in Anaheim, Calif. "We may never do this again. But we could not avoid it this year."

Indeed, while Quality Grassing & Services won the top award with a 96.973 rating out of a possible 100, Turf Drain came in at 96.477.

"We hope and work very hard for success," said Corlett, whose firm celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. "It's in our mission statement: Satisfy your clients, perform quality work and maintain high morale within the staff."

Yet, success in the world of golf course renovation was not the kind the Corletts foresaw when they started Turf Drain in Guelph, Ontario, as an agricultural drainage firm in 1986. Corlett possessed a landscape architecture degree from Ryerson College in Toronto and, in 1985, earned an agricultural engineering degree from the University of Guelph.

By happenstance, Turf Drain's entrance into golf came while the firm was doing a drainage project on a farm.

"The golf course next door called us up to come over and do some drainage," Corlett said. "At the time we had a D-9 with a plow on the back. So we brought over a D-9 dozer, which was a 47-ton machine and far too heavy for a golf course. After that, we decided golf course work was a neat thing to do, so we built our own trenchers. They are laser-equipped, so all grading is done with laser control. We became a specialist in golf course drainage because no one else in that day used laser technology that didn't do damage to the golf course."

In 1991, when Canada's economy hit a recession, the Corletts formed Turf Drain, Inc. in Novi, which is separate from the Guelph operation.

And today, Turf Drain does no new course construction, just renovation projects. Just 5 percent of the work is stand-alone drainage projects,

Corlett said.

And clients agree: Turf Drain does renovations well.

Jim Wyllie, turf and management consultant who worked with York Downs Golf and Country Club in Unionville, Ontario,



plus! The members are

and its reconstruction of bunkers on its 27-hole layout, said in an unsolicited comment: "This was a first-class project from start to finish. They did what they said they would do —

thrilled."

"We have had three different contractors of the past few years and Turf Drain is by far the best. They were fair in pricing and worked with me as the superintendent," said Ed Hock, superintendent at Walnut Creek Country Club in

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PREVENT
GRUBS.
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IT'S NOT EVEN
AN ISSUE.

By MICHAEL HURDZAN

Builders are the heroes of projects

There is a tendency for people to attempt to isolate the one person who seems the most responsible for something of note. Perhaps it is because we wish to have a solitary figure to focus on, for admittedly, it is much easier to praise a general than all the soldiers of his army, a conductor instead of the orchestra, or the quarterback instead of the team. Although we

know better, we sometimes forget that the person being singled out is tall only because he stands on the shoulders of people who helped him or her achieve their distinction. The world is filled with such unacknowledged people, whether it be the families who make personal sacrifices to permit our hero or hero-

ine to rise, or the friends, associates, or subordinates who directly assist the effort. In the field of golf course development, there is a tendency to focus on the architect instead of the unsung artist, namely the golf course contractor.

In fact, the terms "contractor" or "builder" do not do these men

and women justice, for they are artisans in the strictest sense. Their tools may be bulldozers, earthmovers and tractors, but their medium is the earth and the best of these craftsman can mold the landscape to produce earth sculptures we call tees, greens, mounds and bunkers. They understand the subtleties

of nature, landforms and natural processes, and strive to blend the necessary artificiality of golf features imperceptibly into the surrounding environment.

In addition, these people know that fine turf must be grown and maintained on the soils and slopes they leave, so much attention is given to agronomic matters such as topsoil, drainage, seedbeds, fertilizers and seed or stolons.

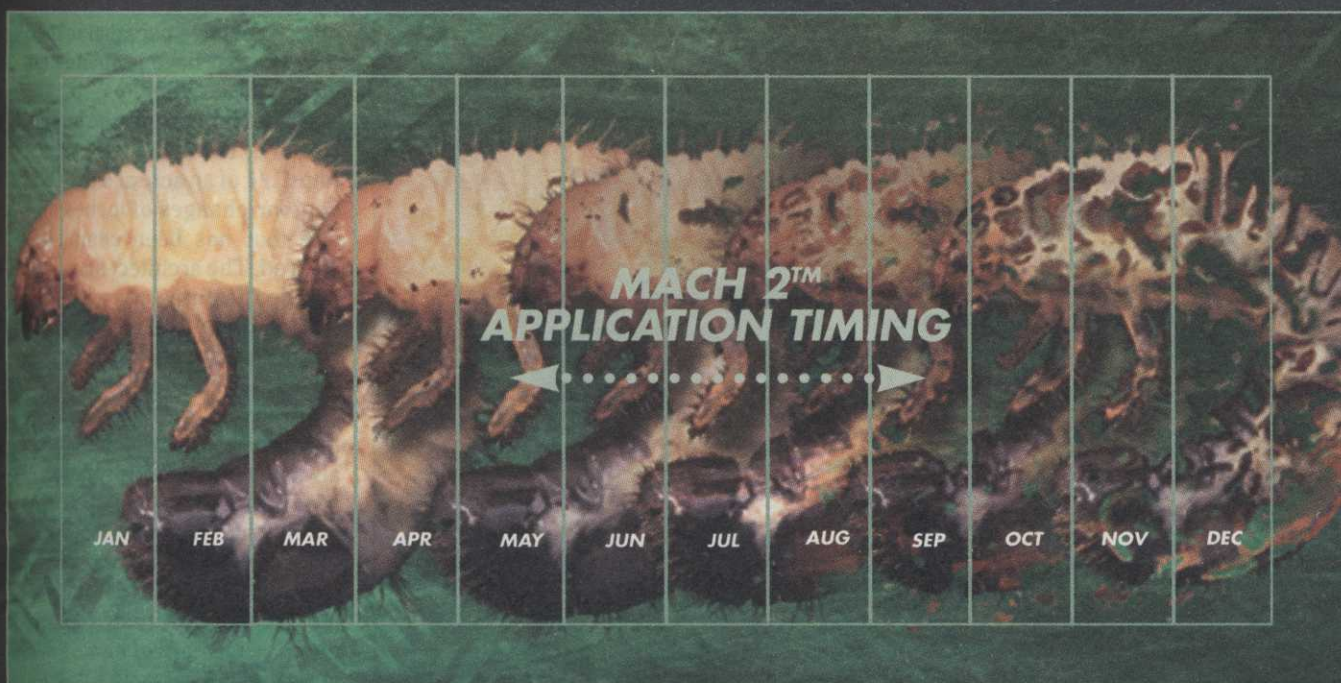
They work against unpredictable weather, unforeseen geological features, and competing weeds and animals to meet an unforgiving ideal planting time. Besides their natural opponents, there are delays caused by humans such as unresponsive suppliers, vandalism, or strikes by other trades or unions.

Their equipment and crews are specialized for golf course construction and thus can achieve a naturalness of contours that is uncharacteristic of road and/or sewer contractors.

The convention is to call these artisans "contractors," and so I shall, but in your mind there should be a clear distinction between contractors and golf course builders. Actually, a better name is "builders." Their

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South Lyon, Mich.

"Actually, they finished under budget on our course," said Ron Foote, superintendent at Michigan State University. "That enabled us to make more improvements on other sections of the course."

"Turf Drain is quality, quick, clean, courteous, and professional with owner and architect relationships," added course architect Bruce Matthews III, whose Design 3, Inc., of East Lansing has worked on five projects with the contractor.

"We're unique. What we do and all we've ever done is golf course remodeling," Corlett said. "Mostly they are private clubs, usually between 70 and 100 years old."

Key to Corlett's plans is maintaining control of growth. The firm did 48 projects in 1995, 56 in 1996 and 60 in 1997. "We're endeavoring to reduce that number but do larger projects," he said. "That will control growth. Once we hit a 20-percent increase, we stop."

From the single trencher and lone tractor of 1988, Turf Drain's stockpile stands at more than 250 pieces of equipment.

That's enough to keep busy 26 full-time salaried and 65 full-time seasonal personnel on projects from the Great Lakes Region to the Eastern Seaboard.