

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 cowhand 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 fair 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 time building waterproof decks in Seattle, Niebur received a life-changing call from his father, Mark.

"Dad 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-

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Joe Niebur



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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 was 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 stone 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.



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tacting colleagues, and helped land Niebur a job as a shaper with Greenscape.

"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.

"I admire him more than anyone else in the golf construction business. The way he ran the show and treated me..."

After three years with Wadsworth, Niebur joined golf course builder Stan Aldridge in Lake Orion, Mich., and they created Aldridge-Niebur in 1986. They remained partners until 1991 when Niebur went on his own.

Always having an entrepreneurial spirit, Niebur enjoys running his 150-person company, which swells to 250 in the summertime.

"The thing I like is, every day is a

different day," he said. "You wake up and you're going to be working in New Jersey or Southern California. Plus, we're building something people will enjoy for many, many years. And whenever you take people there, it's fun. The owners really appreciate the product. And there's a lot of satisfaction in that. They end up thinking we're the greatest guys in the world. Ten years later they treat you like you're an owner."

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 enjoy seeing the employees advance or 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 course is a part of them. Together, we make sure quality comes before profit."

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

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Furness

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be taught," he said, "but they were really good about letting shapers use our creativity. I discovered my creativity working with the Dyes. And the fact we were able to be creative in the field with Pete has reflected in our work with other people. It's helpful on everything we do."

When Furness left Dye Design in 1991 he was supervising multiple jobs in the Pacific Rim. Now, America, and in particular Michigan, is his stage.

And in 1998 Furness Golf Construction built the ballyhooed Arthur Hills-designed trio Bay Harbor (Mich.) Golf Club, Fieldstone Golf Club in the city of Auburn Hills and Red Hawk Golf Club in East Tawas.

One of the company's current projects is the much-anticipated, Rick Smith-designed Arcadia Bluffs standing high above Lake Michigan. An agronomic consultant working on that project said of Furness Golf Construction: "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 comforting fact."

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 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

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GOLF COURSE NEWS



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Niebur

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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.

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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 someone the caliber of his brother and Bohn and partly because he would not be able to give each project the per-

sonal 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 competi-

tion 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, GCBA [Golf Course

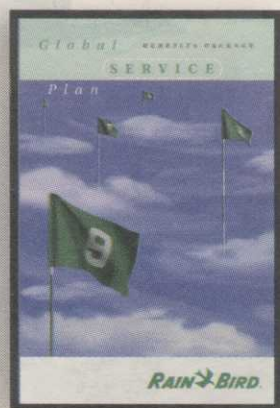
Builders Association of America], ASGCA [American Society of Golf Course Architects], etc. people now realize that, in the long run, it's as cheap to hire a professional as it is to do it yourself and then hire a professional to come in and do it right a second time."

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



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Furness/ Fieldstone

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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.