

## 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. MacCurrah 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-

Continued on page 48



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.

