

BEST SMALL BUILDER • FURNESS GOLF CONSTRUCTION



The par-3 2nd at Fieldstone Golf Club, public access track in Auburn Hills, Mich. Art Hills drew it up, Furness made the rest happen. Opened in July, 1998, the course saw 15,000 rounds since.

## The industry agrees, Furness Golf Construction near-perfect

By MARK LESLIE

CHARLEVOIX, Mich. — Fourteen years ago Tim Furness stood with a rake in his hand seeding a golf course in Asia. On Feb. 12 he will stand to receive a plaque declaring his company the Best Golf Course Small Builder of the Year for 1998.

Some might have guessed this about Furness, since he was, one, driving tractors on the family farm in Elkton at the age of 5 and, two, swinging a golf club at the age of 6.

Furness himself said: "When I started my company I knew we had the talent and ability to build great golf courses. Did I think I would be Small Builder of the Year? That would have been in my wildest dreams. But the last couple years, certain people — like Art Hills, who's probably the most frank guy you'll ever meet — have been praising us and we started to think, 'Maybe we are good.'"

Indeed, Furness Golf Construction, Inc. received near-perfect ranking from the developers, architects and superintendents on the three projects it completed in 1998. The principals were queried on such areas as meeting deadlines and budget, sufficient personnel and equipment, quality of work, and project supervisor. Of a possible score of 80, Furness finished at 79.2.

Furness Golf Construction will receive the *Golf Course News*-sponsored award in Orlando, Fla., at the banquet of the Golf Course Builders Association of America. The annual award was determined following a survey of architects, developers and superintendents involved in projects completed in 1998 by the 27 builders who were nominated. The Small Builder Award is chosen among companies that built fewer than four 18-hole golf courses during the year.

Furness was followed in the survey by Turf Drain Inc. of Novi, Mich., with a score of 78.17, and Quality Grassing & Services, Inc. of Lithia, Fla., at 77.48. In 1997, Quality Grassing won the award, followed by Turf Drain.

Just seven years ago, Tim Furness and brother Chris formed the company, rented an 850 John Deere bulldozer and an 862 John Deere scraper, and shaped a nine-hole golf course for an old friend.

"It was just the two of us," Tim recalled. Now there are 60 employees.

A 1984 Michigan State University (MSU) turfgrass graduate, Tim Furness attributes his success to his seven years working under Perry and Pete Dye in Asia and to his current crew, especially brother Chris, vice president of the company, and Senior Project Manager Pete Bohn.

"If I had to say who would I owe the most, it's Perry Dye," said Furness, who Dye hired right out of MSU and put to work in Japan. "He is the one who had faith in me and put a lot of responsibility on me as a very young man. He gave me confidence and taught me a lot."

From Pete Dye, Perry's father, Furness learned creativity, he said. "Creativity can't

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### Fieldstone, Furness fail to disappoint

AUBURN HILLS — Designer Arthur Hills and Furness Golf Construction have added another fine course to Michigan's ever-expanding golf stable. Fieldstone Golf Club opened for business in July 1998 and has met with rave reviews according to director of golf, Gordon Marion. "We had 15,000 rounds in 1998 and we hit a 99% satisfaction rate on the layout and conditions."

The 18-hole public layout is owned by the City of Auburn Hills and sits on 200 acres of diverse terrain that features meadows, wetlands, mature wooded areas, meandering streams and elevation changes.

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## Niebur

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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

## 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.

## Furness

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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.