

PUSHING DIRT

BY PAT JONES

Course Crafters is defying the odds in the depressed construction business by staying true to its roots in the renovation market

At a time when conventional wisdom holds that the golf course construction market is in the tank, Bob Pinson admits, rather sheepishly, his company is having its best year ever and 2009 looks even better.

His company, Course Crafters, found a niche – renovating existing courses – 16 years ago and stuck with it. Now, with reconstruction, remodeling and restoration dominating the market, Pinson and his staff are reaping the rewards of years spent doing small projects well, building relationships with the right people and growing a reputation as a go-to contractor for an increasing number of high-profile jobs.

Pinson grew up on a family farm northeast of Atlanta. The son of a butcher and a stay-at-home mom who raised chickens, he toiled away in his dad's meat shop and in his mom's chicken coops and, consequently, was glad to get out of little Gainesville for a while and head to the University of Georgia to study physical education.

He quickly decided a career as a PE teacher wasn't for him – although his lifelong love of sports later led him into high school and college officiating – so he took a job out of school in distribution warehousing. After 10 years of that, his roots in farming drew him back to the land. This time, he was pushing dirt with a bulldozer instead of tilling and seeding cotton into it. Initially, he did grading work on subdivisions, roads and dams, but he came across a report from the USGA Green Section in the early 1990s that

indicated there was a big demand for folks like him to handle smaller golf course construction projects in the Southeast. Thus, a golf course construction company was born.

A decade and a half and about 130 projects later, Pinson and his staff are in demand as facilities decide to lengthen, upgrade and improve their courses. He discusses the secret to his success, how to cure what ails the golf market and what he misses most about the early days of starting a course building company.

How did you enter the golf business?

I became interested in golf in the early '90s when I read a USGA report about how much superintendents did on their own. Renovation was booming, and there weren't many guys doing small jobs. The USGA said there was about \$15 million in small jobs being done annually, and I figured if I could get a million or two of that, it'd be cool. I started calling on superintendents and, for the first five years, it was a tee here and a bunker job there.

I got to know architects such as Arthur Davis, John LaFoy, Tom Marzolf and Bob Cupp, and they gave me a few jobs. They took a chance on me, and the business grew. The first job on my own was at Peachtree Golf Club in Atlanta building a dam so they could have their own water source. I started hiring former superintendents who had construction experience. It helped, because we could talk to the client on





Despite the decline of the golf course construction market, Bob Pinson's company, Course Crafters, is having its best year ever. Pinson is the elected president of the Golf Course Builders Association of America. Photo: McNeese Fitzgerald Associates

Bob Pinson

their level. We focused on renovation and, as a result, it's been more than 90 percent of our work for more than 16 years.

I'm not as hands-on as I used to be, but the clients know exactly who to call when they have a problem. We have the best employees in the world. That reputation has given us a niche.

Which projects are you most proud of?

We've worked at more than 130 courses. Some of those jobs were just tees and bunkers, some were renovations, and a few were new construction. We did a big renovation at Southern Hills (in Tulsa, Okla.) that was tremendous. We also did a new course in Gallatin, Tenn., called Foxland Golf Course.

I'm proud of all of them. Obviously, I'm proud that we do quite a bit of work at Augusta National. People trust us with their golf courses. I can't think of a course I can't go back to and the people aren't happy to see us.

What have you learned about working with superintendents?

Superintendents are cool guys who understand what the deal is. Many times when we go into a renovation, the members have strong feelings about the course. You have to spend a lot of time with that superintendent and help him answer the questions he's getting bombarded with. You don't want anybody to get fired. We try to support the superintendent because we understand what he's going through.

I refereed high school football and college baseball for years. That experience helped me be the referee on these jobs. When things get touchy, that's when I try to call everybody together in a huddle and make sure they know the rules. You have to speak up and say, "Look, no matter how well you sold this project, it's not going to be perfect. Don't blame the superintendent. He's just doing the best he can." That might be what I'm best at these days because the

guys won't let me run equipment anymore.

Why do clients select your company instead of others? How do you set yourself apart?


Look at our job list. We have a bunch of strong courses, and they're willing to recommend us. The biggest strength we have is sitting down and telling them the black-and-white truth.

We've had to submit competitive bids on more stuff in the past few years than in the previous 10. The big guys who specialize in new course construction have fallen back into renovation because it's remained strong. The architects also have gotten more competitive. They've started selling harder on these jobs as well, and part of that is price pressure. So, a lot more jobs involve less negotiation and more bid preparation. We're not always the least expensive, but folks still hire us anyway because of the reputation we have. We still do quality work even if the margin gets lower. That's important.

StaLok[®] BUNKER LINER Spend More Time on the Green

Are bunkers stealing your time? Forget what you know about liners. Natural soil is new and improved. Let's talk at the Golf Industry Show.

Advancing the Evolution of Soil

 26 Years Over 100,000 Projects 36 Countries www.StabilizerSolutions.com 800.336.2468 602.225.5900

www.golfcourseindustry.com/readerservice - #20

It's the way I was raised. You do what you say you're going to do even if you're losing money.

What was the biggest mistake you made when assessing a project and how did you fix it?

We're big enough to do one or two big jobs and about three smaller jobs a year. Years ago, you'd have work scheduled a year in advance solidly. Nowadays, it's a little different. During the past three or four years, we took some jobs that we shouldn't have. We priced them too low because we were concerned about keeping the pipeline full. But, with weather, choices about equipment, financing, etc., you just can't figure everything. No matter how badly you need the work, you still have to price it the same way. That's why we hate change orders. Why not price the job right when you know they're going to add a bunch of stuff later?

What are the strengths and weaknesses you encounter with on-site superintendents during a remodel?

Probably their ability when it comes to scheduling. Our expectations, given the construction level required for preparation, removal of irrigation heads, etc., need to be clearly agreed on in the schedule. We quiz them about what they want to check off – things such as drainage, fine grading, etc. A lot depends on whether they have that owner's rep job. If they want to check things, they have to do it on our schedule, not theirs. That's just the nature of the beast.

Who makes choices about materials?

If I'm going to guarantee the work, we're using my materials. If it's not spec'ed, I'll ask the superintendent who he wants to use. We want them to make those decisions because that guy's going to be there after we leave and will have to live with the consequences.

Will the golf construction market eventually rebound?

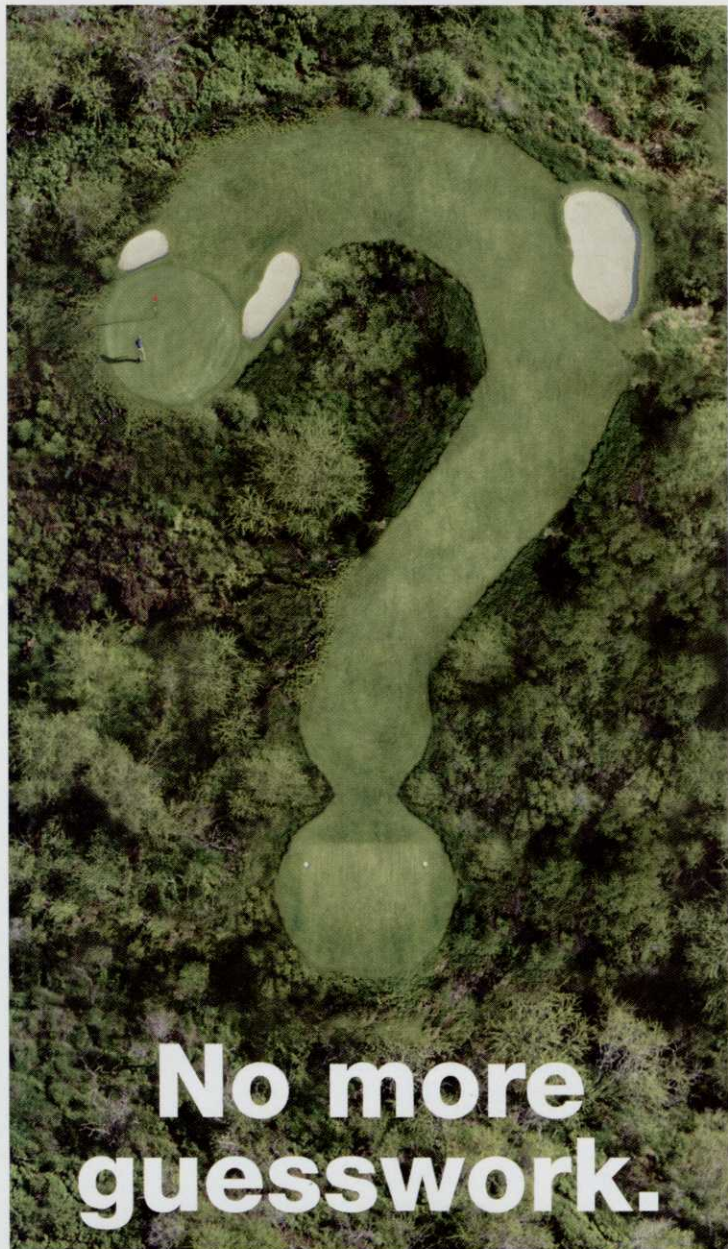
I've been scratching my head about that lately. We might have as good a year as we've ever had this year, and next year looks really good, too. I'm blessed. Most clubs aren't going to stop improving their courses. They have to compete or fix what's been done wrong previously.

What's your advice for a young person, or even a superintendent, who wants to get into the building business?

You have to be a different kind of person for this business ... a nomad to some degree. Some of my guys have families, and some don't. It seems to work OK for most of the folks with families. It's a little easier because we're regional to some extent. Guys try to get home every two or three weeks, but, you're basically in a hotel for three to eight months. It gets monotonous. But, if you like playing in the dirt, there's nothing better than watching a piece of ground transform into a golf course.

Final thoughts?

I love what I do. It's the most fun job I've ever had. You're always worried about a dozer breaking down or making payroll or whatever, but I couldn't have chosen anything more satisfying than this. Until I figure out I can't do it anymore, I'm going to keep going. The only thing I miss is the equipment operation part – it's fun to be out there by yourself with no phone, no e-mail and the sound of those big engines in your ears, creating something special. **GCI**



No more guesswork.

Irrigating fairways, greens and tee boxes requires real intelligence and the world's most advanced soil moisture technology.

GolfLinx water management systems gives you the tools to understand the turf environment right through the soil profile.

No other soil moisture probe provides data at every 2 inch increment to a depth of 12 inches. GolfLinx gives you control to promote healthy turf while reducing water and energy consumption.

Competition level golf courses use GolfLinx to deliver these benefits while improving playability and fine tuning greens.

A modular, no maintenance design and an open and common platform enables plug and play connectivity. A growing distributor network means there are GolfLinx dealers located across the United States – and support is just a phone call away.

GolfLinx – Intelligence in every drop

For more information go to www.golflinx.net or call (714) 966 1975



080501