



# Mechanics and Business Mix Well for Him

By Lori Ward Bocher

Dick Reinders has always liked to tinker with mechanical devices. It's evident in his career path, his business achievements and even his hobbies.

As a part owner of Reinders, a family-owned corporation, Dick heads up the irrigation division. He also owns and manages Watertronics, a company that split off from Reinders a year ago.

As a high school graduate, Dick had no firm plans of joining the family business which primarily served the needs of farmers at that time. "I had a life-long love of automobiles," he recalls. "In 1955 I really wasn't cut out to get a four-year degree in agribusiness at Wisconsin and go into the family feed manufacturing business. So I took off and got accepted at the General Motors Institute in Flint, Michigan. I took a composite course of engineering and management that got me out in 1958.

"My aspiration was to become an automobile dealer," he continues. "I didn't want to spend the rest of my life designing hubcaps behind a drawing board. I thought it was more glamorous to be a dealer."

After working a year as a service manager and Corvette sales specialist, his plans were interrupted by the military. When his tour of duty was finished in 1960, he immediately married. "I walked out of the military and down the aisle," he recalls.

Dick's brother, Bob, who was already part of the Reinders family business, had just taken on a franchise for Jacobsen golf course equipment and other power lawn equipment. (Reinders switched to a Toro distributorship in 1971.) "He needed somebody with an engineering and mechanical background to help him with the business," Dick remembers. "He kind of lured me away from the automobile business."

Soon after that, they acquired an



Dick Reinders

irrigation franchise for Rainbird and Nelson sprinkling equipment. "We really didn't have much of a customer base, so I set about trying to get the irrigation aspect of the business going," Dick points out. From that point on, Dick specialized in the irrigation division while Bob stayed with the turf equipment division.

He started with residential lawn sprinkler applications, and then had

some small commercial jobs. "There weren't many sprinkler contractors around at the time so we had to create our own market," Dick recalls.

The first golf course irrigation job came in 1966 at Portage Country Club. "It was also my introduction into putting together a pump system for a golf course," Dick remembers. "We managed to get the installation in and learned through trial and error. Sometimes on your first couple of jobs you pay for your education. In this case, we did. But the project got in and it worked." Soon there were more golf course jobs for the Reinders irrigation division which was a supplier of equipment as well as a contractor and designer. (It no longer serves as a contractor.) "And we continued to build our own pump sets for these various applications," Dick adds.

This is where the mechanical side of Dick really shines through. He was bound and determined to develop a better pump station for automatic golf course irrigation.

"As we were installing automatic irrigation systems, I saw the need to create some control schemes that

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were more reliable," he points out. "The pressure tank became involved. When pressure dropped, a switch would turn on the first pump. And if pressure continued to drop, the switch would turn on a second pump.

"But when these pumps would turn on and off, we would see surges going out through the pipeline," he continues. "And some of these surges were severe enough that we'd see cracked pipe or broken sprinklers.

"There were some hydraulic regulating valves on the market that were supposed to control that," Dick explains. "But if the water running through the valves wasn't perfectly clear, the first thing that would plug were the control pilots. And then the valves wouldn't do their job and you'd still have the same problems.

"In my quest for trying to build a better pump system, I came upon a motorized electric valve that was being pioneered," he continues. "But it didn't work very well. If the pressure got too high, it would close. And if the pressure got too low, it would open back up—kind of hunted back and forth. It was like having a cruise control on your car that went up and down 5 miles per hour as you drove along.

"One season I hired some young engineering students from Milwaukee School of Engineering to work as service technicians," Dick explains. "I said to them, 'This valve would really be a godsend to the golf course pump station if we could control it and get it to work smoothly without hunting up and down.'

"So we went to work on it, and pretty soon they had an idea for how to control it by sensing the pressure and putting some time delays into it and using what was now just starting to evolve in the electronics industry—a programmable logic controller," Dick says. "So we started to build a little better pump station.

"As the computer became the central control for golf course irrigation systems, our pump stations were better able to work with that computer," Dick continues. "If the computer was set to turn on 800 gallons a minute at 8 o'clock at night, our pump station controls could now react a little quicker. Instead of turning on one pump and waiting to see if that was enough, it could turn on two or three pumps promptly to respond to the demand.

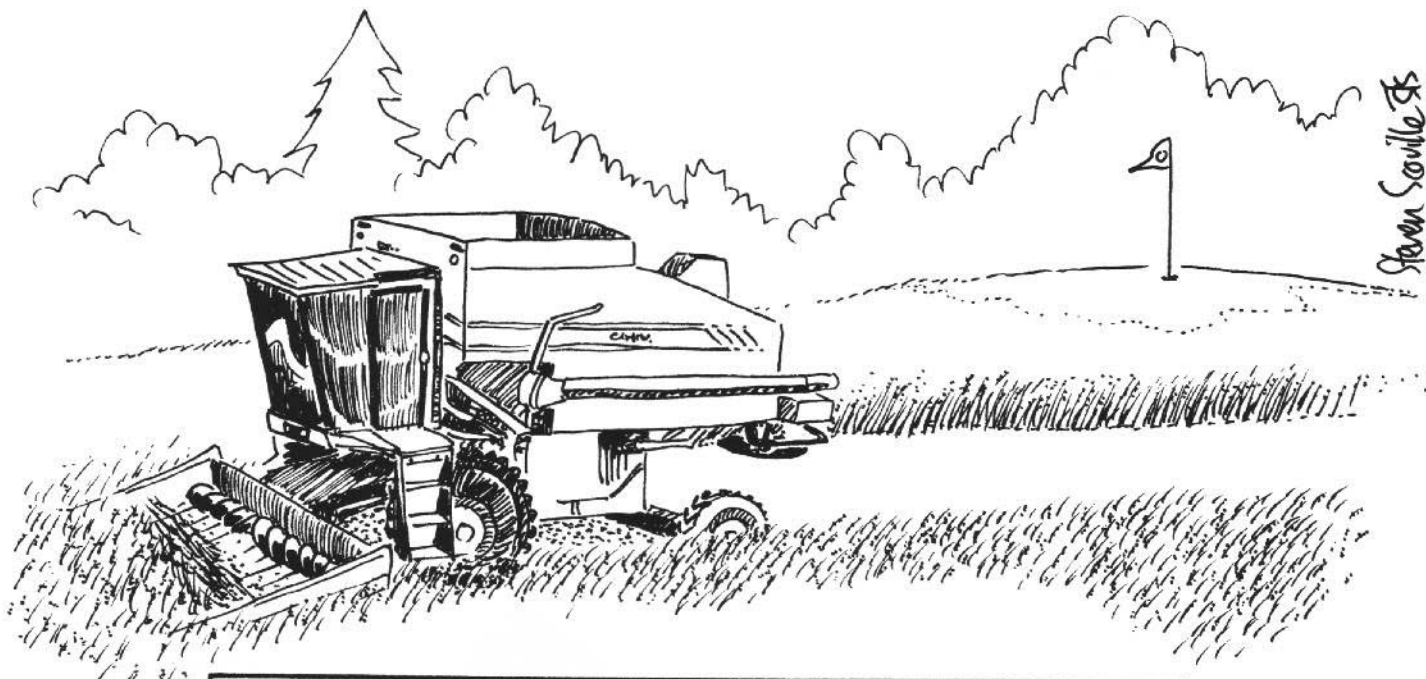
"As we became more sophisticated in what we were doing, we thought

we could probably market pump stations beyond our traditional Wisconsin territory," Dick explains. "So in 1987 we coined the name 'Watertronics' and started a separate division of Reinders.

"Over the years we saw Watertronics grow as part of our irrigation division," Dick points out. "It was becoming so specialized and our market was both national and international. In 1995 Watertronics was separated from Reinders. I wanted Watertronics to have the ability to bring in some key employees as stockholders, which our family corporation didn't allow for.

"Watertronics now has golf course pump stations from Cape Cod through Hawaii, and in Guam, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Viet Nam and Korea," Dick proudly points out. "We also have some stations in South America, the Caribbean and Canada, but none in Europe where there are too many trade tariffs and compliance requirements in Common Market countries for a small U.S. manufacturer to overcome."

In addition to golf course pump stations, Watertronics builds a line of compact pump stations for sports fields, office parks and housing pro-



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jects. It also builds some non-irrigation pump stations for hotels, high-rise buildings and waste water plants.

The company employs 35 people to assemble the stations. "Our stations are kind of a composite," Dick explains. "We buy our pumps and motors. We build our electronic control panels from various components. We're classified as a UL508 shop. We fabricate the steel components, blast them, paint them, and assemble the unit as a complete device that's skid mounted and can be moved by truck and crane to a pump house location, set on site and started up."

Prior to delivery, each unit is fully flow tested in-house, something Watertronics' competitors can't do in-house, Dick adds.

The Watertronics story is just one example of how Reinders has evolved over the years to constantly meet the needs of the marketplace. "It's kind of like bumper cars," Dick says of the company's ability to change with the times. "If you run into the wall, you bounce off and seek a different direction. Not that recklessly. But, in order to survive in business today, you have to look where there is a niche in which you can fill a need.

"And you need to be very conscious of after-market service," he continues. "You can't satisfy everybody all of the time. But if you focus on the fact that you're not going to make just a one-time sale, you can survive by taking good care of that customer with follow-through service. Then you can retain that customer for repeat service and sales.

"Our turf equipment and irrigation businesses in Wisconsin serve a very close-knit group of people," Dick continues. "If we do a bad job, the word spreads fast. If we do a good job, I

think the word also spreads. We try to respond to our customers' needs and fulfill those needs."

Based on this philosophy, the Reinders story is truly an American business success story. The family-owned corporation has continually changed over the years to meet the needs of the marketplace—and also the needs of the family.

Dick and his brother, Bob, who is president and oversees the turf equipment division, are the fourth generation of Reinders involved with the family corporation. They each have three children, representing the fifth generation, who are now active in the company. And their 90-year-old father, Roland, is still semi-active in the business.

"Most family businesses fall apart at about the third generation," Dick believes. "Part of the secret of keeping a family owned business operating is to give each family member a certain area of responsibility and let them develop it.

"We're not crossing paths. And yet we still have our monthly family meetings, which are like mini board of directors meetings, to discuss how each area is doing and how we can support one another to make the business grow further," he adds.

Golf course superintendents are most familiar with the turf equipment division and irrigation division of Reinders. But the company also manufactures pigeon feed and wild bird feed. And it runs an Elm Grove retail operation, Reinders Nature Store, that sells grass seed and environmentally friendly fertilizers and pesticide controls, along with pet and bird feeding supplies.

Reinders distributes salt for water softeners, food production, and ice

control. "That business was developed, and is very crucial to our operation, because it produces revenue in the winter when our golf course equipment and irrigation businesses are sleeping, so to speak," Dick explains. "We tried to balance out our seasonal businesses."

Reinders also has a consumer power equipment division that sells lawn mowers, lawn tractors, all-terrain vehicles, snow mobiles and watercraft.

"In support of all of this we have two parts and service departments—one for motor-driven equipment and the other for irrigation equipment," Dick adds. "And we have branch locations in Appleton, Madison and Stevens Point in addition to our home office in Elm Grove."

The fifth generation is involved in many ways. Dick's son, Craig, is the golf irrigation manager. Another son, Joel, handles aerator sales and specialty products under the irrigation division. His daughter, Laurie, manages Reinders Nature Store. Dick's son, Rick, is not at Reinders, but he is the international sales manager at Watertronics.

"My second daughter, Shelly, got away from me and works for Wrangler Jeans in marketing and advertising," Dick adds.

Bob's daughter, Mary Reinders Quick, manages the salt/feed division. Another daughter, Ann, manages the Madison branch. And his son, Mark, oversees branch locations and the company's real estate and expansion projects.

The Reinders business hasn't always had this diversified profile. It began as an Elm Grove general store owned by Dick's great grandmother,

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Margaret Reitter, way back in 1866. "My grandfather happened to patronize that store and met her daughter, married her, and became part of the business," Dick explains.

"He changed the name to John Reinders and Son in 1886. John had a number of sons and sons-in-law who came into the business. They branched out into feed manufacturing, farm implements, building supplies, a grocery store, a hardware store, and so forth," Dick continues.

Dick's father, Roland, and uncle, George, were involved in the feed manufacturing and farm implement end of the business. They also sold coal for heating purposes, and later, fuel oil.

"After World War II they started to see subdivisions occurring on the western edges of Milwaukee," Dick recalls. "This was in the early 50's when my brother, Bob, was starting to get involved with the business. He could see the hand writing on the wall. Farms were disappearing. But subdivisions were replacing

them, and the people in them would need different supplies—garden supplies, fertilizers, lawn mowing equipment, and so forth.

"So we started the transition from strictly a farm supply store into one that handled what the new suburbanites would need," Dick adds. It's also the time Bob started the turf equipment division of Reinders, and soon after, Dick joined him.

"Where are we going in the future?" Dick asks. "I think we will be looking for some other branch locations that may better serve our area of responsibility for the suppliers that we represent. And we may look for other product lines that serve the turfgrass industry and fit in with the products that we sell now."

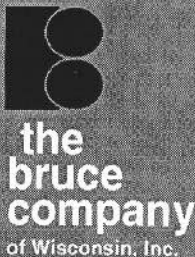
Although he has been involved with the golf industry for all of his adult life, Dick confesses that he has yet to play his first round of golf. "I've had so many opportunities," he says. "But I have some hobbies outside of the turf industry that I've yet to master. And I don't want the frustration of attempting to master golf

before I have my other hobbies fulfilled."

Two of those hobbies point back to Dick's mechanical interests. "I have a 1958 Cessna Skylane that is apart in my hanger/garage at home and that needs to be put back together and restored," he explains. "And I have a collection of automobiles—several Corvettes, many Corvairs and a couple of Datsun Z cars—that need restoration.

"And I have a soccer field that I maintain on my land that is the home field for the Reinders Soccer Club, which is a men's major WSA soccer team," Dick continues. "I also have about 7-1/2 acres of landscaped property on my 120-acre farm near Sullivan in Jefferson County, which includes a 2,000-foot landing strip.

"Once the airplane is flying and the cars have been weeded down to a manageable four or five, and I've freed myself from the day-to-day involvement with the business, then you'll find me out there slicing, hacking and chewing up divots," Dick predicts. ♣



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