

From Start to Finish, It's the Contact With People That He Likes Most

By Lori Ward Bocher

Mention golf course construction, and things like earth moving and shaping usually come to mind. But for Dave Weber, director of the golf course division for The Bruce Company, the job is more about people.

- It's working with legends like Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, and Gary Player.
- It's knowing that golf course superintendents are an interesting and genuine group of people to work with, thus making his work days more pleasurable.
- And it's finding enough people to do all the work that needs to be done – or machinery that will do it in place of people.

As director of the golf course division, Dave is an overseer on all projects, from start to finish. "I'm involved in the estimating, the pricing and bidding for each project," he explains. "I'm also responsible for seeing that the projects we have are being staffed with the right people and right equipment. I purchase and rent equipment that we need. I hire and fire staff and handle the personnel activities.

"I make all the client contacts," he continues. "I'm the point man. If somebody calls here and needs something done, I'm the one who meets with them and helps them decide what they want, gets a price for the project, and eventually follows through and sees that the project gets done."

Dave points out that he is ably supported by his staff, including Brian Porter, the estimator, and Paul Richert, the contract administrator. "They help me a ton. Please give them credit," he adds.

The Bruce Company is usually working on three new golf courses at any given time, along with remodeling projects. "Generally, we can do an 18-hole course in nine months," Dave points out. "But that can vary dramatically depending on the scope or scale of the project. We did an 18-hole course in Zion, Ill., that took the better part of two years to complete because of the large amount of earth work and drainage work that needed to be done. We also did an 18-hole course in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, this year that we started in very early March and were done by the end of August."

Working with golf legends...

It's the people, not the courses, that stand out most in Dave's mind. "This job has allowed me to meet some really neat people," he says. "In the few short years that I've been doing this, I've had the opportunity to do a project with Arnold Palmer and Gary Player, and I'm currently doing one with Jack Nicklaus. I've gotten to meet

some really interesting people this way. And, of course, all of the courses that they do are very above average courses."

Dave reports that it's "very, very humbling" to meet these golf legends. "They're all three extremely... well, I hate to use the word common because they're far from common. But they will stand there and talk to me just like I'm talking to you right now," he relates. "And they're all very, very good golf designers in their own right."

If anyone thinks these three golf legends just lend their names to golf course projects, Dave is ready to set them straight. "They take active roles in how their golf courses are being designed," he reports. "Of the three, Mr. Nicklaus probably takes a more proactive approach than the others. But all three take a very definite interest in how that golf course is being routed and the strategies that are being employed to make the golf



Tournament™ Golf Course Accessories



Featuring Quality Custom Embroidered Flags, Poles, Cups, Bunker Rakes, Ball Washers & More.

LESCO is the exclusive distributor for



SOUTHERN
GOLF PRODUCTS

Contact your LESCO Professional Golf Representative or call
(800) 321-5325.



LESCO®

LESCO is a registered trademark of LESCO, Inc.
Tournament and Grow With Us are trademarks of LESCO, Inc.
Southern is a trademark of Southern Golf Products, Inc.

course what it is."

Live with the land...

Dave finds that most of the architects he's worked with are pretty practical. "They're designing their golf courses to fit the existing land forms. They aren't moving dirt for the sake of moving dirt," he says. "They're demanding in that they want a quality finished product, like we all do when we're putting our name on anything. But they're reasonable."

How much of a role do architects have in choosing the construction company? "It varies on the type or project being done," Dave answers. "If it's a public project involving public funding, the architect's role may be only in pre-qualifying who can bid the project. But then the low bidder is most likely going to get the job."

"With private courses, it oftentimes happens that the architect will select one or two contractors that he has a history with, and he'll recommend them to the owners as being the construction companies that are best suited to build his course," he continues.

"The third option is a design/build scenario whereby the developer/owner selects an architect and builder who work hand in hand in putting the project together. That scenario is the most cost effective for everybody,"

Dave explains, adding that the Bruce Company works under all three scenarios.

Super superintendents...

There's another group of people that Dave enjoys working with – a group with far less star appeal: golf course superintendents. "Golf course superintendents are one of the most interesting and neatest group of people I've ever worked with," he says. "When I was in the landscape end of the business, I worked with general contractors and developers. Now that I work with golf course superintendents, I find them to be such a genuine group of people. It's a real pleasure every day to know that, when I come to work, I'm going to be dealing with people of that caliber."

While working with great people is the biggest reward of the job for Dave, finding and keeping the right employees is his biggest challenge. "Finding and keeping good people, which is the key to any business, is probably foremost on my plate in terms of challenges right now," Dave says.

When the Bruce Company constructs a course, it has a mixed labor force. "We will take our own skilled people to the site," Dave explains. "We use our own shapers and a lot of our own operators. That's a key part to what we're doing – the quality of the shaping and finishing work. But we will also hire as many local people as possible. In the Austin (Texas) area where we're working right now, the economy is booming and labor is about as plentiful down there as it is in the Madison area."

For the traveling work crew, it means being gone from home for three weeks at a time, followed by a four-day weekend. Dave's travel is limited to two or three days at a time. "My visits to a site are usually in conjunction with an architect's visit or the owner's visit to the site," he points out.

More machinery...

The cost of labor is a driving force in the evolution of golf course construction. "Right now, the biggest cost we have at any project is labor," Dave explains. "The less labor intensive and more mechanical something can become, the more advantageous. Laying large-roll sod is an example that comes to mind. It used to be done by hand, and it might take five guys to do it. Today, with the large-roll sod, it takes two – one running the spider that's rolling out the sod and the other guy using a fork to pull it in place."

"I would say, in our industry right now, the issue that's looked at most often is, 'How and where can we replace physical labor with mechanical labor?'" Dave adds. "There are small backhoes now to do trenching work that used to be done manually. Mechanical carts can move material and dump it into places you couldn't get to before."

There have also been changes on the course. "Over



You'll never have to mess with straw again. PennMulch's patented green pellets are enhanced with superabsorbent polymers and starter fertilizer. Here's how it works. As soon as water is applied, PennMulch® expands to retain moisture in the seed bed, providing 36% better seed establishment than straw. Plus, it's easy to spread, weed-free and won't blow away. PennMulch is ideal for golf construction, overseeding and divot repair; multi-use sports field repair and lawn areas. For a performance and cost comparison, call your Lebanon Turf Products Distributor. Or 1-800-233-0628.

Frank Baden
Territory Manager
Bettendorf, IA
(319) 332-9288

the years we've seen the evolution of golf courses being designed for all levels of play," Dave explains. "Whether it's a moderately budgeted daily fee course or an upscale private course, multiple tees have become very common so that different levels of players can play the same holes and have the difficulty relate to their ability to play the game."

This trend has affected the remodeling end of their business, too. "When remodeling a course, what we see most is bunker renovation or the addition or enlarging of tees," Dave says. "Some of the older courses that had very small tees are needing to make them bigger to be able to support the amount of play that they're getting."

Keeping cost in mind...

"When designing a course, there's also a very conscious concern on everybody's part as to how much it's going to cost to maintain the golf course after it's built," Dave points out. "Designers don't want to do things that are going to drive maintenance costs through the roof or things that are going to require a much larger staff because, again, it's very, very difficult to find the staff to do the work that needs to be done."

"So I think there's a very conscious effort between owners, designers, superintendents and contractors to try to create a course that is going to provide an equal level of opportunity to every golfer, and something that's reasonable and affordable to maintain," he sums up.

According to Dave, the golf course construction business is still very competitive even though there's a large number of courses being built. "With landscape and golf work, even when there's a large amount of work that is out there, it still seems to be very competitively priced," he says. "It's never a problem to find a builder, even with

the large number of courses being built."

A look back...

Although he's been an employee of the Bruce Company since 1978, Dave has been working in the golf course division just since 1995, and he's been its director for only one year. Prior to 1995, he worked in the landscape end of the business. And what got him into the landscape industry? Let us digress for a moment...

Dave was born in Portland, Ore., but his native Wisconsin parents moved back to the Badger State when he was 5 years old. "For all intent and purposes, I'm Middleton raised," he points out. "I went to Middleton High School and graduated in 1969. Then I went to UW-LaCrosse because I wanted to be a phy ed major and a phy ed teacher."

"But then I had to go into the service because of the Vietnam War," he continues. "I volunteered for the National Guard because I had a very low number in the draft lottery. When I came back from basic training, rather than going back to LaCrosse I went to UW-Madison. At that time, to be a phy ed major, the school required a foreign language. And I just absolutely despised the thought of taking a foreign language."

"In the College of Agriculture was this thing called 'landscape architecture' that looked really neat," Dave recalls. "And no foreign language was required. So that's how I ended up there. I had absolutely no interest in the field before that."

Luckily, he liked it...

Once he was in the major, he grew to like it. "It was a ball. It was a great major," he says, adding that he grad-





THOMAS J. EMMERICH
CERTIFIED IRRIGATION DESIGNER

- *GOLF COURSE
- *COMMERCIAL
- *RESIDENTIAL
- *MASTER PLANNING
- *SYSTEM EVALUATIONS

TOTAL PACKAGE DESIGN SERVICES

T.J. EMMERICH ASSOCIATES, INC.

IRRIGATION CONSULTANTS
N68W W30986 CLUB CIRCLE EAST
HARTLAND, WISCONSIN 53029
414-966-1051

uated in 1975. "Then my wife and I packed up our few belongings when I got a job with a landscape contractor in Tucson, Ariz. I started out on the landscape crew to learn how they did things and to learn about the different plants."

Working in a desert climate was new for Dave. "Everything was completely foreign," he recalls. "The design concepts were the same, but the type of plants we used were different. I had many a run-in with a cactus! And it was not uncommon for people down there to work at night and not during the day."

Dave and his wife weren't in Arizona for long. "We were there for one year. Quite frankly, we missed the seasons of the Midwest," he admits. So they came back to the Madison area where Dave found a job with FW Dodge, a company that puts out a daily construction report, "Dodge Reports," that went to contractors and suppliers in the construction industry.

"My responsibilities were to interview architects and engineers and owners as to what building projects were being done and the specifics about those projects," Dave points out. He worked at this job for two years.

"In 1978 a college classmate of mine let me know that there was going to be an opening at the Bruce Company for a drafting person," he points out. "It was an entry-level position, but it was a chance for me to get back into the landscape business. My wife was pregnant with our first child. I left a salaried job with a company car and benefits to start work at the Bruce Company for minimum wage and no benefits. It was scary at the time, but it turned out to be one of the best decisions of my life."

After working in drafting, he moved to a position in landscape design and sales. He held that position until about 1995. "At that time, Lee (Bruce) needed some additional staffing in the golf course end of the company," Dave explains. "I had expressed some interest in that and had helped him with a couple of minor projects. He asked me if I would like to start transitioning in that direction, and I did."

"At that time I was handling primarily larger commercial design/build type work," he continues. "I kept doing some of that and started to help with golf course projects, too. In 1998 I moved into the golf course division on a full-time basis. And a year ago I became director."

Husband, father, coach...

Dave and his wife, Debbie, have been married for nearly 29 years. "She worked as a cardiac technician at St. Mary's Hospital from 1988 to 1999. She also attended college," he says. "She graduated from the UW-Whitewater in December (2000) with a degree in social work. She interned at a detox center in Madison last summer, and she continued working there after

graduation. She's also enrolled in graduate school."

Debbie and Dave have two sons. Bryan, 22, is a junior at UW-Eau Claire majoring in business finance. "He worked on the maintenance crew for Mike Semlar at Bishop's Bay for five summers, so he knows how to get up early in the morning," Dave adds. Son Jeffrey, 20, is a freshman at Madison Area Technical College. "He's thinking about attending Purdue University to major in their golf course architect program, so this golf course thing might run even deeper in our family."

The Webers live in Waunakee where Dave has been active in youth sports. "I've been a youth hockey coach for about 20 years," he points out. "Currently I'm in my third year as the head hockey coach for Waunakee High School. I was the assistant coach there for three years before that."

"Between hockey and work, it keeps me pretty busy," he adds. "As I tell my wife, trying to support three 'kids' in college is a full-time job."

In closing, Dave just wanted to say: "I'm very humbled to be asked to do this article. It's a real honor for me." ❧



Eagan, MN 55121

651.454.3106 • Fax 651.454.7884

*Supporting the
status and recognition
of the
Wisconsin
Turfgrass Industry
through
Education, Research,
Products and Services*

*Dale Parske
Agronomist*