

Growing in Florida

A second generation of leaders guide DeBra Turf & Industrial Equipment in the Sunshine State's expanding turf equipment market.

by Ron Hall, associate editor

Jud DeBra, tan and trim at 43, his dark hair graying, cranks up the big Chevy, snaps on cruise control and settles in for the 3½-hour drive south from Orlando. Destination: Hollywood, FL. Mission: to stay one step ahead of Florida's turfgrass industry.

DeBra the company official and DeBra Equipment the company are on the move. Hollywood is the busiest of three DeBra Turf & Industrial Equipment Company offices.

"We see things changing here in Florida," Jud DeBra says.

The V-8 bends coastward and miles of scrub pine and acres of grazing cattle give way to gleaming patches of white Florida sand—bulldozed sites of future residential developments and the businesses they spawn. South Florida creeps north. DeBra Equipment, the largest Jacobsen distributor in North America

and guided by a second-generation of family members, will be pushing hard here soon with the addition of an office in Stuart, FL, just north of West Palm Beach.

New generation

Last May, Bill DeBra retired as president. He is one of the five brothers who founded the company. In 1946 he and brothers Don, George, Jack, and Jud, Sr., began selling Cushman scooters and three-wheel vehicles from Tampa and Atlanta, GA, dealerships.

"I guess there is no secret to the success of this business," Bill's son Tom says. "It was just good old hard work. They put their noses to the grindstone and got down to work."

Dave DeBra (Jack's son) is DeBra Equipment's executive vice president. He and Tom direct the East

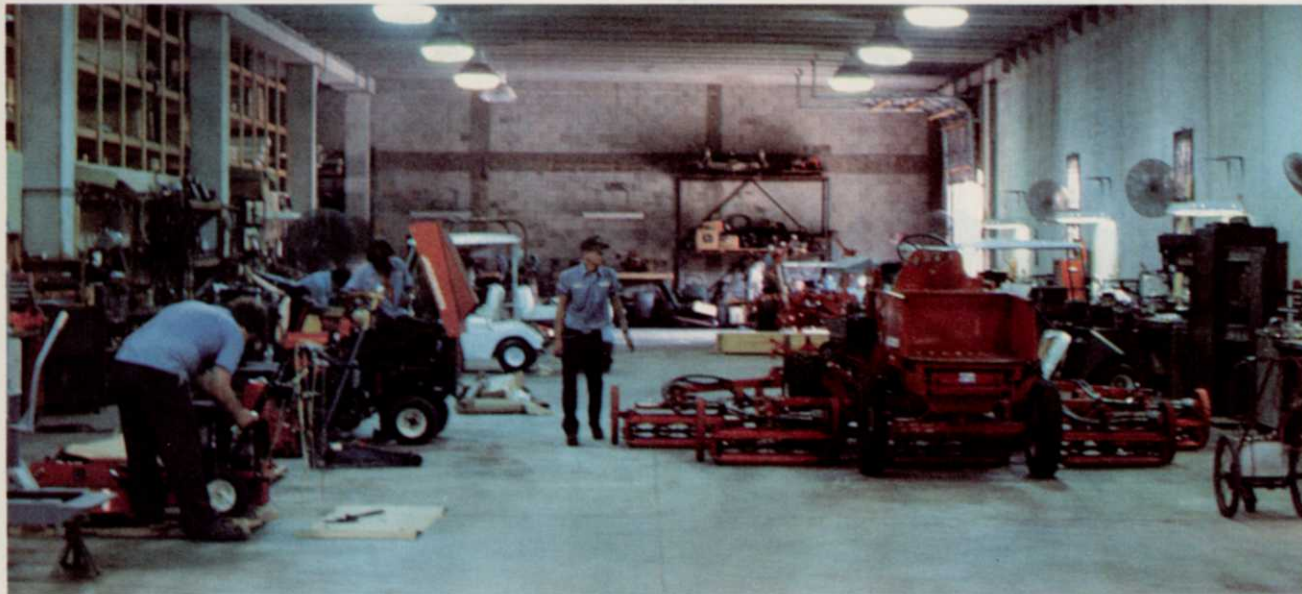
Coast operation out of the Hollywood office. Jud (son of the late Jud, Sr.) is the corporate vice president and directs the West Coast offices of Fort Myers and Tampa. Dave has been with the business 20 years, Jud 17, and Tom, the youngest of the three cousins, four years.

This is the heart of a hard-working and visible management team that takes an active role in community and professional functions. Dave is past president of the Florida Turf-Grass Association.

Golf is king

Hard work is one reason for DeBra Turf's success. Florida golf is another.

Says Jud, "Of the 100 new golf courses built in the country last year, 24 were built in Florida. People come to Florida to be near the water or to be near green. Waterfront property is



Employees service equipment in DeBra's vast warehouse



Jud DeBra (sportcoat), Tom DeBra with Jacobsen HF-15 reel mower.

getting expensive and scarce, so a lot of Florida development centers around golf courses. Developers can pay for a new course with the sale of lots."

In 1956 the company entered the golf business by leasing golf carts (a service it still provides with the lease of 150 carts to Dade County). Not until 1960—when Jack DeBra moved to Hollywood, FL, just north of Miami—did it plunge into the commercial turf market as a distributor for Jacobsen. The introduction of a riding greens-mower by Jacobsen in 1968 made things happen for DeBra—and for Florida golf course maintenance.

Or as Jud says: "The growth explosion hit."

Latest figures show 770 golf courses in the state. Play is measured at about 34 million rounds annually. A two-year-old study described Florida golf course maintenance as a \$177 million industry with more than 6,000

employees.

Other directions

DeBra Equipment, however, found opportunities in other areas, including government accounts. Although company officials describe this as a "maturing" market, it remains profitable. More exciting is the contract maintenance market flamed by the spread of turfed and landscaped properties up the coasts and inland.

"The biggest growth will be in the landscape business," Jud DeBra adds. "And as the caliber of maintenance is pushed up in the big developments and nice resorts, it will influence the rest of the state about what is the norm and what is acceptable." That translates into the need for professional equipment.

DeBra Equipment, with 15 pickup-truck-equipped salesmen on the road, tries to anticipate these client needs. "Our involvement with residential



Service Manager Gary Foote, right, helps mechanic Jack Moffat with a mower reel adjustment.

developments and condominiums opens new markets for us. It's a natural extension of the services we can offer," says Jud. That attention led DeBra to offer industrial equipment also, including the Clark & American warehouse and factory sweeper and the Netherlands-manufactured Ravo street sweeper. Industrial equipment has shown a 150% sales increase over the past two years, a company spokesman says. Even so, the company picks its markets carefully.

"DeBra takes a conservative approach to growth," says Gary Foote, a Michigan State grad who began his turf career with DeBra, worked the Southeast for Jacobson, then returned to DeBra as parts and service manager. "DeBra doesn't take on lines just to be adding more equipment."

The Florida company, with sales expected to exceed \$13 million this year, now represents more than 70 manufacturers (including Jacobsen, Excel, Smithco, Cushman, and Kubota in two locations). It backs its salesmen with 13 mechanics and a million-dollar parts inventory.

And its service schools are a model in the turf industry. Factory representatives from Jacobsen (which pioneered the idea of a service school) and other manufacturers visit DeBra Equipment offices on a regular basis to provide free hands-on training for client mechanics. Turnouts of 250 to 300 mechanics are common.

"We're working with the same customers over and over so what we do is build relationships with our customers rather than just making sales," Jud DeBra adds. "We know if we can build good customers, they'll be buying good products from us over a period of time."

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