

# IN CONTROL

At 28, Mark Yahn is writing a youthful success story as president of Ground Control Landscape & Maintenance. Orlando, Fla., is the right market.  
by Ken Kuhajda, managing editor



Mark and Laurie Yahn, owners of Ground Control Landscape and Maintenance in Orlando, Fla.

Ed Phillips calls to me as he sees me walk out of Ground Control Landscaping and Maintenance in Orlando, Fla.

"Mr. Photographer," he says, seeing my camera but unaware of my name. "Why don't you come out back and get a few pictures. When all the trucks come in and all the equipment is lined up it's pretty impressive."

Phillips, Ground Control maintenance supervisor, takes great pride in "his" equipment and the fine shape it's in.

He's one of three maintenance supervisors ("I'm the senior supervisor," he says) at Ground Control, a seven-year-old gold mine in east Orlando.

As the crews return from their daily routines and the trucks and equipment are cleaned and lined up—indeed, an impressive sight and a daily event—I ask him if Ground

Control's maintenance division is really that good.

A smile sneaks across his tan face. "There's no doubt about it—we're the best in the area," he says. "You can drive down the streets here in Orlando, the ones with the apartments on both sides, and you can tell the ones we do."

That pride seems typical of Ground Control employees, 110 in all. As Phillips calls instructions, he gets no dirty looks or sneers in return. They know their jobs, they do their jobs.

The clean-up continues as 15 or so Ground Control employees rub, shine, spray, and sharpen, readying the equipment for another day. Mechanics continually rebuild. They seem unaware of the stranger with the camera around his neck.

### The front office

Meanwhile, back in the office,

Ground Control's "administrators" wrap-up another day with an eye on tomorrow.

Most are named Yahn.

The head man is a Wheeling, W.Va., native, who moved to Orlando in 1970 when his father was transferred.

Mark Yahn is your average 28-year-old—with an above-average business. He drives a new Mercedes, his 25-year-old wife an Alfa Romeo.

His boat he keeps south of his Orlando home near Port St. Lucie. He and wife Laurie are in the process of moving into a new home in an upscale area northeast of Orlando.

His business, started in 1978 by Yahn and two friends, grossed \$3.4 million in 1985.

This year, gross figures upwards of \$3.5 to \$4 million are expected. In Yahn's first full year (1979), he grossed \$330,000.

He was 22 then. "From the beginning one of the keys was that we controlled our money," says Yahn. "We didn't split it three ways and spend it at the local bars. We put it back into the business."

Yahn and partners Frank Edwards and Alan Curran began in the sod business, getting the bulk of their work on referrals from Edwards' sister, who worked for American Sod, a local supplier.

In October 1978, one month after the corporation (yes, they incorporated from day one) was formed, they got a big break.

### He took a ride

The story goes something like this: the sod trio was replacing turf and redoing the landscape for a woman in the River Run II housing development.

Down the street rolled the developer, Lester Zimmerman of the Greater Construction Company, in his Lincoln, ready to talk business.

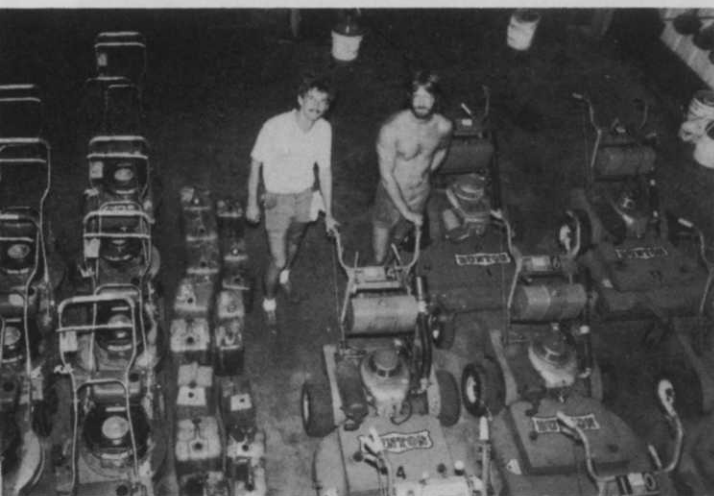
Zimmerman asked the slightly-soiled Yahn if he wanted to take a ride. Perhaps to escape the Florida heat, Yahn consented.

Zimmerman informed the whiskerless Yahn that he needed a landscaper for the 100-plus homes he was developing in River Run III.

They arrived. "How much do you want to do this?" asked Zimmerman. Yahn didn't know. This was new to him. Zimmerman gave Yahn a couple days to get a bid together.

With the help of American Sod,

## LANDSCAPE PROFILE



A profile of Ground Control. Top, the well-landscaped home base in Orlando. Left, maintenance supervisor Ed Phillips (left) and maintenance foreman Wayne Smith line up equipment at the end of the day. Right, employees Gary Stephenson and Shalom Simms get ready to call it a day.

Yahn arrived at a price.

Zimmerman accepted. "He told me that our price was a little more than what he had been paying but that I seemed honest," recalls Yahn.

Ground Control got the job—and the mess that came with it. The lots were in poor shape, some half completed and abandoned.

Somehow, Ground Control survived that first big job, leading to a

long and prosperous relationship with Greater Construction.

It finally ended in the spring of 1984 when Yahn "started slipping," not giving Greater Construction the personal attention he always did.

"They were a major part of our business," says Yahn, noting that Greater Construction gave Ground Control \$250,000 in business in 1982.

Smartly, Yahn had developed

other resources and the loss of Greater Construction didn't crush his operation. By 1984, Ground Control had established itself as one of Orlando's biggest and best landscaping and maintenance companies.

### And now there's one

Of the original partners, only Yahn

*continued on page 30*



**Mike Guthrie, Ground Control maintenance administrator.**

remains. Edwards left in 1979, Curran late in 1985. It's Mark Yahn's show with the capable help of office manager/wife Laurie, bookkeeper/mom Mary, and irrigation specialist/dad John.

Along with Mike Guthrie (maintenance administrator) and Jeff Deyo (construction administrator) they form Ground Control's management base.

Landscape construction accounts for 25 percent of gross revenues, maintenance 60 percent, and irrigation 15 percent.

*'We have to improve the professionalism in our industry. That means fulfilling your end of the contract.'*

*—Yahn*

Landscape architect Stephen G. Pategas, hired in December 1984, has helped the growth of the construction division, giving Ground Control design expertise it once had to hire from the outside.

Yahn's quick to credit the Orlando area for his success. Steady growth continues with a parallel growth in multi-family and commercial structures.

Maintenance/landscape firms are warring for the business. "You think this is a highly-competitive area until you go to an ALCA conference and

## Mark Yahn: growing up with Ground Control

Take your average 28-year-old. A bit wild still, a bit emotional, perhaps, a little flighty. And certainly almost always right.

Now take your average 28-year-old and put him at the head of a multi-million dollar business and what do you get? Someone a bit wild, emotional, and flighty, who almost always thinks he's right, running a multi-million dollar business. Right?

Well, maybe. At 28, Mark Yahn runs Ground Control, probably exhibiting some of those 28-year-old traits. Like most young men, he's emotional, maybe too much so. He admits: "I'm very emotional with my business. I take my business very personally. I get excited when we get the big job and take it real personally when we just miss the big job."

He has weaknesses and strengths. He's taken time to analyze his traits and use the "data" to his advantage.

According to Mark Yahn, he excels at:

- Marketing. "I know what we are and I know how to tell people what we are."

- Delegating authority. "Some people call it lazy, I call it delegating authority."

- Planning future growth. "Our growth projections have been fairly accurate."

He lacks in these areas:

- On-site instructions. "I don't do real well with in-depth instructions to the workers. I'm not good at handling the on-site labor force."

- Accounting. "My accounting abilities—there's not a lot of talent there. That's where (wife) Laurie complements me."

- Technical knowledge. "I don't have much technical knowledge on the irrigation end. That's where my dad (John Yahn, head of irrigation) comes in."

Similarly, the landscape business has its advantages and disadvantages.

Among the advantages Yahn cites are: 1) challenge ("making the machinery run smoothly."); 2) freedom of movement; 3) financial possibilities; 4) direct results attainable from the work; 5) variety of people you meet.

Yahn's list of disadvantages: 1) disappointments ("losing the big job."); 2) quality and quantity of employees; 3) financial risk ("the sheer risk of being in business."); 4) level of competition; 5) the need to be so heavily equipped.

*—Ken Kuhajda*

everyone has the same problem. It doesn't seem as bad," says Yahn.

But that one low-baller or semi-professional is a risk to the industry, says Yahn.

"We have to improve the professionalism in our industry. That means fulfilling your end of the contract—by using high-quality materials, for example," says Yahn.

"And at the same time the owner needs to be sincere in his bidding and needs to qualify his contract to eliminate the non-professional," he says.

### The real key

Mark Yahn pauses. He's asked what is the one ingredient needed for a successful maintenance/landscape business.

Another pause, a rarity for the glib businessman. "I guess getting on an architect's bid list. That's it in a nutshell. Everytime you turn around

a new job comes up."

In 1986, Yahn may think twice before bidding the new jobs. He calls 1986 a "critical year."

"We're not going to grow as much this year and that's on purpose. We need to slow down a little bit and not relax on any job. We don't want to get reckless," he says.

The maintenance division, which accounted for almost all the \$1.1 million in gross revenues in 1982, has slowed somewhat, as landscape construction and irrigation have taken off.

Despite maintenance's slowdown, Ground Control has grown, leading one to conclude that there is a bullish market to be tapped in Orlando for the construction and irrigation divisions.

Talk of millions of dollars doesn't awe the 28-year-old. For like his company's name, Mark Yahn has his feet completely on the ground. **WT&T**