

Green Space

Steve Schepers
Owner, Lakeshore
Irrigation Inc.,
Holland, MI

BY JASON STAHL

You're called Captain Insano?

Yeah, the guys I work with call me that, and I think they got it from some movie they saw. The reason they call me that is because they ran into me one night at 9 p.m. and I was still working. They told me to go home and I said, "Hey, this is part of the business." I've installed things at midnight under the glow of car headlights.

What was your most difficult job?

The clubhouse at Arcadia Bluffs, a golf course in northern Michigan. We were on a tight schedule, and I was originally told that they needed us to install 60 sprinkler heads. The owner made some changes, and shortly after I found out that they needed 230 sprinkler heads...in two days. That was where having a brother in the same business helped out. I used some of his employees and we got the job done.

Talk about your brother. What's it like competing against him?

Gary owns Schepers' Lawn Sprinkling in Grand Rapids. I worked at his company through high school, college and five years beyond that before starting my own business. There's enough work in his area and my area that we rarely rub shoulders. Ironically, it's helpful that we own our own businesses because we can help each other out — for instance, if we need to borrow a machine or find a worker. We're brothers and we're in business and it's a touchy area, but there is more to life than making a buck. We keep it on the up and up.

What's the conversation like at the Thanksgiving dinner table?

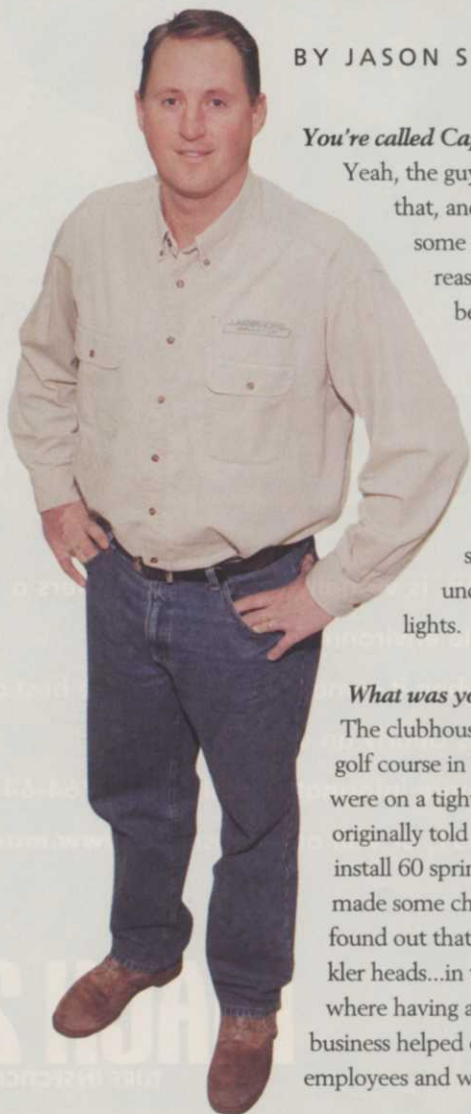
We talk very little about business at Thanksgiving. When we used to work together, we never talked about sprinkling. Now that we're 20 miles away from each other and don't see each other that often, we talk about the business for five minutes or so when we get together.

How has your labor situation been?

It's probably not been the worst case. I've only lost one employee in the last five years. It comes down to being a good boss, being fair and honest. I've done every job from the ground up — I dug holes as a kid, hooked heads and managed crews. I know what everybody's feelings are at every stage of the job. You have to stay close to your guys because nobody wants a boss who sits in the office all day. If your employees don't think you're slacking, then they won't slack. No employee is going to work harder than the boss, because the boss sets the benchmark.

Occasionally, an employee will want to leave to start his own business, and that's going to happen.

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But I emphasize that things stay professional and we stick to ground rules. When that happens, there can actually be a benefit. We can even refer customers to each other.

You seem pretty laid-back about your business.

Don't get me wrong, I'm as competitive as anyone. I just think that there's more to life than making a buck. We all have lives going on, we all have struggles. Just because a person is a competitor does not mean we can't get along. I try to keep a good perspective.

Company at a glance

Years in business: 5

Annual revenue: Not available

Projected growth for 2000: 30%

Number of employees: 2 full-time, 4 seasonal

Commercial accounts: 30%

Residential accounts: 70%

Other services offered: Christmas light installation

Business in installation/design: 80%

Business in maintenance: 20%

Market area: Western Michigan

What are some of the differences between installing irrigation in the North and the South?

One thing is that we use polyethylene pipes instead of PVC like the contractors in, say, Florida. That's because we have freezing conditions in Michigan, and PVC would crack. The reason that they use PVC in Florida is that there is an element in the soil that eats away polyethylene.

Another difference is that we are a seasonal industry

and don't have the luxury of having significant income four to five months a year.

How has your family taken to all your hard work?

Starting out is difficult, but I've done a lot better in the last few years. I've been fortunate enough to have good employees so that I can let the business run itself a little more instead of me coddling it. To be able to stand back and say enough and go home to my wife, Kelly, and sons, Nathan and Luke, is nice.

It looks like you've invested quite a bit in your Web site.

I started it two years ago, and I'm currently in the process of redoing some of it with new ideas I have. I don't get a huge amount of business from it but I don't really try to. People check it out for general information. As a business, you have to have the whole package, and that's why I have a Web site.

Does the "whole package" include a new office?

Yeah, I ran my business out of my home until this year, when we moved into a 2,400-sq.-ft. office condominium. It's enough space to work, I guess. An office is never big enough.

What has been the key to your success?

It's not really as hard as I thought to be successful in business. You have to say what you can do and do it. And you can't be afraid to tell somebody you can't do something. People want to be everything to everybody, but you have to stick to your guns. Know your mission statement and your niche. I don't go out and put sprinkling systems in golf courses because that's just not my thing. I'm not geared for that.

Sometimes I sell \$10,000 sprinkling systems to customers, but it's not so much selling to high-end customers as it is doing a quality job. It's easier on the short side of things to cut corners, but it's a quicker way to end your business and establishing a reputation you can't get rid of.

What will your industry be like in the year 3000?

We'll be installing sprinkler systems on Mars.

Will you ever sell and get out of the business?

Some day, because that's the type of person I am. I'm the type who wants to do something and get it working as well as it can and, as soon as that happens, change over to something new. Irrigation is in my blood, but I think I could let it go even though it would be hard to get used to. I'll never fully retire because I'd like to try others things like construction management.