

Southern West Virginia Firm
Recognized for

Excellence in GOLF Industry

By Ed McCall



Aspen Corporation walked away from the 2007 Golf Industry Show with the Builder Excellence Award. The Legacy Award was presented to the Daniels, WV, firm at the Golf Course Builders Association of America's annual dinner in Anaheim, California, for their renovation project on the Old White Course at The Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs.

Most of the work on the C.B. Macdonald design had to be done in the off-season in order to keep the course open for play during good weather. Battling snow, freezing temperatures, and dark added tremendous challenges to the project that was done in phases and stretched out over four years. "The weather was totally unpredictable, so we had to prepare for every possibility that would come along, and of course it did," related Aspen V.P. Ronnie Adkins.

Aspen is a certified golf course builder and a charter member of the Golf Course Builders Association of America who for the past quarter centu-

ry have restored, renovated, irrigated, and built numerous courses throughout the United States. Many of these courses have hosted high profile televised events sponsored by the PGA and USGA. Aspen president Donnie Adkins believes part of the company's success can be traced to "their dedicated and hardworking employees."

How do two brothers from Abraham, WV, starting with only \$700 of working capital garnered from the sale of the family horses, end up running a multi-million dollar, award winning golf course construction and renovation business? According to Donnie and Ronnie Adkins of Aspen Corporation there are several factors, "...work ethic and making quality our highest priority being two of the most important. And luck, never underestimate the importance of luck, both good and bad, and being able to recognize opportunities."

Twenty-five years ago when both quit their jobs at Glade Springs, where Donnie was the general manager and Ronnie the director of grounds, to form

a real estate developing firm, interest rates skyrocketed. Bad timing or bad luck? With no real estate development on the horizon, they were soon contracted to do a small renovation job at Black Knight Country Club in Beckley. The architect overseeing the job, Fred Garbin, was a past president of the American Association of Golf Course Architects, and he was so impressed with the time they invested, their attention to detail, and the overall quality of the job that he recommended them for other jobs in the Pittsburgh area. Good luck or good timing? And thus began their odyssey in the golf course business which continues today the same way it began, by word of mouth. The golf division does little or no advertising, except for an occasional ad in one of the trade magazines. "We do that more to support the organizations like the WVGA or the GCSAA," the brothers confided.

Aspen Corporation today has three subsidiaries: the aforementioned Aspen Golf, Aspen Irrigation, and Aspen Landscape. Almost everyone in south-



ern West Virginia recognizes those red trucks and hardworking crews wearing red shirts with the familiar Aspen logo on them sprucing up lawns and gardens throughout the area. The landscaping crews venture as far as an hour's drive from Beckley to perform their services and have even been seen in neighboring states. The irrigation crews work within a 500 mile radius of home and confine their services to housing and business developments and golf courses who want to install or upgrade their irrigation capabilities. Having recently turned down jobs in Israel and in Scotland for fear of overextending and not being able to meet their own exacting standards, Donnie defines the territory for the golf course division as "the planet."

Indeed it is. A look at the list of their clients reads like a Who's Who of golf courses. There's Riviera in Los Angeles (in preparation for the '98 Senior U.S. Open), Oak Hill (in preparation for the PGA) in Rochester, New York, Shannopin in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Firestone in Akron, Ohio, Nemaocolin Woodlands Resort, Uniontown, Pennsylvania, The Greenbrier, The Homestead, The Country Club of Virginia, and our own Glade Springs, to name just a few.

Once you have reached the pinnacle of your profession, as Aspen Corporation did in winning the Legacy Award in 2007, what do the Adkins brothers feel the next 25 years will bring? Ronnie sees the recent trend of older, traditional style courses going back more to their original designs and roots continuing. Good examples of this include much of the work Aspen has done at The Greenbrier and at The Homestead. These C.B. Macdonald and Donald Ross designs now reflect their original selves more than the courses they had evolved into over the last century.

Donnie believes that to stay at the forefront of the industry they must not stray from their core values, but he also realizes that having cutting edge equip-

ment, especially laser technology, and skilled technicians to operate it will be essential. Today, one of their first jobs in the Pittsburgh area that took six weeks could be done in six days thanks to the advances in technology and equipment. Add that to his belief that good people are at the crux of their success and you can understand how the company that started with only five others plus the two of them, has grown to over 150 employees.

Recently, he continues, "We have worked equally hard to contain the growth of our company and thus maintain the quality of our work." In 2003 Aspen did 70% more volume than the year before. 2004 saw an increase of 70% over what they did in 2003, and in 2005 they experienced a 60% increase over 2004. Such growth is what led to turning down those projects overseas.

Currently they have projects underway on Lake Erie and in Virginia Beach. This spring they will begin work on the third golf course at Glade Springs as part of the Cooper Development. Woodhaven will be the sister course to Stonehaven, which is also a design of architect Tom Clark. Testament to their longevity is the fact that they are now going back to update work at courses where they had earlier done renovations. Revisiting former clients a second time is even more rewarding to these brothers whose business model depends on a team concept that allows them to maximize both their labor force and their machines.

Golfers fortunate enough to enjoy some of Aspen's handiwork firsthand simply hope they keep up the good work. 

