



QUIET POWER

KNOWING WHEN TO GO AGGRESSIVE, AND WHEN TO LAY UP, IS A LESSON ALL CONTRACTORS ENGAGE IN THROUGHOUT THEIR CAREERS

Darren Disney, president of Disney Sand & Gravel, Hebron, Maryland, has seen his share of boom and bust business cycles. The last boom on the eastern shore of Maryland ended in 2007, and any business not located directly on the coastline is still waiting for the pendulum to swing back. At age 39, Darren has learned the secret of surviving the cycles.

“Our diversification is what has saved us,” explains Disney. The company has played it smart and made the tough decisions in order to survive while keeping their key infrastructure in place.

Of course, there’s more to the story than that. Disney set the wheels in motion to accommodate both large commercial projects and residential projects with the same attention to detail and urgency.

This balancing act harkens back to his early years when he started his own landscaping business right out of high school — lot clearing, septic tanks, and homeowner driveways. For those jobs he runs the equipment himself with the assistance of a helper. Residential work now accounts for about 50 percent of his business. The other half is commercial — in particular, the sand

and gravel operation which he acquired in 2004 when things were really booming; an aggressive move at the time.

“Years ago when I first started in landscaping, I used to buy all my sand and gravel from this farmer who basically had a hole in his field. All of my working life I’ve been hard at it for 7 days a week, morning till dark. He knew my family, and knew that I was a hard worker. As he got up in years, one day he and I had a long talk as we rode around his property in his pickup. Long story short, we worked out a deal. So I essentially started with a pond in a field that

had different products. I did my research and determined there was a need for processed materials. So we set up a sand-washing plant. Then we took the pit to the next level, and we now have masonry sands, concrete sands, golf course sands, and gravel. We sell not only to the concrete and asphalt industries, but golf course design and rehab companies as well."

It's the pit that led to Disney's first purchase of a Kawasaki wheel loader; they had been mainly running excavators and off-road trucks.

"We had priced some used loaders, as that is all our budget would allow, but the big brand names were not affordable. Rich Woolfolk at Elliott & Frantz, where we'd been buying our excavators and trucks, had a used Kawasaki 80 with 11,000 hours on it. It worked great for us! We were so happy with it that about two years later we bought a new 85ZV. It's now got about 16,000 hours on it so we knew it was time to get another. Now we own a new 85Z7, trading in that first used 80."

SAND TRAP BLESSING

When the downturn hit, Disney consolidated most of his fleet and core employees around the pit and made more product, steadily increasing volume as demand rose. Former competitors turned to him for their materials. Disney's golf course sand, a niche market product, turned out to be the real breakout product and a major stabilizing factor for the company as well.

"There are only three very large sand mining areas in nearby Delaware, about 30 to 35 miles away from us. When the economy was going gangbusters, nobody could keep up and it was a great time for me to expand. When things started to slow, the big guys weren't interested in following all the stringent quality controls necessary for golf course sand. We were smaller and able to adjust to accommodate their needs. Once our name got out, golf course architects took a look at our materials and really liked our nearly white color. When they remodeled the Blue Course of the Congressional Country Club Golf Course in Bethesda, Maryland, for the 2011 U.S. Open, we hauled about 700 truckloads of sand there for the job. We've also supplied Glen Riddle Farm and Queenstown Harbor golf courses in Maryland, and Plantation Lakes in Delaware."

Besides sands for golf courses, construction, beaches, and playgrounds, Disney offers a wide range of gravels and stone, as well as soil products like bank run, top soil, fill dirt, composted top soil, and garden blends.

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

Today the Disney fleet consists of five dump trucks, a tractor trailer and dump body, six excavators, and two Kawasaki loaders. A Grizzly screen separates rock, and a dredge allows Disney to take the original 80-year-old five- to six-acre pit an additional 30 feet deeper. The company continues to work their pits, fulfilling orders, and stockpiling for the future upswing Disney is sure will come.

BUNKER SAND

INS AND OUTS OF GOLF SANDS

All sand is not alike. It varies in size, shape, composition, color, and purity. The playability of a sand is significantly determined by its particle size and shape. When a golf course decides to change out the sand in its bunkers, add sand to the top of the fairways or putting greens, or replace sand in tee boxes and other areas, they look for certain kinds, shapes, colors, and dimensions specific for each kind of application. They even perform lab tests on their sands before accepting them for use.

Disney Sand & Gravel supplies all three kinds of sands used by golf courses — bunker, top dressing, and golf course. Bunker grade sand is finer for rapid drainage and beauty. Top dressing grade sand is used to aerate fairways, putting greens, and athletic fields. Bermuda grass, often used in golf courses, particularly likes the addition of sand. And golf course grade sand is used for tee boxes and under the base of the greens, and is often mixed with other materials.



The company's new 85Z7 is a perfect fit for Disney's philosophy of running equipment. "It puts the power where the demand needs to be and not into actions that waste fuel, wear out rubber, or take the longevity out of the machine."



Disney Sand & Gravel has its own fleet of trucks, delivering their products throughout the Eastern Shore region, including Annapolis and Baltimore.



This dredge is responsible for deepening the original 80-year old sand pit an additional 30 feet. Note the 80Z7, ramp, and Grizzly separator in the back.

"When that happens, we'll be the company that has been around 30 to 40 years with a great name from always doing what we promise to do. I always keep in mind the people who have helped me get to where I am today. Sometimes it is a challenge to honor those commitments, but that's what you have to do to stay successful and keep a good name. You have to do what you say you're going to do. People will come back."

Nurturing his business with as much care as a championship-course groundskeeper, Disney is also making sure his equipment remains in tip-top shape.

"I tell our guys to run our equipment economically and not to run it in their power



The wheel loader feeds gravel brought up by the dredge or long-reach excavator into their Grizzly separator.

positions, because for our work it is not necessary. I don't need to push the limits as we try to keep all of our equipment as long as possible. And we maintain it flawlessly because we can't afford to buy new every three years. **So I can respect the technology that's behind the new Z7. It puts the power where the demand needs to be and not into actions that waste fuel, wear out rubber, or take the longevity out of the machine.** I call it quiet power."

WHAT'S NEXT?

"We want to retire some debt, spend more time with the family, take care of our employees, and continue to afford nice



These piles of gravel give a hint of the broad range of materials made by the company. They include septic tank gravel and pea gravel for landscaping.

equipment. I want to be ready for the next upswing. I'm only 39, so I've got lots of hard work left ahead of me, but it would be nice to do it a little less stressfully. When you're younger, you are supposed to be in overdrive. But it's time to start circling back around. Without a great support group and an understanding wife, you just can't carry the amount of workload and stress — no human being can. I couldn't have made the full circle without her."

As they say, in golf as in life, it is the follow-through that makes the difference.

Disney Sand & Gravel, LLC is serviced by Elliott & Frantz, Delmar, Delaware.