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Contractor of the Year Update: Class of 2003

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Editor's Note: Equipment World's Contractor of the Year program has honored a variety of contractors during its five years. Now that the program has a few years under its belt, we wanted to go back and check in with our past finalists. We'll be revisiting these former finalists through April, and then announcing our 2006 Contractor of the Year in May.

Kevin "Bo" Carter

KT Carter

Contracting

Jacksonville, Florida

When KT Carter Contracting experienced a slack time about nine months ago, it drew the company up short. "We'd been going like gangbusters for the past few years and the downturn was scary," Carter says. "All of the sudden it seemed we couldn't buy a job."

Part of the lull was the city's post-Super-Bowl hangover, since so much building had preceded the event. Carter responded by downsizing his company, selling some machines and letting some people go. "Now we're slowly coming back and we'll probably be at our 2003 revenue level, around \$5 million, this year," he says.

The company still concentrates on utility work, site prep and road grading for a variety of commercial and municipal clients. As always, Carter likes to brag on his people: "Get good ones," he says. "They're what make you."

Advice: "Make sure you get paid. Know who you're working for, and have a payment system and stick to it. If an owner gets off track, stop and have a talk."

Charles Foot

C & F Construction

Smackover, Arkansas

"We're going along at a good, steady pace," says Foot, who is especially happy with his asphalt paving company's progress in light of rising oil prices. "The weather's been so good this winter we've been laying pavement every day this month." He jokes: "I might get to go fishing in the spring."

Foot reports C & F has gotten more selective in the jobs it takes on, letting go of the smaller ones, "as long as we have plenty of work." He still owns the firm with his mother-in-law, Sue Childers Jameson, and his brother-in-law, Philip Childers, who serves as company vice president.

C & F bought a new mainline paver two years ago and has also updated its rollers and dump trucks. "We try to keep our equipment up to date when times are good so we can stretch it when they aren't," Foot says.

Advice: "Don't do the work too cheap or be afraid to make a profit. Our experience has been that even if we have the higher price, we tend to get more work because we have enough in the job to do the extras that our clients sometimes ask for. It doesn't cost you much to do a bit more and it goes a long way."

Brian and David Gruhot

D&G Excavating

Marshall, Minnesota

"We've tried to streamline and focus on doing a few things well rather than trying to please

everyone," says Kristin Gruhot, Brian's wife and the company's office manager. This refocusing included eliminating a radiator shop the firm used to operate and doing less farm tile installation.

But the excavation and site prep firm has also taken on new work. It has been able to gain additional water and sewer expertise and expand its aggregate operation. Instead of outsourcing work at its quarry, D & G bought its own crushers and screeners to produce the rock, most of which goes into company jobs.

Son Brian heads the day-to-day operations and his father David now is semi-retired. (Brian and Kristin are pictured with their son David.)

Advice: "We truly believe if you treat your customers right and you bid honestly and competitively your business will eventually grow," Kristin says. "Undercutting everyone in your bidding doesn't help anyone."

Ron Hunsche

Ron Hunsche Excavating
Highland, Illinois

For the past 15 months, Hunsche's company has had a full plate. "We're moving more than a million cubic yards of earth on a mine reclamation project in Albers, Illinois, and that job won't finish until this August," he says.

Hunsche says his firm's acquisition of this job is proof positive safety pays. "We got it because of our safety and workman's comp record," he says. "It's a question that's definitely asked in the marketplace, especially on big jobs. They can hire anyone with a backhoe, so if you have a great safety record, you'll get put on the top of the pile."

In addition to the Albers job, the company is continuing to do a number of site prep and building development jobs, plus its concrete pump division stays busy throughout the St. Louis area. The business is still a family affair, with Hunsche's brother Gene his equipment manager and son Brent a field superintendent.

Advice: "Make sure you know your costs, especially your fuel costs, since they're such a big factor today. Fuel costs have tripled since 2003 so you've got to have a good handle on it."

Kraig Meyer

Generation III Excavating
Hamilton, Michigan

"We're pretty much status quo, still staying close to home, within 10 miles from our shop," reports Meyer. He also networks with other area contractors, working on jobs with them together that individually they might have had a hard time taking on.

Meyer concentrates on excavating jobs for a diverse client list, including utility companies, residential customers, small developers and area drain commissions. "We've been doing this for 13 years and we're in it for the long haul," he says. His wife Cindy serves as office manager.

Meyer has maintained the size of his fleet, which contains graders, excavators, loaders and dump trucks. He rents the rest, including compact excavators.

Advice: "If you diversify you don't notice downturns as much as the next guy; as one area slows down, you can pick it up from other clients. If you work as hard as the next guy, you're going to make a living. Prepare yourself for an opportunity."

Jeff O'Risky

O'Risky Excavating
Evansville, Indiana

O'Risky Excavating has been growing modestly, "slow and steady like we want to," O'Risky says. "Our local market is so diversified it's kind of insulated and doesn't really react to national ups and downs."

The company, which does site development, subdivisions, basements and some light commercial work, has added a scraper, skid steer, semi truck and a dozer to its lineup. "We're also still keeping all our old machines," O'Risky says.

O'Risky admits he sometimes has to quell the itch to look at other contracting avenues beyond what he's doing. "I'm always trying to exploit new opportunities," he says, "but if you stick to what you are good at everything seems to work out. You don't want to lose focus on what got you there."

Advice: "This is an expensive business to get into so make sure you manage and limit your debt ratio. Well-maintained used equipment will serve you well, especially if there's a downturn."

Gregg Perrett

Perrett Construction
Valentine, Nebraska

Perrett Construction continues to prosper doing grading and bridge work for both the Nebraska Department of Roads and the Union Pacific railroad. Perrett now has annual revenues of between \$8 million and \$10 million, double what his revenues were when we last talked to him.

"We've also expanded our geographical area a bit," Perrett says, "and we're doing work in Grand Junction, Colorado, and have another project northwest of Omaha." The company has upgraded its scraper and truck fleet, and now has seven scrapers and 11 trucks.

In addition, Perrett has embraced GPS technology, putting more than \$300,000 in GPS equipment on his fleet, and even hiring a GPS coordinator. "He programs all our units and makes sure everything is working right in the field, plus he sets stakes on some jobs," Perrett says.

Advice: "Don't get too big too fast. I get concerned when I realize most people in their twenties have never seen the impact of high interest rates."

Steve and Jeff Wainwright

W.D. Wainwright & Sons
Prattville, Alabama

While keeping their hands firmly in paper mill pond settlement cleanouts and ash hauling, the two brothers are also in the process of developing a high-end housing site in Prattville. "Our city's been growing so much, we thought there was a good opportunity there," Steve Wainwright says. And so the company has purchased a 250-acre lot on which they will place a 17-acre lake and even take a shot at building a few houses.

"With the paper mill work, there's not really anything you can look at afterwards and say 'I built that,'" Wainwright says. "With the housing development, we'll have a legacy."

The brothers have also expanded the geographical circle of their paper mill work, now going up into Tennessee. These expansions have prompted the company to increase its fleet, buying six new artics, a long-reach excavator and another dozer and grader. And the company has a new facility just outside town, with a log cabin serving as the company's office.

Advice: "Get your ducks in a row as far as knowing people in the industry you want to tackle. Learn the business by signing on with someone who's doing it because it's a hard-nose business."

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