

Par for the course

Marengo Ridge Golf Club professional Jim Robinson is among those helping area golfers get in the swing of things.



Grain Gain

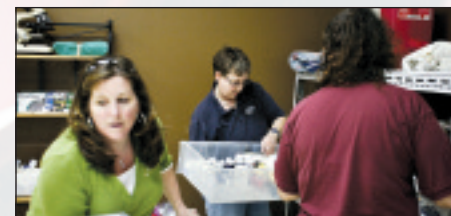
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COVER STORY
Crystal Lake's Mathews Company turns up the heat in grain drying industry

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Road wars

Vet bets that a second location will pay off during construction.



Made in McHenry

Family company making hay with grain dryers

By CHRIS FREEMAN

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CRYSTAL LAKE – Nestled behind the trees off state Route 176 in Crystal Lake is a company doing big things.

Really big things.

Mathews Company is a family-owned grain dryer manufacturer that has been in business for 56 years. Co-owner Judy Sedlak watched her father open the business in the Precision Twist building before moving it back from the road to its current site.

“Dad was an inventor, an entrepreneur,” Sedlak said. “He got ideas of what people needed, what would make their way of life easier. He saw a need.”

The need was building grain dryers, some small enough to be used by farmers on their land, and others tall elevators used by commercial operations.

The company employs about 100 people in its 240,000-square-foot facility. Its network of dealers select to customers, and Mathews manufactures all its products in Crystal Lake. The average turnaround time for an order, all of which are custom made, is about 20 days.

“Our global business has grown dramatically the last few years,” Sedlak said. “We manufacture everything here and we have for 56 years. Every dryer is custom ordered. There’s different voltage, motors, screens depending on which grain you’re drying.”

The smaller units include continuous-flow dryers that allow for heated and cooled drying areas for different grains or different moisture levels of a single grain. The tower units, meanwhile, provide a heating source in the middle of the unit. It heats the grain above the source to dry the grain, then uses



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Julian Garcia uses a fabrication machine at Mathews Company.

a vacuum cooling system to recapture the warmer outside air back into the dryer. That means the heating source uses less energy the more it runs.

“[Over the years] the equipment has grown in size,” Sedlak said.

After an order is taken, the fabrication of the dryer begins. The units are cut and made, then sent to an assembly point system. They get a heavy duty paint job and are baked, and then the parts are put together in a line and taken out the back door to be shipped by truck.

The tower sections, though, remain separated because of their size and later are assembled on site.

The size of the units can vary, particularly in

global markets, where large farms are much bigger and more diversified than the U.S. market.

“In the Ukraine, Russia, Slovakia or places like that they have much larger farms,” Mathews President and Chief Executive Officer Larry Antos said. “They have 10,000 acres and bigger, some as large as 250,000 acres. They have much larger units that take much larger crops.”

Those crops also are using multiple grains and products, meaning the dryers must be capable of drying in different zones.

“Each farmer dries multiple crops in Europe, and their multi-grain dryer levels are different,” Mathews sales and marketing manager Phil Farr said. “Different temperatures, different growing seasons. In Europe,

it’s at the same level, but we export into Nigeria and that’s a different temperature zone, different products to dry. Same with Khazikstan or Cameroon.

“Different crops dry differently, so you need a multi-heat zone design that brings down the heat gradually. It’s a complicated dryer, but we make it. Commercial units here have gone to simpler big towers with one heat source.”

There is a family feel to the company, starting with Sedlak and her brother, co-owner Dave Mathews. Both of Sedlak’s adult children work for the company, as does her oldest grandson.

“I’ve been with the business since I was a kid,” she said. “It’s just what the family did.

“This has always been a family business, and with the success of the kids and grandkids, we intend to keep it that way. We’ve got a lot of longevity in our employees.”

That longevity comes from a close-knit group that enjoys working together, she said.

“Management provides the atmosphere and the loyalty, and fortunately that works both ways,” she said. “That’s gratifying to see that kind of appreciation work both ways.”



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A Mathews Company employee smooths out the base of a grain dryer at the manufacturing facility in Crystal Lake.



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