

EARTH

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**Community Recycling Emphasizes
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Waste Recycling After Success
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Greg Kuno Builds Loyal Customer Base with Integrity, Expertise & Cat Productivity



Above: These luxury view project sites in south Orange County are a specialty of Greg Kuno. He has developed a special expertise in coping with the size, multi-level excavations, and frequent change orders required by the owner, the architect, planners, soils technicians and regulatory agencies. This particular lot covers an estimated five acres.

Heavy equipment contractors come in all varieties and sizes. Surely one of the kind easily admired are those who graduate from owning and operating a single machine into a company that owns a half-dozen units and employs six to ten or more people.

The owner-operators who grow successfully, despite small beginnings, seem to have several things in common. First, they are willing to work hard for long hours when necessary—although they always feel badly about the impact of an absence from their family. Second, they give every customer a decent job for the

money, conscientiously doing their best—even when the contract isn't paying for it. Third, they enjoy working with people. This helps them attract responsible customers and hold onto good employees. Fourth, they never let a few years of high income destroy their sense of proportions when it comes to Money vs. Values. And fifth, they learned early on the benefits of reliable, productive Cat equipment and the advantages of strong product support from a first class dealership like Shepherd Machinery.

A case in point is Greg Kuno, one-time apprentice-trainee for the Orange County Sanitation

District. Greg developed skills at operating a variety of heavy equipment during those early years. He left the county to work for three years to learn hillside site development from a contractor specializing in that field. Greg subsequently formed a partnership with a friend to do the same kind of specialty work. The team dissolved after five years for a variety of reasons, including a recession.

Nine years ago, (1987) and struggling to keep going on his own, Greg bought a new Cat 416 Backhoe Loader from Shepherd Machinery. "It was all I could afford at the time," he admits. His wife, Rachel, worked as a physical therapist. They had a four-year-old daughter, Christina, a six-month-old son, Nathan, and mortgage payments on a house in Orange County.

"I planned only to try to make a living doing backhoe work and site grading for local homesites," Greg recalls.

Sound familiar? Greg's situation has probably been duplicated a thousand times over in

Below: Greg Kuno started out on his own nine years ago, but not before spending almost 11 previous years learning to operate heavy equipment. His first machine was a Cat 416, which, after 7300 meter hours, he replaced with a 416B. Wear was not the reason for the trade. What he sought was all-wheel drive and a multi-purpose bucket.



Southern California since the 1950s. Like most owner/operators, when he started out, he was only trying to make a living.

Within a year and a half after acquiring that first Cat 416, Greg had put 2800 hours on its meter. This shows he was not only working some pretty good hours, but also that his machine must have had minimal downtime.

"I grew simply because customers kept calling and asking for more grading and excavating," he explained in an article published in a 1990 issue of Earth Magazine. "Fortunately, the 416 never let me down."

But even at this early stage in his company growth, Greg had already acquired two other machines. One was a Cat 953 Trackloader bought used from Shepherd. Another purchase was a Cat 963 Trackloader, also purchased used from Shepherd.

Today, about nine years after buying his first 416, Greg Kuno still owns and works daily with the 953 and 963, although both have been busy enough to warrant engine rebuilds. The original 416 (with almost no downtime and no major component work) was traded in at 7300 hours, but this was not because of wear. Greg says he wanted all the new features of the 416B, as well as all-wheel drive and a multipurpose bucket. In addition to those three machines, Greg today owns a D6H, a small skiploader for fine grading, and a GMC lube and maintenance truck, which is uti-



lized by maintenance mechanic Russ Morgan.

Greg's wife, Rachel, owns and manages a small equipment haul and trucking company. Avery Transportation has a 300,000 mile Peterbilt tractor, a low-bed trailer and an end-dump trailer. Greg hauls his own equipment and that of a few friends, and tries to haul as much of his own dirt as possible.

Just recently, Greg has taken delivery on a late-model used Cat 950F Loader from, as always, Shepherd. Greg now has a contractor's license, but he often operates this loader or other equipment when the workload just won't let up—and also because he really enjoys being at the controls of a productive machine.

There are now two women working in the company office, Rachel and his sister-in-law, Vicki. There are a half-dozen full time operators and laborers. Greg is proud that several of them can work alone at a jobsite, unsuper-

vised, and turn in a productive, well-managed day. A good friend is brother-in-law, John Verdugo, whose father was a well-known local grading contractor. Greg is grateful for the education John gave him in estimating. Greg was able to return the favor by introducing John to the 416B. Verdugo recently bought one of these from Shepherd to add to his spread of 935, 955L and 977L Trackloaders.

"John just plain prefers front engine loaders," Greg explains. Greg also expresses admiration for the job John did in helping clean up and rebuild almost all of the fire-damaged areas of Laguna Hills after the recent fire.

The projects undertaken by Kuno's Backhoe Service (somehow the name doesn't seem to fit anymore) are never a piece of cake—and that probably accounts for the company's success. Greg specializes in excavating and grading luxury and view homesites on what is often

Above, right: In many cases, Greg has another tractor, usually his D6H or the 963, pushing the material into a loose stockpile for the 950F Wheel Loader. On one recent occasion, the 950F loaded 428 loads in five days, averaging 80 loads a day. The peak export was 107 loads a day. Usually 16-20 trucks are running on such occasions.

Right: Greg will usually have two or three machines working simultaneously on a single site, but on this particular project, he has almost all six of his units on the job. This includes the 950F, the 416B, the D6H, the 953, the 963 and a small skiploader. On many days, Greg's truck and end-dump carried away the export.





Left: As often as possible, Greg tries to bring the trucks into the excavation area to load. As the work progresses, this often becomes impossible. By using the Cat 950F for the export loading work, he has greatly reduced wear on the trackloaders' undercarriages, regardless of where it is necessary to position the haul equipment. The new Cat 950F loader has also speeded production.

difficult terrain. Not only are the initial designs complex, but they are often subject to change as the owners, architects, planners, soils engineers and governmental regulatory agencies change their minds or discover new reasons to complicate and frustrate work progress.

It thus takes patience, tact, resourcefulness and a spirit of compromise to bring these kinds of projects to a successful completion. Greg has all these qualities, and more. That is why he has come such a long way from those years as an apprentice on the solid waste landfill, or as the owner of a single 416 struggling to survive on small jobs. His rate of growth has consistently been 20% a year.

At the recent job in the coastal hills south of Laguna, at which many of the accompanying photos were taken, the sloping lot covered an estimated five acres. The foundation plans called for multi-elevations, each one with critical line and grade. The final

export consisted of 428 loads. With 16-20 trucks running, and with his D6H pushing to the 950F, Greg was able to average 80 loads daily, hitting a peak of 107 loads on one day.

The front sewer hook-up went down 22-24 feet, for which Greg rented a 325 Excavator from Shepherd as well as a shield from Trench Shoring. Even then, the ditch opened up on a 1:1 slope for a cut 35 feet across at the top. It had to be done in a tight 2-3 day sewer hook-up.

On another job in the same vicinity, Greg was working on a two acre site that probably comprised four lots overall. The final residence started out to be 55,000 sq. ft. but was scaled back to 40,000. Again, there were multi-elevations for the structural pad, each one critical. There were back cuts to within 1/10 ft. standards. The export was 35,000 yards of dirt, plus 60 loads of rock to the crusher. In addition, there were 23,000 yards of excavation and recompaction in a varied rock field buried under

the pad site by previous work in the area. For this project also, the street sewer connection was made at 22-24 ft.

Early on, Greg Kuno gained a wholesome respect for Cat-built equipment. During his three years with the hillside site specialist, he worked with two small trackloaders of a different make. Then, during the partnership, the team started with a non-Cat trackloader but occasionally had to rent a Cat 953. That unit proved to be so much more reliable and productive the partners eventually bought it. Over a five-year period, the partners wore out two non-Cat trackloaders, both at 3000 hours. The 953 was a different story. Greg's operator is still running it today, with 15,000 hours or more on the meter, and it performs very reliably.

"After operating other makes of tractors and backhoes, I'm convinced that the reliability factor is 200% to 300% greater with Cat," Greg declares.

Because of the 953's size limitations, but conscious of its rugged reliability, Greg also bought a used 963 from Shepherd. This machine is also still working in his spread. When Greg finally traded in his original 416 on a 416B, he didn't even bother to ask for turbocharging—he was that confident of the available power. On the other hand, there were some features upon which he insisted and which are now paying big dividends.

"After working with the new machine and its four-wheel drive and clamshell bucket, I would never go back to anything else," he declares. "The new hoe seems to have a little more power, but what I wanted was more traction, especially when going up and down hills. The multipurpose bucket has reduced by half our cut-in time because we're not wiping out the foundation lines chasing around for dirt as we clear away the spoil. We lose a little bucket capacity, maybe 10%, but then the 416 is not supposed to be used for pro-



Left: Kuno's 416B is dozing cut material forward to build up a wider turn for the bottom dumps which must make it into the excavation to facilitate loading. A few minutes ago, the 416B was dozing and turning simultaneously to move cut material into the hole for Kuno's 950F to load out. It is when dozing heavy loads and especially when turning at the same time that the four-wheel-drive really begins to pay off.

duction loading anyway. That's why I bought the 950F.

"At 3800 hours on the 416B, we've had absolutely no problems. A little leak in the boom extension is all that I can recall. I really love the new teflon wear slides for the stick extension. It's so fast and easy to slip in new shims."

An even more enthusiastic commentator is Steve Porter, operator of the 416B. Steve at one time had his own backhoe company but used a different brand. Loyal to a product line that had served him satisfactorily for years, Steve says he was not impressed with early 416's, but now thinks the 416B is an altogether different story.

"I like it real well," he declares. "It has exceptional balance, especially on the slopes, even without counterweights. It has really strong power for its size. I recall one slope that was so steep we had to rappel down to the bottom. You could look between your feet and see the heel as you descended. The 4WD 416B drove up and down that slope like it was on cogwheel tracks.

"Mechanically, the 416B has been perfect—trouble-free since day one. These Cat backhoe models are just getting better and better. I don't know what they'll come up with next."

As it just happens, Greg Kuno does know what's coming up next. He's been to the Cat proving grounds at Tucson. He's seen the future—and it works!

"Cat is about to introduce a crab-steer model of their backhoe loader line," says Greg enthusiastically. "It's unbelievable what the Cat all-wheel steer machine can do on the slopes. It can go over the top and work parallel to the slope to achieve almost anything you want. I've seen these and demo'd them. They're the most versatile backhoe ever built. It's the one design improvement that can make me think this early about trading in my 416B."

Next to the upcoming Cat

Right: The cartoon on Kuno's 416B Backhoe Loader boom illustrates an interesting advantage of Caterpillar's curved boom design. Operator Steve Porter was at first cool toward the Cat line of backhoe loaders, but this new 416B has won him over completely. "It has been trouble-free since day one," he declares.



416C All-Wheel Steer models, the great love of Greg's professional life is his Cat 950F Wheel Loader. He bought it from Shepherd with only 938 hours on the meter, so he figures he now owns what is virtually a new machine for a substantial savings.

The first big advantage to the 950F says Greg, is that he's no longer wearing out tracks on his 953 and 963 loaders. As the luxury view lots become larger and call for deeper foundations, there's more and more export which must often be carried to the curb. There's a huge time factor also. Greg now tries to stockpile export so there's at least 100 loads a day going out.

"I'm also saving a lot on fuel," observes Greg happily. "Whereas I used to burn 50-60 gallons of diesel a day loading with the 963, I'm loading more trucks now with the 950F and using only 25 gallons. That's the advantage of using the right equipment for each application.

"On these jobs, I'm probably working for the wealthiest people in Orange County," continues Greg. "A good relationship with

the customer is very important at the front of the job as well as at the back.

"I'm real proud of our reputation. That means never having had a job complaint or having to fight with anyone before the State Contractors Licensing Board. We've never had any settlements. I figure if we do quality work, clean work, and try hard to work in a spirit of goodwill and friendly cooperation, we won't have any trouble. So far, the policy has paid off just great.

"Shepherd has been a wonderful supporter all these years," Greg summarizes. "The company has extended me some really good financial deals. Their parts and service support has been unsurpassed. The company has really lived up to its warranty obligations, proving to me how much better it is to deal with a reliable supplier who has integrity rather than try to save a few thousand at an auction or in a private deal. In addition to all this, Shepherd has sent me twice to Tucson, where I learned things I could never have found out anywhere else." ■

Right: Operated by Tom Sherman, Kuno's 963 is at work on another coastal view site in the same general area. The excavation is for a residence that started out at 55,000 sq. ft. but has been scaled back to a more conservative 40,000 sq. ft. because the owner didn't want to overdo it.

