

Benjamin Dutton: Icon of the Equipment Industry



Ben Dutton, executive vice president of Equipment Corporation of America (ECA), was born and educated in Philadelphia and now lives in nearby Springfield, Pa. However, he is no stay-at-home. He spends almost three quarters of his working hours traveling to manage the firm's growing number of locations, now eight.

Dutton began college after accepting an offer to play football at North Carolina Wesleyan College, Rocky Mount, N.C. The school cut the program when he started and Dutton returned home to Philadelphia, where he studied accounting at Saint Joseph's University. He never worked as one. Instead, while he was still in college, he began to sell construction equipment for a local company as a commissioned salesman while still attending classes. That first venture into equipment sales seems prescient now.

After working in his dad's paving and excavating company for three years, he decided to return to his old career path, selling construction equipment. His first interview was at ECA. The interviewer turned out to be the father of a high school football teammate and the pair just "talked football" for quite a while. Dutton got the job, which was only 2 miles from his house, and never left the firm.

ECA was founded in 1918, by several Midwestern firms that wanted to create an outlet for their trade in equipment and machinery. The group was one of the first to promote renting equipment. Dutton has

worked there since 1975. Now a \$70 million company, ECA began with selling and leasing commercial and industrial equipment as well as defense surplus equipment. One of its first agreements to sell new equipment was with MKT Corporation which manufactured pile driving equipment. This was the beginning of the company's evolution into a foundation construction equipment company.

Family-owned Firm

Dutton has had a long and successful career, and has especially enjoyed working with the Kerns in the family-owned firm. The Kerns did not found the firm but have built on the original 1918 concept, and over the years, the firm has improved by adapting to many types of foundation equipment. Roy Kern is the president of ECA. Asked how he would describe Ben Dutton's personality, he said "lots of it!" Kern says Dutton is outgoing and funny, and connects with employees and customers. Recently after an industry meeting, Dutton delivered an hour-long standup comedy routine and had the audience "mesmerized," telling jokes and stories about the equipment business, according to Kern.

ECA has grown from 20 employees in 1975 and now has over 80 employees, says Kern, and this growth is "largely due to Ben Dutton." Dutton has a broad knowledge of the foundation equipment industry and products, plus a great memory about the industry's history. He has been Kern's "right hand man." Kern says he could not have overseen the growth without Dutton — a problem solver who learned about the industry and the equipment on the job, and is well respected by employees and customers. Dutton also travels 70% of the time and his mobility has been key to the company's success.

Dutton greatly admires a self-made man in the equipment business, Jim Harmston, whom he met at an ADSC meeting while checking out of a crowded hotel 20 years ago. Harmston started out as a crane operator, bought out a small

company and built it into a successful firm, Foundation Services, and eventually sold it to Hayward Baker, which is owned by Keller. Dutton talks to Harmston daily, and the latter man even has a "Dutton Suite" at his own home in Greensboro, N.C. Dutton is an "icon in the equipment world," says Harmston, and "everyone knows and respects him; he is a go-to guy, who doesn't just push his own products. Dutton is very fair, very knowledgeable, very outgoing and has high standards."

Another colleague whom Dutton has known for years is Bob Tuleya, of Tuleya Pile Foundation. They met over 35 years ago and have traveled to Europe, including two ECA/Bauer sponsored trips to Schrobenhausen, Germany, and to Italy and Hawaii. Tuleya says Dutton displayed remarkable organizational skills in managing the 40 trip participants — overseeing meals, housing and transportation for everyone. Part of one trip included Dutton wearing lederhosen, a bow to the German location. He furnished the reluctant Tuleya with a pair of his own.

Tuleya notes that everywhere he goes, someone knows Dutton and speaks well of him. He extends that compliment to ECA, calling it a "top of the line firm," always reliable, and one that always solves any problems. Tuleya offers a reflective view on their multi-year relationship, saying "the construction industry can affect one's values and integrity. Not only has Ben Dutton maintained his, these attributes have grown stronger."

DFI Involvement

The Deep Foundations Institute played a role in Dutton's career early on. He was invited to DFI's inaugural meeting by Bob Compton, who along with Jack Daugherty and others, co-founded DFI. So Dutton was a witness to DFI's birth and has been a loyal member during its subsequent growth. He commends Theresa Engler, DFI's executive director, for her success in overseeing that growth.

Dutton says ADSC, PDCA, AED and DFI are all devoted to giving back to our industry. He calls the foundation industry the “invisible” infrastructure. “You can see a bridge,” he says, however the foundation is the most important part of any structure, but it’s invisible. He says all the industry groups educate the public about deep foundations and their importance. DFI is probably more diverse, with its many short courses and conference papers and its own research programs, providing an excellent source of information.

Looking Ahead

Dutton sees growth in the deep foundations industry, mainly because the infrastructure is critical to the U.S. economy. He notes that legislation impacts the construction industry, citing the FHWA’s reaction to earthquakes, that of mandating seismic criteria for bridges and highways. This new design criteria helped the foundation drilling industry to surpass all other foundation technologies. The economy is always a factor as well.

The business model for ECA changed in 1975, the year Dutton joined the firm. Originally ECA bought and sold used equipment of all kinds; they would buy anything cheap in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia and turn it into a profit, he recalls. The new model has evolved toward foundation equipment, much of it imported from Europe. ECA has a calculated growth strategy with exclusive distribution east of the Mississippi and Eastern Canada. They are a full-service equipment dealer actively involved in the distribution of foundation construction equipment, and they service what they sell. In March 2015, ECA acquired New England Construction

Products, Taunton, Mass. Then in August, the firm added Pile Equipment of Green Cove Spring, Fla.

Summing up the current construction scene, Dutton says ECA works in major markets with many multi-billion dollar projects, such as the new Tappan Zee Bridge in New York, most of the stadiums east of the Mississippi River, the rebuilding efforts at Ground Zero and many other high-profile projects. We “can go up or down, depending on those projects,” he says. Dutton also notes the growth of private/public partnerships as another aspect of their current business. Underlying all projections, says Dutton, is the fact that a “healthy infrastructure is critical to our economy and necessary to support the growth of our nation.”

Combining Golf and Charity

Dutton recently played 74 holes of golf in a dawn to dusk charity for deserving caddies. His own caddy for years won one of these scholarships and went on to Temple University. Dutton’s personal charity included some very big tips. In his private life, golf looms large. He has been on the board of directors of his golf club, and has coached youth football, baseball and basketball. Dutton attributes the success of his career to the support of his wife, Mary Jane. Over their 43 years of marriage, and often reminded by her that “I was only home for 21 of them,” they have raised a family with two sons, two daughters, two grandsons and two granddaughters. In addition to his passion for golf and sports, he has been active in local Corvette clubs and has chaired local Corvette car shows.

Virginia Fairweather



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