



Even though he has two GHS decks, Coates usually mulches clippings as he does on this property's winter rye.

Mowing for all the right reasons

Les Coates, owner of Lawns by Les, has been in business 24 years. He has a beautiful family, nice home, and operates a successful landscape maintenance business in the Phoenix suburb of Litchfield Park. Yet, he's not bashful about saying success didn't come easily, nor

was it originally built on the right predication.

"I think a lot of people get into this business just to make money," says Coates. "Young entrepreneurs oftentimes put revenue ahead of important issues such as buying good equipment and having the proper credentials and insurances. Or, they wait



Les Coates has owned more than a dozen Walkers. He says that operating good equipment and keeping it maintained leaves a good impression on customers and employees alike.

too long to trade in a mower, again because of money. Or, they take on a large account that will double their business overnight, without thinking about the consequences if that account suddenly disappears.”

Coates admits that early on in his career he was guilty of some of this thinking and paid dearly for it. As they say, however, experience is the best teacher, and this operator has put the experience, but not the lessons, behind him. Today, his full-service landscape maintenance company has 20 homeowner association (HOA) properties and a handful of high-end, residential homes. They employ seven people, including his son Remington and five-year lead man, Isidro Perez. Two crews drive snappy-looking, cab-over Isuzu trucks, one of which is equipped with a work-body ideal for carrying tools and irrigation repair parts. The other pulls a 26-ft covered trailer for hauling around a covey of hand-held equipment, two Walker Mowers, two Excel Hustler

mowers, and a couple of Honda trim mowers. The trailer also houses an air-compressor for filling up flat tires, blowing off equipment, and operating air tools.

DECISION TIME

The owner of Lawns by Les started mowing lawns in 1981 during his first semester at an area junior college. His track coach asked him to mow his aunt’s lawn, which Coates agreed to do for \$12 a cut. “When the

minimum wage was slightly over \$2.00 an hour, the job looked pretty attractive,” Coates recalls. That one lawn led to another in the neighborhood, and another, and within a year, the industrious student was mowing 11 lawns in

between attending classes. He would mow a couple of lawns in the morning, attend a class, and mow a couple of lawns in the afternoon, attend a class, and then mow a couple in the evening. The scenario was manageable until a particularly rainy week forced him to make a decision

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– either attend his 10:00 a.m. class or mow a lawn. He mowed the lawn and never looked back.

“Oh, as I think back, I regret that I didn’t get my degree,” says Coates pensively. “Part of the reason for the regret is that I just haven’t had time to complete my degree since then. In fact, I haven’t even taken a week’s vacation in 17 years.”

What he has done, though, is work. For nine years, he held three jobs, mowing lawns by day and repairing machines at an arcade by night. A paper route from 2 to 4:30 a.m. capped off his day. “One thing I have never needed much of was sleep,” he muses. After nine years of the three-job merry-go-round, he dropped the paper route and settled for six years of having only two jobs. Today, it’s one job – and one job only.

Looking back at those early years, he was not particularly fond of mowing with a push mower or using a hand clipper. It wasn’t long, though, before his girlfriend Becky (now wife) emptied out her savings account to buy him a labor-saving string line trimmer, and she was indirectly involved with his first Walker Mower purchase.

“Ironically, Becky’s parents mowed lawns, and they may very well have had the first Walker in the Phoenix area,” Coates remembers. “To make a long story short, I liked their mower, especially its zero-turn capability and small 36-inch deck that allowed me to use a riding mower in a gated backyard. After only a year in business, I purchased one for myself and eventually doubled the number of accounts without having to add an employee.”

The new mower also enabled him to bid on a townhouse complex, and his business gradually transitioned to the commercial market, where

bigger money could be made. With the money came risks, however, and a few years later, when a large client failed to pay their bills, the young company couldn't weather the storm. Coates had to sell everything, and literally start over from scratch.

"The experience taught me a couple of important lessons," he adds. "Experts talk about slow, controlled growth, but until you experience what the consequences of growing too fast are, you won't really appreciate what they're saying. In addition, I originally took on that big job because it paid \$750 a week, not because it was a property that I necessarily wanted to maintain. Now, I take a close look at every property before I think about how much it can generate. My feeling is, if the property is right, the money will be there for you."

SMART OPERATOR

"Over the years, I've learned that a business has to take priority, not just in theory but in practical terms, too" says Coates. "After all, it generates income that ultimately clothes and feeds one or more families. Once an owner grasps that reality, business planning, having a professional image, equipment and

equipment maintenance schedules also begin to take priority."

He continues, "Operating good equipment and keeping it maintained also leaves a good impression on employees. If you put yourself in their shoes, would you rather work for a company that supplies you with top notch equipment to get the job done, or with a company that expects you to be productive with an old mower or second-rate string line trimmer that never starts?"

Coates feels that he has the best equipment money can buy, and he keeps it relatively new by trading mowers every 1,500 hours and hand-held equipment every year. He also carries a maintenance log on all his equipment, and is loyal to his dealers.

"When you are loyal, your suppliers will return the favor," he emphasizes. "They will give you a fair price and be there when you need them."

Lawns by Les has owned more than a dozen Walker Mowers. Currently, they operate two 26-hp, fuel-injected models and have two 42-inch GHS decks, one 42-inch mulching deck and one 52-inch mulching deck. "Most of the time, we use the mulching decks," says Coates. "They do such a

thorough job that clients can hardly tell the difference between collecting clippings and mulching. The 52-inch deck, in particular, does a great job filling in dry spots and bare areas in the turf. After the mulched Bermuda grass takes hold, the lawn looks even and great."

Keeping turf and plant material looking great in Phoenix is even more challenging than usual, thanks to near-record dry conditions and rising water costs and use restrictions. Coates, for example, spends a lot of time working with homeowner association boards to make irrigation effective, yet affordable for them.

A typical association for him may include 40 or 50 homes, and, depending on the property, the Lawns by Les crew maintains the landscape right up to a homeowner's front door.

Coates is usually very accessible because he works alongside his crew, something he says that both employees and customers appreciate. As he points out, being in business is not just about making money, it is about making the right decisions – about doing a good job, about having a passion for your work, and about taking care of your business. **WT**

Les Coates with lead man Isidro Perez.

