

Nada Pacific

Teamwork Leads to Success

By Nick Zubko



Cal Terrasas (left) and Steve Buntich have led Nada Pacific from a startup joint venture to one of the West Coast's premier microtunneling contractors.

It was once thought that a company could be quite successful if it did one job, but did it well. But in the unpredictable microtunneling field, a company needs the versatility to complete a wide range of projects — coupled with an ability to adapt to the constantly changing industry — to even compete.

One of the best ways to obtain that versatility is to pool the resources of qualified, experienced and reliable partners. When Pacific Boring Inc. and Mladen Buntich Construction Co. first realized the potential of the microtunneling industry back in 1992, they pooled their experience and expertise and created Nada Pacific Corp. As the first microtunneling company established in California, it has been able to maintain its position atop the West Coast market for a decade. And as quickly as the California market has grown in that time, that's no small feat.

"I think a large part of our success comes from being able to draw from both companies," explained Cal Terrasas, Nada Pacific president and co-founder of Pacific Boring. "The Buntich side supplies us with the expertise in deep shaft construction,

while Pacific Boring can handle the tunneling aspect of the operation. With the combination of both shaft and tunneling expertise, we get a lot of projects done pretty easily."

But to achieve the current level of success, a number of crucial steps were taken over the last several years to make that progression possible. Incorporating what was initially a temporary joint venture was clearly the first big step. Through years of carefully selecting projects and educating owners on alternative methods, Nada Pacific has been able to set itself apart from the industry, while at the same time, encouraging its growth.

From the Ground Up

Delving into a new industry with relatively little experience is a risky proposition, but as Nada Pacific would continue to exhibit throughout its history, risks with a high rate of success are frequently worth taking. So, based on a handful of successful collaborations, and the burgeoning microtunneling market on the West Coast, Pacific Boring and Buntich Construction created the

Nada Pacific joint venture.

Named after the "Pacific" in Pacific Boring and Mladen Buntich's wife, Nada, the joint venture was awarded California's first large-scale microtunneling project by the City of Ventura in November 1992. The Bristol Relief Sewer project involved microtunneling 8,900 lf to install 36-in. plastic-lined reinforced concrete pipe. Still virtual microtunneling novices, Nada Pacific experienced its share of difficulties; but through a critical combination of experience, versatility and sheer toughing it out, the fledgling company was able to complete the project on time.

"We really had no idea what we were getting ourselves into — I don't think either of us did," recalled Steve Buntich, Nada Pacific secretary treasurer and Buntich Construction supervisor. "But we had confidence in our abilities and sort of a 'never say die' attitude. I think that's what has gotten us through a lot of the tough jobs. If every job was the same and there were no problems, it would be easy. But it's the ability to work your way through those problems that makes a good contractor."

Completing the project automati-

cally qualified the company as the leading microtunneling contractor in California. Though neither company had a great deal of experience with microtunneling, they realized that it could be the start of something big.

So as their proficiency grew, a handful of successful projects followed. Meanwhile, the demand for microtunneling projects in the area was skyrocketing, and a unique opportunity was now staring both companies right in the face. Buntich recalls thinking, "there wasn't much question of what we had to do."

"We were able to learn a lot and develop an understanding of the industry, so we figured, 'Hey, we're one of the first ones in on this, so there's no better place to be.'"

Risk and Reward

Nada Pacific incorporated in June 1994, but even as the partnership continued to make a name for itself in the industry, something was still missing. After persevering through its first few projects with what it considered insufficient support from a foreign supplier, the maturing company decided to look elsewhere.

Given the longstanding relationship Pacific Boring had maintained with equipment manufacturer Akkerman Inc., it seemed natural to extend that relationship to Nada Pacific. Akkerman wasn't in the microtunneling business back then, but that would soon change.

"They prodded us to enter into the microtunneling marketplace, and in the end, they were probably what finally pushed us all the way in," recalled Maynard Akkerman, president of Akkerman Inc. "But had it not been a Nada Pacific-caliber company, I don't know that I would have wanted to do it."

"Some contractors are willing to work with you, and others aren't. They were, and I think it was a testament to their leadership and to their people."

Nada Pacific now handles one of

the largest fleets of Akkerman microtunneling equipment in the United States. Nada Pacific's input and testing of the initial machines exhibited a trust between the two companies that has become a rare and sought-after commodity. That level of trust continues to this day, as Nada Pacific still regularly provides feedback on a variety of new Akkerman products.

"It's hard to believe that one company can have that much of an influence on another," Akkerman acknowledged. "When you're a young company and you're growing, there are some key situations that play a big role in where you end up down the road ... and establishing this relationship with Nada Pacific has definitely



Nada Pacific completed the Martinez East Side Sewer Improvement Project through busy areas of Martinez, Calif., including in front of the Contra Costa County Courthouse.

been an example of that for us."

New equipment and support allowed the company to take on some of the riskier projects with added confidence. Most of the risks, however, are balanced out by the years of experience that give Nada Pacific the ability to perceive inherent risks. That ability provides an early opportunity to either avoid a project completely or, if possible, lead an owner toward a more promising solution.

Choosing Wisely

While some companies may bid as many projects as possible, Nada Pacific utilizes bidding criteria that keeps it from getting in too deep or

squandering valuable man-hours on the projects destined for failure.

"A lot of the reason Nada Pacific has been successful is because we pick and choose our jobs fairly well," Buntich explained. "We take the ones that we know we can make money on. We're not here to take every job, we're here to take on the jobs we know we can do."

There haven't been very many jobs Nada Pacific couldn't do, which can easily be attributed to decades of experience. But what that experience and background also allows is an uncommon ability to see flaws in a design before a project is ever started. Also uncommon, is that having microtunneled more than any contractor in the state, Nada Pacific frequently advises owners against it.

"Owners often look at microtunneling as the more appealing, high-tech process," Terrasas said. "But in many cases, it may not necessarily be suited for that job. We don't try to force microtunneling on a project that isn't suited for it, so we've done a lot of substitution in the last couple of years."

The company often provides alternative solutions that will be more efficient both for the contractor and the owner, while producing the same end result. That ability is some-

thing some contractors don't have the qualifications to provide.

"Nada Pacific has the ability to look at a project differently than a lot of other contractors," Akkerman said. "Even if a project is specified with microtunneling, they can look at it and decide to microtunnel all of it, some of it, or none of it. That can usually cut some cost, and in a lot of cases, make for a more successful project."

The ability to steer clear of the failures and lead owners toward better solutions comes from the extensive background in tunneling, pipe jacking and auger boring that has allowed Nada Pacific to undertake a wide range of projects. And as a result, much of a project's risk is offset by that versatility.

“With the foundation from the other companies, we are familiar with the limitations of the other machines,” Buntich explained. “Knowing the limitations of both a microtunneling machine and a conventional TBM makes it much easier to look at a project and see what’s really the best way to complete it.”

Staying Ahead

California has become a growing marketplace for microtunneling ever since Nada Pacific formed. But even as the competition has grown, somehow the forerunner of the market has also managed to remain the frontrunner, with more than 80,000 lf of pipeline installed by microtunneling. What seems to make the company stick out more than anything is its ability to look at an overall picture, rather than just a

longer bore, one more project, or having the most microtunneling footage.

No one can guarantee success, but



This project in the San Francisco Zoo demonstrated microtunneling’s ability to minimize disturbance.

taking the proper steps to do a job right is the best way to come close. Nada Pacific’s dedication to making what it believes to be the “right” decisions — rather than the ones that may be convenient at the time —

seems to have had as much of an influence on the industry as any new technology.

And despite the success of the company, that dedication can still be seen today in both owners, who, even now, are rarely found in the office. Each of them can usually be found either on the jobsite, on the way to a jobsite, or down in the trenches. They say that’s where they learned, and that’s the only way to continue learning.

“You learn something in every job,” Buntich said. “And since you can’t learn it all at once, I don’t think that learning curve ever goes away. This industry is always changing, and hopefully, we’re still learning today so that we can keep up.”

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