



Southern Bleacher Co. completed the 49,000-seat stadium at Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif.

Bleacher leader

Joanna Miller Clients turn to Southern Bleacher Co. for bleacher and grandstand projects performed with 'integrity and class,' the company says.

Many school teachers look forward to summer as a time of relaxation, but high school band director James R. Geurin used one summer break to start a bleacher building company. Southern Bleacher Co. got its start in Van Buren, Ark., and later moved to Graham, Texas, located 100 miles west of Dallas. The company is celebrating its 62nd anniversary this year.

According to Vice President Garrett Pettus, the high school needed new seating on its football field. Geurin and a friend, who later became a partner in the business, built the company's first

bleacher and business quickly grew as other schools in western Arkansas took notice.

Pettus describes the early business as "bell curve" with bleachers built in the summer before school began in the fall. "Eight years later, there was a machine shop available for sale in the small town of Graham, Texas," he says. "Mr. Geurin purchased the machine shop in 1954 for work in the off-season doing oilfield work such as collars and rebuilding pumpjacks."

Today, Southern Bleacher is in its third generation and employs 150 people. Geurin's daughter

and Pettus' mother, Jo Ann Geurin, owns the company with her sons. Her other son, Wyatt Pettus, also serves as vice president.

It will install approximately 300 grandstand and bleacher projects this year with an average capacity of 2,000 people, Pettus says. The company's average project is worth \$300,000, and most are done as part of larger projects. The company works with 35 subcontractor installation crews nationwide. Its 160,000-square-foot fabrication plant in Graham sits on 43 acres.

The company has expanded beyond high school projects and

Southern Bleacher built a 4,420-seat bleacher project for the Chambersburg Area School District in Chambersburg, Pa.



also takes on work at colleges and universities, speedways, rodeo facilities and Major League Soccer (MLS) stadiums. Pettus says MLS, women's softball at high school and college levels, and motorsports such as NASCAR, National Hot Rod Association and other organizations are all growing in attendance.

Southern Bleacher was recently awarded the American Galvanizers Association's Excellence in Galvanizing "Most Distinguished Award" for the Texas Motor Speedway and Texas Christian University Lupton baseball stadium projects.

In 2007, the company did its largest amount of work in California, followed by Texas, Florida, North Carolina, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania and Utah.

"There is a big emphasis now on a complete athletic complex,"

Pettus says. "The total package of any given project that we are involved with is in the millions. The overall grandstand and bleacher market is conservatively worth \$125 million to \$150 million a year."

Pettus says there is a growing trend of under-bleacher facilities, such as locker rooms, concessions and restrooms. "There is also more emphasis on providing all spectators with better sight lines," he says. "There is less emphasis on the absolute minimum cost and more emphasis on improved sight lines and comfort."

"In regards to new materials being used, we are seeing school colors on rises, backrests and pressboxes and our latest innovation, Vertical Rail, which is a new choice instead of chain-link fencing."

Many stadium project owners and contractors are also request-

ing ramp towers and incline wheelchair lifts for pressbox access as alternatives to elevators. "They also want to use Southern Bleacher's Interlock 2000 decking system for more weather-resistant space underneath," he says. "The deck also provides no penetration."

"The pressboxes have become more important to owners and designers, too," he adds. "They are built much larger than they used to be and are now incorporating amenities such as recessed lighting, cabinetry, carpet, sloped front wall and central heat and air. Sometimes, the owner will request private suites or partition walls in his or her pressbox."

Southern Bleacher is the largest bleacher manufacturer in an industry with only six players. Pettus says, adding, "Our closest competitor is Sturdisteel in Waco, Texas."

He says the company's long list of satisfied clients is a testament to its successful business practices. "We take great pride in treating our clients with respect and honesty, and we conduct our business with integrity and class," he emphasizes. "Not all companies can state this. Most importantly, our dedicated sales professionals are the most knowledgeable in the stadium, grandstand and bleacher industry."

This year, the company is donating a 750-seat softball stadium to the Graham Independent School District in honor of its six decades in business. In 1996, it donated a 1,500-seat baseball stadium to the district for its 50th anniversary.

Pettus says 2007 was the company's best year in its history, with \$97 million in sales, and 2008 may be even better. ■