

# TEAM LEADER



*Prior to George Bush's election as President of the U.S., Neil Zundel met him at a conference where the two former collegiate athletes had the chance to reminisce about baseball games between Princeton and Yale.*

NEIL ZUNDEL'S  
GREATEST  
ACCOMPLISHMENT AS  
PRESIDENT OF AISC WAS  
FOSTERING A CLOSER  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
FABRICATORS, STEEL  
MILLS AND OTHER  
MEMBERS OF THE  
CONSTRUCTION  
COMMUNITY

**By Scott Melnick**

**E**VEN AFTER AN 11-YEAR TENURE AS PRESIDENT, THERE ARE NO PICTURES OF NEIL ZUNDEL at AISC's headquarters in Chicago. If you read back issues of AISC News or Modern Steel Construction, there are few—if any—quotes from Zundel. Yet, by all accounts, he was an amazingly effective leader and a presence which will be felt long after his retirement at the end of last year.

According to some, it was exactly that willingness to avoid the spotlight that made him so effective. "He's a super salesman, but he was also a very discreet president," explained John H. Busch, currently president of AISC-associate member Busch Industries and the chairman of AISC when Neil was hired. "He's excellent at bringing important issues to the board, guiding them, but letting them take all the credit."

Zundel's leadership skills were honed at a young age. He was born in Plymouth, UT, grew up in Brigham City, UT, and began his collegiate career at the University of Utah in 1942. A year later, he left school and enlisted in the marines. The marines thought he was officer material, but at that time required two years of university for its officers (he ultimately became a first lieutenant and was stationed in San Diego). After taking a battery of tests, he was accepted into Princeton, where he studied economics, math and chemistry—and where he excelled at both football and baseball. In football, he played center, linebacker and was the team's punter. More impressively, in an era before side-line play-calling, Zundel was given the responsibility of calling his team's offensive plays and in setting their defensive formations. How good was he? After his senior year, he was selected to the All-East team and invited to play in the East-West game. And his leadership skills were impressive enough that after graduation he was offered a job as an assistant football coach at Princeton. But as good as he was on the gridiron, he was perhaps even better in a baseball park. He was primarily a catcher, though he also played some first base and he was known as much for his pas-

sion for the game as for his consistency. In his worst season, he batted .375, in his best, .400. And after graduation he was offered a contract with the Detroit Tigers.

### THE REAL WORLD

But as tempting as it was to continue his athletic career, he opted instead to enter the business world. "I was a husband and a new father and my responsibilities to my family came first," Zundel explains. "And in those days, the business world brought job loyalty and security." Two job offers attracted his attention: one with Chase Manhattan Bank and the other with Reynolds Aluminum Corp. While today neither might seem particularly glamorous, in the 1940s, aluminum was a hot material—it was a young and growing industry with nearly unlimited opportunities.

After a three-week training session, he was assigned as a sales representative working out of Los Angeles and selling a variety of industrial products, ranging from aluminum sheet and plates to bars and rods. After three years, he was sent to Salt Lake City to open a new sales office, and three years later he found himself at the National Sales and Marketing Office in Louisville as Reynold's assistant marketing director. Near constant movement came with career advancement. "When the company said move, we moved. If you were on a career path, you moved to advance. Fortunately for my family, most of the moves came during summer months so it didn't involve my children changing schools in mid-term," Zundel says. A few years later, that office was moved to Richmond, VA, and Zundel was promoted to marketing director. Next was a stint as general regional manager in Philadelphia and then he was promoted to vice president of Reynolds Aluminum Sales Company. Seven years later, he returned to Richmond as Vice President and General Manager of Reynolds Mill Products Division. Finally, after four more years, he was promoted to Group Vice President and President of Reynolds' German division—and he was made a member of the company's board of directors.

It was while at Reynolds that Zundel developed his leadership style, which emphasizes giving individuals great responsibility. Years before "employee empowerment" became an industrial

buzzword, Zundel had put it into practice by giving greater authority to work teams on the shop floors. "They know their job best and they know how best to improve their work," Zundel says.

During his time with Reynolds, the company expanded dramatically and developed many of the products, such as aluminum siding and aluminum shingles, that we take for granted today. Other major product developments include: advancements in the use of aluminum for trucks and tractor bodies; aluminum railroad cars; a variety of automotive applica-

tions such as a/c units, engine components and decorative trim; and a variety of industrial marine applications.

Despite his position with Reynolds' German division, Zundel was never based in Germany. Instead, he often flew in for short stays. During the 1970s, it wasn't unusual for American executives to be kidnapped and held for ransom. Reynolds, as did many other large companies, offered its executives a driver—who would also act as a bodyguard and perform such functions as entering a hotel room first. While Zundel turned down that perk, he didn't completely ignore risks. "We were instructed not to take the same flights and to rotate our hotels, and I gladly complied."

By the early 1980s, years of travel had taken its toll. He was burned out at work and deeply involved with personal interests. A member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormonism), Zundel had long been involved in church activities. While based in Richmond, he served a seven-year term as Stake President for Richmond and another seven-year term as regional representative for New



*Golf is a dominating passion with Neil Zundel, pictured here on the golf course with 49ers quarterback Steve Young. Zundel has played in and won several tournaments and currently carries a 13 handicap.*



*Padding was minimal in the days when Neil Zundel starred for the Princeton Tigers.*

England—an activity that involved traveling from Richmond to the New England area nearly every weekend. So, shortly after his sixtieth birthday, Zundel retired.

But not for long. A short time later he received a call from a headhunter. “He asked if I was interested in going back to work and I told him it depended on where,” Zundel recalls. “I was only interested in Chicago, where I had a son, daughter and grandchildren living, or Washington, DC, where I had a daughter and grandchildren living.” Fortunately, the opportunity was with AISC, which was headquartered in Chicago.

“Neil had a lot of obvious qualities,” explained Busch. “He had top management experience with a

major company. He had experience with the construction industry. And he had an obvious flair for marketing.” And the steel fabrication industry had an obvious need for dynamic leadership.

Steel’s share of the construction market had been eroding for some time. While steel once was the dominant material for both buildings and bridges, by the 1980s concrete had made serious inroads in both markets. At the same time, the older integrated mills were reducing their marketing activities—and the newer mini-mills had not moved to pick up any of the slack. One of Zundel’s first actions as president was the creation Project Market Share, an attempt to increase steel’s share of the total construction market. And out of that program emerged AISC Marketing, Inc., a sister company to AISC that was funded jointly by the institute and the major steel mills (today, AISC Marketing includes Bethlehem Steel Corp., British Steel, Inc., Chaparral Steel Co., Geneva Steel, Lukens Steel Co., Northwestern Steel & Wire Co., Nucor-Yamato Steel Co., Oregon Steel Mills, TradeARBED, Inc., and U.S. Steel Group Div. of USX). “The marketing company helped solidify the relationship between fabricators and steel mills and is probably the most impor-

tant achievement from Neil’s early days,” explained Busch.

“Neil helped bring the fabrication community together more and he also improved mill relations,” added Frank B. Wylie, president of AISC-member Grace and Wylie Fabricators, Inc., and a former chairman of AISC. The mini-mills didn’t previously have a relationship with AISC, or really with many fabricators. Instead, they mostly sold material to service centers. “It was important to get all of the key players working together,” Zundel says.

“There’s always been a supportive nature between the mills and AISC, but since Neil became president the relationship has grown even closer,” explained Robert W. Johns, who has been sales manager for Nucor-Yamato for the last decade and previously was with Bethlehem Steel. “There’s a better sense of mission and a better sense that we’re getting greater results for our marketing dollars.”

But Zundel didn’t stop with just closer ties to the steel mills. He also moved to create closer ties with both trade associations, such as the American Welding Society, and with professional organizations, such as American Society of Consulting Engineers. Along a similar vein, in 1987 the institute melded the National Engineering Conference and the Conference of Operating Personnel into one event. The joint conference, which evolved into the National Steel Construction Conference was further movement to bringing different elements of the steel construction industry together. What started as a meeting of fabricators and engineers has today further evolved to include erectors, contractors and architects.

This move towards greater unity in the industry continues today. One initiative begun during his term that he hopes will continue moving forward is the development of a North American Steel Specification and the development of standard steel with a higher yield strength. “It’s important that we develop a common spec, using a common material and a common certification program,” Zundel states. While steel enjoys a good market share in both the U.S. and Canada, this isn’t true south of the border. “And not just Mexico, but also South America.” And, he adds, fabricators in the U.S. should start looking to make alliances with fabricators in

Europe. "In some cases, our fabricators have greater capabilities than those elsewhere and we should try to capitalize on that advantage." In part, Zundel believes that this can take the form of partnering between fabricators and contractors and the growth of design/build work.

At the same time that AISC has fostered closer relationships with other members of the steel construction community, the institute has also expanded its membership base. "There's been a transition in the institute's makeup from domination by a few large fabricators to getting many smaller fabricators involved," states Busch. "It's not just the big guys anymore and Neil has been a great facilitator in that regard," echoed Johns.

### UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Despite these advances, however, Zundel doesn't believe the work is completed and he sees a growing conflict between engineers and fabricators. "The engineering community has abandoned parts of the Code of Standard Practice, but so has the AIA. The issue of design responsibility is very complex and needs to be resolved." During the last year, Zundel has advocated the formation of a Steel Construction Industry Roundtable with representatives from all areas of the industry. "We need to sit all of these groups down together to work out some of these concerns." While work on the roundtable is only in the preliminary stage, Zundel has high hopes for this group in the future.

One thorn in Zundel's side has been the performance of steel moment connections in seismic areas. Despite the problems that arose after the Northridge Earthquake, however, Zundel received high marks for his handling of the situation. Once the problem was identified, AISC committed both time and money to finding a solution, a research effort that continues today. "While the board has taken a more active role than they did in the past, we still rely on Neil for counsel," Wylie explains. "He has a unique ability to see to the heart of a matter, whether it's a marketing issue or a technical matter. He knows how to ask the right questions."

Another area on which Zundel has left his imprint is the institute's involvement with EPA and OSHA regulations.

"It was easy for Reynolds to comply with EPA and OSHA rules because we had a full-time compliance staff," Zundel explains. "Most fabricators, however, don't have the luxury of being able to afford such a staff. Instead, the institute attempted to fill that need." Foremost, Zundel helped establish an education program to let fabricators know what they needed to do to come into full compliance with EPA and OSHA regulations. However, under Zundel's leadership the institute also went a step further and contacted EPA and OSHA officials to help them better understand the fabrication business and to help them better tailor the rules for fabricators. "My position has always been, if an EPA representative walks into your office and fines you for non-compliance, you can't take issue with whether your trade association kept you informed about the regulations, because we certainly do," Zundel states.

"Neil brought to the institute a continuation of our history of integrity and leadership in steel construction," according to Robert P. Stupp, president of AISC-member Stupp Bros., Inc., and a former chairman of the institute. "His involvement in government affairs, engineering matters, education, marketing and, above all, his persistent drive and work effort has helped to maintain steel as the premier building material."

One development that Zundel is extremely proud of is growth of AISC's education program. "We've developed design guides on the university level to help professors teach steel design. And we've helped create excitement among students through the National Steel Bridge-Building Competition. We need to continue this effort to help convince students that steel is not a mature industry, but instead is still exciting and evolving."

Education also may play a role in Zundel's future plans. While golf and his family activities will consume much of his effort, he's also hoping to develop a course about the industrial revolution for a local community college. "I think it's important that students see where industry began and where it is today and how we got there." And who better teach such a course than someone who has not just been an observer of industry in the U.S., but an active participant.

*Editors Note: During the six years that I've worked for AISC, I've had an opportunity to observe Neil Zundel's management skills up close. I, and the rest of the staff at AISC, will genuinely miss his presence, and not just for the bagels he was occasionally cajoling into bringing to meetings.*