

As the president of three affiliated companies—Philip G. Ball Company, Race-West Company, and Sparky's Transportation Corporation—Harris Cutler knows a thing or two about fresh produce. The oldest of the three, Philip G. Ball Company, is celebrating 75 years of service in 2019. We talked to Harris about his responsibilities, what's new, and what lies ahead for the family-owned and operated businesses.

Tell us about your duties on an average day.

There are no average days in our end of the business. We come to work every day with a plan of what we want to accomplish based on the previous day and any areas of concern. Each day brings challenges. Efforts to be fair, responsive, and resourceful set a pace for the future.

We're blessed to have a team with experience, commitment, and focus. We take great pride in the team spirit at our offices in Clarks Summit and Riverdale. Every day we share information, learning, and teaching. We also research trends, recipes, food safety, and new varieties.

As a coach, and at times quarterback, I must have a vision of the entire field and ensure our team has proper support. When necessary, we add to our staff. Our associates are self-driven to achieve great success. In our business, there are no shortcuts. We are responsible for anything and everything that doesn't go just right.

My father, Philip Cutler, had a simple phrase we've come to revere, "Know who you are doing business with." Each day closes with a review and preparation for the following day. I can make four strong suggestions to anyone reading this article: (1) keep an accurate calendar, keep appointments, and get to meetings five minutes early to properly prepare; (2) never overpromise, but always overdeliver; (3) keep copious notes—accurate, readable notes are critical to review actions, reactions in real time, and settle disputes; and (4) always think about the future and what it will look like, then plan, plan, plan.

How difficult is it to juggle three separate companies?

There's a common respect and interest between the transportation and product sides; both have to coexist in fairness and shared opportunity. Our companies are complementary, so it's rare to have conflicts. Philip G. Ball is the original company founded by my grandfather as Ball Brokerage, focusing on

wholesalers and repackers. We continue to do business, 75 years later, with longstanding customers and farmers.

Race-West sets up growing deals and contracts, taking responsibility for product, transportation, and any issues that may arise. Both companies sell produce: Ball issues binding standard memorandums of sale and Race-West issues sales confirmations, purchase orders, and bills of lading—two completely different trading formats.

Sparky's was founded in 1993, in memory of my brother Danny, who we called Sparky. As a freight contractor, Sparky's pays for transportation upon delivery and receipt of signed bills. Our world has gone crazy and no one wants to pay bills in a timely fashion—we do, every day. We've found there's only one way to do business: the right way. Doing things right leads to more opportunity. As president of all three companies, I try to lead my teams in the best way possible. Again, no shortcuts, copious notes, clear understandings, and transparency in everything.

Is any one aspect of the business more challenging than others?

The most difficult part of the business is fluidity of product, the passage of time, and the changing of the guard. Over my 48 years in business, I've lost many close friends to illness and tragedy. New blood is constant. Being involved with new people and next generation family members is awesome. Seeing the transition and losing contact with those who get sick or pass on is something I find very difficult. The tonic, I have learned, is to enjoy constant conversation and anticipate problems. I'm a genius in solving other people's problems, but struggle with my own. At my age, I'm seasoned enough to understand this business is not about the transaction, a quick win, or intimidation. It's about working together so everyone wins and is proud of their trading partners.

Training and being patient pays great dividends. As I get closer to the end of my

trading years, I want our story to be the best it can be as a performance and force for the future. "Never forget where you come from," is a quote from Nate Schiowitz, a mentor, and one I live by every day.

Are you interested in adding new products to your line? More organics?

We've been carefully adding new vegetables to our root category, which is our specialty. We remain open to learning about other commodities and expanding our network of farms and distribution channels. Studying a commodity or commodity group is essential to learn about temperature, perishability, compatibility, and growing calendars, as well as who needs us and to what extent.

We've become more involved in organics. Organic produce has an implied warranty separate from conventional. Organic communities are thriving as conventional farms yield 3 to 5 percent of market share every five years. Ultimately, organic will become the leader. We see ourselves moving deeper and deeper into organics as demand continues to increase.

What's your vision for the rest of this year, and 2020?

The future will be filled with change. Truly, the only constant in the industry is change. Knowing this, we, as a family, and as three companies, must stay focused on our fundamentals. Learning, sharing, showing empathy for our trading partners, working hard, and always trying to master greatness are the tools we use.

We predicted in the past that fruit and vegetable consumption would double, and it's increasing every day. We see plant-based nutrition taking over more and more of the plate as everyone looks toward better health. The government will exert more influence on what support programs provide to clients. The days of poor nutrition as a result of lack of education will draw to a close. Schools will teach children about exercise, nutrition, how to grow gardens, and how to improve

overall food choices. Communities will move toward community gardens. All along the way, fresh produce will receive great publicity and new customers will be hungry. Companies at the forefront of flavor, ease of use, and education will do very well.

Imagine our colleges and institutions focusing on the old adage “an apple a day keeps the doctor away.” As anecdotal as this may sound, we will learn as a society to eat for better health. Pharmacies will be filled with cut fruits and vegetables, prepared foods, soups, and stews, all engineered to replace the medicines that fill our cabinets. Farmers and research scientists will come up with ways to present snackable items sold and served in containers designed by nature.

Then there’s recycling and composting. We, as a society, will save our scraps, peelings, and food waste and reposition them as healthy soil builders for gardens and vegetable patches. Lastly, industry consolidation will continue as major companies have no way to grow except through acquisitions. Wall Street will find its way into our industry and we’ll see strong interest in the healthy products we sell. Can you imagine the excitement a dot-com or startup company could create by engineering a fruit or a vegetable? We have the right product at the right time; investors will be anxious to get into the produce business. Look for green markets to hyperexpand as communities want their citizens to get healthier.

Four generations is an extraordinary achievement; what’s your secret to success?

Honestly, my grandfather Phil Ball’s recipe was treat everyone as if you would have to be with them in the marketplace for years to

come, and be on good terms. Over the years, we’ve done our best to be good to everyone. My father, Phil Cutler, was the great thinker, planner, and the creator of our legacy approach to business. His mantra was “you have to be involved, every day, to be part of something great.” He kept us away from all potential outside owners who would’ve been driven by what could come out of the business, as opposed to what stays in, or is brought in. My father spent most of his produce years struggling, just to have food and clothing for his children. This gave us a tremendous empathy for those in need, which has been a significant driver of our outside interests. Our family is deeply committed to helping those who are struggling, because we know that struggle.

My generation reaped great benefit from such struggles and is emerging from struggle to progress. This progress will manifest itself in future generations enjoying great success. Just what is great success in the produce industry? Great success is constantly remembering the struggles of previous generations and always remembering where we came from. We want to be worthy of the attention and focus of our trading partners and the farms we serve. We are so proud of the farmers who have entrusted us with their product.

Which is your favorite of Patty Bravetti’s “Pop Phil’s Favorite Recipes”?

Patty and I cooked together on Sunday, March 31, to benefit animal shelters and our local JCC (see photo). As you can see in the photo, we’re enjoying each other’s company and following a time-tested recipe. Patty’s gift of being able to take her love and channel it into a delicious meal makes everything she does wonderful. “Pop Phil’s Favorite Recipes” is a great treasure. We hope these

recipes will make people’s lives better just like they do ours. Check them out at www.philipgball.com. Each and every one is beyond words!



What else would you like our readers to know?

We want to give thanks to Blue Book for allowing us to share our thoughts. Blue Book Services is an amazing story of progress, constant improvement, and focus. That’s why we are so enamored with the company.

Our family will not be selling our produce businesses. Our family will not be merging and inviting outside interests to come and change who we are and what we do. We’re just getting started, intend to continue to grow, and will be around for generations to come.

My father and grandfather were joined by greatness to our next, fourth generation. The children are infused with the memory of struggle, the quest for greatness, and a commitment to our friends and industry partners.

Finally, the true definition of learning is to know how much there is to learn; the true definition of greatness is to continue to improve and grow in helping others—the only way to help oneself.



“Have regard for your name, for it will continue longer than a thousand treasures of gold. The days of a good life are numbered, but a good name lasts forever.” - Ben Sira



**CELEBRATING
75 YEARS
OF SERVICE**