She's got 'a ticket to ride'

Jan Beljan, Rachel Therrien and Alice Dye are the only three women among the 200 golf architects in the United States. Beljan and Therrien are profiled here. See page 14 for a story on Dye.

BY VERN PUTNEY

Jan Beljan is high on travel. Golf has been her ticket to faraway places. However, her role as course architect/senior designer for Tom Fazio of Jupiter, Fla., initially brings puzzlement from counterparts in foreign countries.

The latest example came in April in Japan. She later learned from the translator that the greeting party was surprised that a woman would be representing a golf course design firm.

Once it was demonstrated that Jan was a "lady" as well as a professional, she was readily accepted.

She viewed five courses and walked a site for 36 holes. Construction techniques and methods in Japan have improved dramatically, she said, and it is small wonder that there is such a desire for courses there that golf was her ticket to the future. Her long-range goal was to become a "very good golf course architect."

Sixteen years later, she's comfortably in that role with the firm of Geoffrey S. Cornish and Brian M. Silva of Amherst, Mass. Though family and friends were strangers behind the scenes. Kelly the next summer arranged her transfer to the maintenance staff.

"Even so, for pure design, the Old Course and Ballybunion, Ireland, is my favorite," she says.

Continued on page 20

From boots to drafting, Therrien's learned ropes

In the spring of 1973, Bangor (Maine) High School senior Rachel M. Therrien landed a job in the Bangor Municipal Golf Course pro shop.

Though family and friends were strangers to golf, Therrien sensed almost immediately that golf was her ticket to the future. Her long-range goal was to become a "very good golf course architect."

Sixteen years later, she's comfortably in that role with the firm of Geoffrey S. Cornish and Brian M. Silva of Amherst, Mass.

Her path to that position took several detours, each one providing in-depth background. Therrien literally learned all aspects of the game "from the worm's eye view on up," she says.

Shop association with Bangor pro Austin Kelly was pleasant, but nature lover Therrien wanted to experience golf in the field and behind the scenes. Kelly the next summer arranged her transfer to the maintenance staff.

Work hours were long, but the University of Maine at Orono varsity basketball player learned to play golf in off-duty moments.

"Golf," she noted, "encouraged creativity, encouraged communication with people from all walks of life, and can be practiced anywhere in the world."

"Needless to say, personal sacrifice was necessary. Those who have indicated that I did not meet with too much resistance in pursuit of my chosen profession are in error — but I have met and worked with some wonderful people. This never would have happened had I not continued on my chosen course."

Rachel Therrien at the drawing table at Cornish and Silva

Kelsey introduced her to the basics of course maintenance. After three years at Bangor Muny, she transferred to Penobscot Valley Country Club in Orono, where veteran course superintendent Wally Pearson further refined her skills.

Therrien took time out from "hands-on" work to obtain a bachelor's degree in landscape architecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1978, and a certificate in turfgrass management in 1979 from UMass' Stockbridge School of Agriculture in 1979, where she had transferred.

After UMass graduation, Therrien met Ted Horton, then superintendent at Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, N.Y., and joined his staff.

"If ever there is such a place as 'golf heaven,' (course designer A.W.) Tillinghast must be there," says Therrien. "I made the most of this opportunity. I was determined to learn from, listen to, observe all there was to see from this piece of land, this marvelous golf course, and all the people who kept it ticking."

"I am delighted to have been associated with one of the top 10 layouts in the world, just 45 minutes north of New York City's Times Square and within the most populated urban setting in the United States. "Westchester County is an incredible setting for golf courses. I had 40 to study within a 10-mile radius of Winged Foot. I did not keep score while playing Winged Foot because my chief interest was in experiencing, not so much the numbers, but what was required to play either the East or West course. I could reach the greens in regulation if I put my mind to it, but I was more captivated by course subtleties."

After one year at Winged Foot, Therrien moved with Horton to nearby Westchester Country Club in Rye. Her six-year stint there as landscape manager and assistant golf and grounds superintendent for 350 acres of private recreational facilities involved managing 45 golf holes, tennis and related land uses, and preparing the tournament sites for professional golf and tennis.

The long-range task at Westchester was to restore the golf course and club grounds. Holes were rebuilt, reseeded and replanted, fairways contoured and ponds expanded.

"Working with Horton, contributing to and implementing parts of the planning framework for this rehabilitation work was a rare experience. Horton is a most knowledgeable and professional designer, and never fears a challenge," says Therrien.

While pursuing a master's degree in landscape architecture at North Carolina State University in 1988, Therrien was from 1986 to early 1989 project manager/designer with Little and Little in Raleigh, N.C., planning (preliminary routing, final routing, clearing, drainage, earthwork, grading, circulation, erosion control and presentation drawings) to specifications writing and the interior design work that must now takes to design and build a golf course.

Involved in this process are engineers, hydrologists, environmental specialists, landscape architects, land planners, contractors, irrigation specialists, golf course superintendents and agronomists.

Speaking with prospective clients and former colleagues who are discovering to make adjustments to their golf courses as time and use dictate needs are important parts of Beljan's days. She considers slide presentations and seminars vital to educating the public to golf course design.

Beljan's early contacts with contractors and laborers in the United States often were a bit tenuous but she quickly established a good working relationship based on mutual respect.

"Respect," she points out, "can only be earned. That was achieved on daily supervisory jobs by being there as long and working as hard as everyone else — every day, daylight to dusk, on many occasions when few others were there."

Long hours on the course weren't new to Beljan. She hails from a golfing family. Father George and his brothers, Carl, Willie and Andy, were well-known golf professionals in the Pittsburgh/Western Pennsylvania area.

Raised on 450 acres of prime golf real estate, Jan's early days included growing up on a site planned in the mid-1950s to become a four-season family resort. George designed and supervised the construction of the golf course, as well as the initial phases of development.

Continued on page 20

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Continued on page 20

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Continued on page 20
The foundation has grown significantly in both scope of services and stature over the years, said John Jacobs, president of Jacobs Management, with offices in Buffalo Grove, Ill., and Scottsdale, Ariz., who has been purchasing Ram Thunkarkan, a businessman based in Illinois. Thunkarkan will be chairman and CEO. Tim Miles, a founder of John Jacobs' Golf Management, will be executive vice president and chief operating officer. Miles said, "The new association will be looking for a greater involvement in golf facilities for real estate development, both as an asset and as a amenity." The company has consulted in the construction and management of golf facilities. 

Jacobs Management company is sold

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Designing women

Beljan gains respect in the industry...

Continued from page 13

Beljan became a summer and weekend laborer on the golf course under her golf pro-superintendent father. "Of course, I was helped by the fact that I had been the only girl in my class, and so was more self-sufficient and had to work harder and longer than the boys," she says.

A cum laude departure from WVU in 1976 and Beljan returned to her native Pittsburgh to work with the lawn care firm of B.A.D. At his business, he knew I had to be related to either Carl or Willie Beljan (a good Slovenian name and quite rare.)

"He expected to see a nephew and was surprised to find a niece instead. He took an interest in me because of my background, and arranged for me to meet Tom Fazio at the 1978 PGA Championship at Oakmont.

"What a wonderful way to learn golf at such a young age and from the many support facets of golf," she says. When the family moved to Kingwood, Va., Jan enrolled in landscape architecture at West Virginia University on a scholarship.

She continued her love affair with golf, commuting to the university and working at Presto Country Club, initially as a pro shop attendant. Back in April 1977, she was named the next year as assistant superintendent. Her younger brothers and sisters worked in the pro shop. Following to 20 years ago it was quite an oddity to see a woman maintaining a golf course, she recalls.

Jan and her sister Pat, five years her junior, were similar in appearance. "People often would have a hard time believing we were a woman operating equipment. Then they'd wonder how Pat changed clothes and got out on the course on a machine so quickly after taking their money in the pro shop," she says. Jan learned how a golf course could be maintained on a limited budget — with hard work, long hours and total dedication. Dawn till dark, seven days a week, was common during the playing season.

Most assistant superintendents do not have the opportunity to see "the other side of golf," particularly with the members' point of view, said Beljan. "At every club, there are players, male and female, and good and not so good. There was always a conversation of why the low-handicap women should play from the same tees as the high handicappers, because the former generally were young (35ish) and more athletic. So as amusing (or frustrating), it was a way to play that fit me..." she says.

"I have seen golf course management and design work change from much manual effort to skills highly mechanized and technical. More surprisingly, perhaps, I've witnessed a male-focused culture give way to a more cosmopolitan one."