Frye has worked with the best, accepts Kiawah’s test

By Peter Blais

H e has helped Robert Trent Jones, Tom Fazio, Jay Morrish and Pete Dye build courses.

He is head superintendent at the course that just hosted perhaps the most talked-about golf tournament in history—the 1991 Ryder Cup at Kiawah Island, S.C.

So, when George Frye, 35, answers, "I just want to keep learning and advancing in the golf business," it's hard to imagine there is much left for him to learn.

Frye's education began in the golf-rich area of Pinehurst, N.C. He picked up his first club at age 10 and was on the ground crew at Donald Ross' personal shrine by 16.

"I knew back then that all I ever wanted was to work in the golf business," said Frye, who received an associate's degree in turfgrass management from North Carolina State University in 1978.

Frye's first professional stop was a 4-1/2-year stint as assistant and later head superintendent at Seabrook Island, S.C., where he worked with Jones on the Crooked Oaks Course.

Asked for a brief description of the best-known of contemporary architects, Frye said: "Trent Jones is very traditional in his designs. He's worked with many architects (including Jones, George Fazio, Desmond Muirhead, Jack Nicklaus and Bob Cupp). He can adapt to many different design conditions. No two of his courses are the same."

But Frye and his wife Louise, a native of Athens, Ga., missed the Southeast. So when the chance to return to Kiawah as director of maintenance in 1985 appeared, Frye jumped at it.

The island, located 17 miles south of Charleston, had two courses—Gary Player's Marsh Point and Nicklaus' Turtle Point. Fazio had started a third course, Osprey Point, when Frye arrived.

Construction was delayed somewhat because of the resort's sale by a Kawasaki investment company to a group of local businessmen. Landmark Land Co., in turn, bought the golf courses and other amenities from the local investors.

Frye assisted Fazio at Osprey, a course developers asked Fazio to make friendly on the budget and maintenance crew.

"Fazio was very accommodating," Frye said. "We ended up with a course that was a lot of fun to play, with wide fairways and a lot of character. It's a layout that can be very rewarding for the average golfer."

"Tom is very flexible. His designs really take advantage of the land. He creates features that complement the piece of property he has to work with."

While Frye oversaw construction at Seabrook Island, Oak Hills and Osprey Point, his role was more limited at Dye's Ocean Course.

"Pete did most of it," Frye recalled. "Pete prefers to say he builds courses rather than designs golf courses. He really does design as he builds, moving things around until he gets it just right."

"He lived on the course for about a year (1989 and early 1990). He was gone for only about three weeks. Pete directed everything. His crew began grooming the piece of property he has to work with."

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"I'm an extremely quality-conscious individual," he said. "We use every resource available to get the most out of this golf course. Adherence to quality is an important trait. To maintain a golf course properly you want to complement the design with sound management practices that bring out the true character of that design.

And what kind of course was Frye left with once the Ryder Cup hoopla died down? "Pete didn't want to leave us with a maintenance nightmare and he didn't," Frye said. "The turf areas are relatively easy to maintain. It's the natural areas, particularly the dunes, that are the most difficult.

"This is a very sensitive piece of property. We have to spend the time and money to protect the natural areas, food and wildlife that make it special."

The total annual maintenance budget for the four courses runs between $2.3 million and $2.4 million. The Ocean Course and Turtle Point are the most expensive to maintain. Osprey Point and Marsh Point cost a little less.

Among Frye's 60 employees are head superintendents at each course—Jeff Stone at Marsh Point, Wayne Abbott at Turtle Point, Wayne Sellers at Osprey Point and Steve Miller at the Ocean Course.

A new course has sprung up every four to five years at Kiawah since Marsh Point became the island's first 18 in 1976. Enough acreage is available at Turtle Point for another nine or possibly 18 holes, Frye said.

"I enjoy taking a course from beginning to end, producing something that is compatible with good maintenance practices," Frye said. "It's fun visualizing how things could be, putting a green here, figuring how you'd mow around a bunker there."

What will it be financially troubled Landmarks or someone else who develops that land remains to be seen.

"Not knowing what the destiny of current management will be is somewhat troubling," Frye said. "But Kiawah is such a well-planned and developed facility that it will remain one of the top resorts on the East Coast, regardless of who owns it."