Ross lives!

Kay keen to keep lasting influences
By Mark Leslie

If Stephen Kay had never read that feature article on golf course architecture 26 years ago, he might have a teacher of English classics today. Instead, he is a keeper of the classics — golf courses, that is.

"When I was 13 or 14 I read a two-part article in Golf Digest about golf course architecture. I was on the school golf team, and I read that article and thought it was the greatest thing in the world. And I said, 'God, please let me be a golf course architect,'" Kay recalls.

The Lord apparently heard. Following the advice of architects Robert Trent Jones Sr. and Bill Mitchell, Kay followed a well-designed plan that led to a landscape architecture degree from Syracuse University, a turfgrass degree from Michigan State University, and work as both a course and construction superintendent. The result: a six-year hitch as a designer with architect Bill Newcomb of Ann Arbor, Mich., and the launching of Kay's own business in 1983.

Since then, he has gained increasing fame and respect as a champion for the masters of golf course architecture, especially Donald Ross and A.W. Tillinghast.

"I'm glad my career has gone this way," Kay said. "I turned down a chance to do a course in Florida in 1983. I wanted to come back East and renovate some of the old golf courses because I thought they were the best. It's been some years to really learn what their techniques and styles were, to the point where I can go to a course and say, 'This is by Ross or Seth Raynor and do them so well that people won't know that I did it.'"

"This is exactly what I wanted to do and I've done it," Kay said. "I'm very pleased with it."

... while super restores greens to original form
By Frances G. Trimble

Tommy Grisham vividly recalls his first interview with the greens committee at Highland CC in Fayetteville, N.C. It was obvious to the 17-year agronomy veteran that Highland's vintage mid-40s course "was in distressed condition." Yet the committee members were not of a mind to consider major renovation.

"They wanted to know what to do, but at the same time they said, 'Don't...'

... and Crenshaw views classic as player/designer
By Bradley S. Klein

Hidden gems. That is what professional golfer Ben Crenshaw sees in his travels around the world. Once in a while he happens upon a priceless diamond — a golf course with character and memorability, a classic.

Such a discovery occurred last summer when Crenshaw visited The Orchards in South Hadley, Mass. Having signed on to play the Canon Greater Hartford Classic, Crenshaw was on the lookout for a meaningful golf experience.

"I thought of Greenbrier Park in Morgantown, W.Va., and the Golf Club of Georgia. It was one of the early courses... Consequently, we directed everything this year at improving the course."

Hills takes over as president
By Peter Blais

Art Hills can thank the Yellow Pages for launching his career.

The newly elected president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects was a struggling, 33-year-old landscape architect trying to raise five children when he placed an ad in the Toledo, Ohio, phone book. Buried in the space were the words "Art Hills, 350 acres and a dream."

"I had been wanting to get into golf course architecture for some time, and this was the first real break I had," Hills said. "I knew I had to take it."

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Crenshaw scrutinizes Ross with the special eye of pro/architect

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Hartford Open in Connecticut, Crenshaw set out for Massachusetts. His trip was without fanfare. Only the host professional and course superintendent were given notice.

The Orchards was originally built in 1922 as a nine-hole course. A textile magnate, Joseph Skinner, hired Donald Ross to create a sporting layout for his athletic daughter, Elisabeth. She enjoyed the course so much that Ross was asked back in 1927 to add another nine. In 1941, the Skinner family sold the 200-acre site to Mount Holyoke College, whose campus lay in town. The school now administers the course in conjunction with the club membership.

Whenever a golf course boasts the handiwork of Donald Ross, questions are raised as to what this means. Nearly 600 courses across North America claim the honor, though in many cases the authenticity is doubtful.

With The Orchards, however, the pride is fully merited. Ross’s original drawings for the holes are preserved in Pinehurst, N.C., and though it is not known how much time the master himself spent on site, there is no doubt that one of his two senior associates, Walter Hatch, based nearby in North Amherst, was entrusted to oversee construction. Moreover, The Orchards features enough authentic Ross touches as to leave no doubt of its pedigree.

Credit also goes to the current greenkeeper, Paul Jamrog, who combines a thorough knowledge of modern turf science with a classical appreciation of the game.

When he arrived in 1984 as the only full-time member of the maintenance crew, Jamrog found a neglected course, with fairways mowed in straight lines, the greens rounded off, and many of the bunker walls in a state of collapse. Overwatering had led to the loss of native fescue grasses, while poa annua and crabgrass had proliferated from tee to green.

To overcome these problems, Jamrog began a vigorous program of upgraded maintenance designed to restore the course’s natural character. He also convinced the club to hire more full-timers and purchase improved equipment.

In all of this, he was supported by longtime head professional Bob Bontempo. As Jamrog’s maintenance program began to register its effects on the course, Bontempo convinced the membership to seek a national...
Pro Crenshaw enthralled by master designer's touch

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championship. The breakthrough came when the USGA selected The Orchards to host the 1987 Girl's Junior tournament.

The course was in spectacular condition for the tournament, receiving rave reviews from players and officials. It was during a practice round that then-USGA Executive Director Frank Hannigan set history in motion. While watching play on the 4th fairway, he could barely contain his excitement. "I can't wait to tell Ben Crenshaw about this place," he said.

The second hole is a particular favorite among regulars at The Orchards. At 362 yards and straight away, it might not at first glance seem a taxing hole. But about 220 yards down the fairway, the ground starts a steady climb to a postage stamp of a green, not more than 3,000 square feet in size.

Crenshaw hit a short iron behind the pin. As he walked up the slope to the putting green, he saw the severity of contour. The green must have sloped five percent from back to front, leaving him a vertical drop of three feet in a 60-foot putt to the front pin placement.

"It's amazing," said Crenshaw to Jamrog, "Modern architects can't build this anymore. Greens speeds today would make this green obsolete. I hope you never change it."

"No chance," replied Jamrog.

Crenshaw did not appear to be hitting the ball particularly well this day. His concern was not with playing the course but rather with looking at how certain touches enhanced it. It was his way of answering the question, "what makes a Ross course?" It isn't enough, after all, merely to proclaim that some famous person designed it long ago. The real issue is to see how the craftsmanship that made Ross so famous lives on 60 or 70 years later.

Some architects examine visibility from the tee. Others devote themselves to how the green surrounds look from the middle of the fairway. Crenshaw attended to the putting surfaces. And whatever it was he was looking for, he found it at the 5th hole. This is a downhill 157-yarder to a green that rises in the back, then falls off precipitously. The hole looks like a very relaxed inland version of the famed 11th at St. Andrews. And it was at the green that Crenshaw noticed a feature that, for him, made the hole.

"You see those soft little knobs at each end of the green, about midway back?" he asked. "That's what creates the slope, and that's the turning point of the green."

Crenshaw saw the perimeter of green extended to the edge of the fill pad. Yet the outer three or four feet of the putting surface was folded ever so slightly outward. Those two little knobs served simultaneously to steer a well-hit shot inward while redirecting a slightly mis-hit shot away from the center of the green. Over the years, Jamrog had been extending the green surface until it had reached its proper place, just as Ross had designed it.

The 14th is a fine downhill straight-away 4-par that starts from the highest point of the golf course. The Connecticut River Valley is visible to the west, and due north, behind the green, is the ridge of the Holyoke Range. Some years ago, the USGA Golf Journal selected it for its back cover feature on great golf holes. Yet Crenshaw pointed out a feature that neither Bontempo nor Jamrog had ever noticed.

As he walked off the 14th tee, Crenshaw referred to George Thomas' famous book from 1927, Course Architecture in America. "You know how Thomas says that once in a while you can landscape the green so as to suggest the contour of the distant backdrop? Well, if you trace out the top of that mountain, you'll find the basic shape reproduced just below it, in the back edge of the green, right where the mounding breaks off. It just fits in so naturally here."

All of a sudden, Crenshaw's comment had transformed their perception of the hole. What makes a fine golf course is that everything is by design. Features that seem so familiar one time around present themselves differently the next.

The final hole at The Orchards is an unrelenting uphill 4-par to a two-tier green. The putting surface sits virtually under the clubhouse veranda. By this time, it was late afternoon, and word of Crenshaw's visit had gotten out to the membership—or at least to those who, having completed their rounds, were now recounting among themselves the day's goings-on and tragedies.

This made for a convivial reception party. From the middle of the 18th fairway, as Crenshaw prepared to hit his three-iron, there could be no doubt about the fanatic betting and financial stakes - become positively feverish.

You see those soft little knobs at each end of the green, about midway back? he asked. "That's what creates the slope, and that's the turning point of the green."

Crenshaw's ball landed in a greenside bunker, yet more wagering took place. And as the par-putt rolled toward the hole, the anticipation and financial stakes - became positively feverish.

The ball plopped in, the crowd cheered merrily, and Crenshaw waved to them and promised that he'd come up and say hello.

A half hour later, his visit was completed. It was now past eight o'clock, and Crenshaw was eager to return to his hotel. To have dinner with the family. "No, they've already eaten," he said. "But I want to make some sketches of those greens while they're still fresh in my mind."