The shape of things to come: The men behind architects' creations

By Mark Leslie

Art artist, part blueprint follower cum mind-reader, part heavy-equipment operator yet with a soft touch. Golf course shapers are all these things — and more.

"They put the heart and soul into a golf course," Jan Beljan of Fazio Golf Course Designers will tell you.

"They're the prima donnas of our industry. They're crucial to us," said Bill Kubly, president of golf course builder Landscapes Unlimited, Inc.

"You can't overextrapolate how important the shaper is," said architect John LaFoy.

"Shapers literally are architects," said Dana Fry of Hurdzan Design Group in Columbus, Ohio. "They often are designing as they go on a bulldozer."

To golfers, the big names are the Nicklauses, Fazios, Joneses, Palmers, Hills, Morishitas and Cups of the design industry.

To those designers, the big names are the Truman Williamses, Sonny McNeils, Don Thomases, Lewis Stones and Lou Cappellis of the shaping world.

When the Vintage Club decided to do a renovation, the owner asked architect Tom Fazio to make sure he sent shaper Cappelli, who was instrumental in building the original design.

In Puerto Rico they call Cappelli "Louis the Magnifico," Fazio said.

"It shows they like your work and attitude. Workmanship means a lot," said Cappelli, the late George Fazio's personal shaper, who has perhaps worked on more golf courses than any man alive.

"If you do everything else right and you don't have shapers capable of doing what you want, the finished product can be entirely ruined," said LaFoy, of Greenville, S.C.

"The final six inches is what the golfer sees."

"With several architects, we get projects because we have certain shapers," Kubly said. "The architects try to instill in the owners the importance of the shapers. A lot of times the owners will say they can get a local earth mover. 'Why hire shapers?' they ask. It makes a world of difference."

"You can recognize and help you overcome problems, like surface drainage, that you haven't noticed," said architect Ted McNally of Palm Beach, Fla.

"In the end, it's about relationships and people," said Johnny Christiansen, a shaper for golf course builder Landscapes Unlimited, winner of the prestigious Building Congress Award for Craftsmen of the Year in the Baltimore metropolitan area, for his work on the course at left — Caves Valley. The Craftsman of the Year Award is usually presented to masons who work with their hands. Christiansen received the award in November. Bill Kubly of Landscapes Unlimited said 12 people from the Building Congress inspected the site of Tom Fazio-designed Caves Valley, the first golf course built in environmentally stringent Baltimore County, Maryland, in 25 years. The project management company explained to them what Christiansen did with the bulldozer to shape the course.

By Mark Leslie

California wins 'honors' as Toughest State for Permitting

According to a Golf Course News poll of leading course architects and builders, California is in another zone altogether from other states. The Golden State got far more votes than second-place Florida, third-place Texas, fourth-place New Jersey and fourth-place Maryland.

Of the 40 people responding to the questionnaire, 15 tapped California as the toughest, while New Jersey received six first-place votes, Florida five, and Maryland four.

Little consensus was found for easiest permitting state, however, with Texas receiving the most votes among 32 nominees. Nebraska and Louisiana tied for second place.

"It's not 'easy' anymore," wrote architect Clyde Johnston of Hilton Head Island, S.C.

"The inmates are running the asylum," Cupp said.

"You have to have a natural knack," said Marvin Schlanch, who has worked with a number of architects

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Course shapers: Adding substance to form

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over 25 years. "It's like an artist who draws a picture of a mountain. He's an artist. That's in him. You don't learn that. You have to have good eye for it and a feel for building a green. You have a design from an architect and you have to be able to read his mind and know what he's looking for. If you can put those together you can be a shaper."

Yet, Schlauch said, it takes years to be good. He points to his 23-year-old sidekick Casey Fraser as "a natural" who can read blueprints, knows grades and golf, and is beyond his years in expertise.

"Nothing is perfect. Everything is free-flow. It looks like God created it. That's the difference between a bulldozer operator and shaper," said Greg Will, of Classic Land Shapers, a division of Sporting Valley Turf in Lancaster, Pa. "The dozer operator tends to get things more level, round and symmetrical. It's probably easier to have never worked on a dozer before and shape than to change from dozer work to shaping."

Pitches, Dips. Rolls. Bunkers cut into the faces of greens. Shapers have to form a mental picture of all these land forms "and know ahead of time what you're going to do," Ponko said.

Cappelli, who started shaping for George Fazio at the age of 29 in 1959, is particularly fond of bunkers.

"I think traps make the golf course," he said, "their ins and outs, ups and downs, different shapes."

Cappelli feels fortunate he could free-style for so many years when George was alive.

"When I started playing, I got fascinated in the game and I got new ideas from building golf courses," he said. "I saw a lot of greens were small for long holes. The tees were too small and didn't have many angles to shoot from. The bunkers were too round, with no character. There was no variety of lies on the fairways. Things like that. Plus George taught me a lot. I started doing things on my own and he thought they were great. Routing of the holes was mostly on paper. But sight and feel was done the most."

Other shapers who can't freelance so much, have earned their reputations by learning, architects' tastes and tendencies.

"With Trent Jones, we could have phone discussions and I knew exactly what they wanted," said Ponko. "I knew both Roger [lead designer Rulewich] and Trent real well, so when they talked about wrapping a green into a mound, I had a mental picture of it right away."

"Richard and I have developed a rapport when you finish and you can stand back and look at it. I also like to travel. So it fits my lifestyle."

"I never tire of going to work in the morning," Will said. "Everything is different every day. If you take a year to do a course, it's long. You're always working somewhere else. The area is different. The architect is different. Every hole is different. Every green is different."

Crucial inches

The top six inches of soil is the most crucial part of construction. That is where you want your most highly skilled equipment operators working, builders say.

Ground on a course is moved in three ways and by three types of equipment: heavy earth-moving by D6s, John Deere 850s and similar bulldozers; fine shaping by Dls and Dls. They start with something big and whittle away at it. It's shear artistry. No moves are wasted. Shapers don't get the credit they deserve.

For many of the shapers, their reward is the work itself.

"It's a great way to make a living," Ponko said. "I truly love building greens. It's rewarding when you finish and you can stand back and look at it. I also like to travel. So it fits my lifestyle."

"I never tire of going to work in the morning," Will said. "Everything is different every day. If you take a year to do a course, it's long. You're always working somewhere else. The area is different. The architect is different. Every hole is different. Every green is different."