Retaining your team: Palmer has know-how

Ed Seay, the head of Arnold Palmer’s design team for more than two decades, agrees that ego and the ability to flex one’s imagination are major factors in lead designers leaving firms to go on their own. But he feels his boss and partner holds the key to keeping both “the figurehead” and lead designer satisfied.

Arnold’s remarkable guy. He says he always has a good word for others. A lot of other people say a lot of bad about me. But, I like his style and he seems to have a very high degree of urgency,” Seay said. “The Palmers, Art Hills, Ken Kiliarin, Davis Love III, Gary Kern, Larry Packard — they all came out of Robert Bruce Harris’ office,” he said.

Neveretheless, a number of lead designers have struck out on their own from the Robert Trent Jones II International covering. Bob Cupp, who formed his own company in 1985, expects his “Three Musketeers” team never to break up. He said doing projects with agronomist Billy Fuller and construction coordinator Jimmie Griffin is “just wonderful. When you add in John Fought in our Western office, it’s more fun than we should be entitled to have.”

A financial twist if sweetens the fun factor. Cupp and Kite Golf Enterprises partner Tom Kite have established that on projects for larger firms all have spawned protege of some renown. It all shows, said Seay, that building a golf course is a cooperative effort.

The man behind the man

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After all, notoriety usually stops at a firm’s letterhead.

“I’ve thrived and enjoyed it. It’s been a comfortable relationship for me,” said Rulewich, who for 30 years has been a lead project designer for 86-year-old Robert Trent Jones. “I’ve had opportunities to break away. But, probably for lack of initiative and ego, I chose not to.”

“Mr. Jones created opportunities for me and other people to get to work on some great projects, and I was content to do that.”

Asked if he resented not getting public recognition for his work on Jones courses, Rulewich said: “Not really. I guess I’ve never had the ego to feel that that’s what I had to do.”

“I’ve never pursued [the idea of leaving Fazio],” said Banfield, who has been on the Fazio payroll for 20 years. “Every project is exciting and evolves to the next one. If you’re on your own, you have the responsibilities of being a businessman. Tom has to wear so many hats.”

“What is success or fame but satisfaction? I have that now. I’m sure people at times would like the recognition. But I’m thankful to be where I am.”

Any lesser amount of recognition he may have received over the years hasn’t tamed Ed Seay, the main man in the “design” of Palmer Course Design Co. for 22 years.

“The [course] owner chooses to market a ‘Palmer design.’ Down the line, it’s ‘Palmer-Seay.’ That’s a marketing issue,” Seay said, adding: “Arnold is very generous in his accolades to me and others in the company.”

Asked if he had considered leaving Rees Jones’ firm, for which he has worked for nine years, Greg Muirhead said, “No, there’s still a lot to learn.”

Besides, he added: “It’s a lot of fun and we get to put our own signatures and flair into each course. I look at all the ones I’m involved with and feel I had a big part in each one — from devising the routing to making it happen on the field.

“The recognition is nice but I think we all realize people hired our firm because of the guy’s name on the door. He’s built the reputation and that’s what they’re buying. Plus Rees is always free in giving us public credit.

“The bottom line is what that I really love to do is design,” said Don Knott, who has worked for nearly two decades with Robert Trent Jones Jr. “I haven’t wanted to get into a situation where I’d be running a company and spending most of my time doing golf course design and public relations, sales, personnel management, collecting bills, and all those things.

“I’m in a position where we get great clients, particularly good sites and I can concentrate most of my energies on how to design and produce a better golf course or better golf hole.”

Asked how he has been able to disregard the fame that comes with headline designers, Knott said: “You have to have the right personality. There are clearly a lot of guys who have come out of [companies] who want their names in lights. In that case, they have to do their own thing. To me, it’s not essential. It’s just how good the golf course is. In 50 years 50 percent of the golfers aren’t going to know who built the course. They’ll only know it’s fun to play and if they like it.”

“For some reason we’ve managed to put together a staff that’s happy doing their design work,” he added. “The real internal satisfaction of all