R.M. Graves turns 18.9 handicap to his advantage

By Peter Blais

Few golf course architects would have you know they can't consistently nail the green from 200 yards with an easy 3-iron or drain any putt within 15 feet. Not so Robert Muir Graves. The 63-year-old, Walnut Creek, Calif.-based designer is proud of his 18.9 handicap.

"In fact, it's come down three to four strokes in the past year," he said. "I've backed off the business a bit lately and spent more time on the golf course. I've been practicing quite a bit. I'll bet there are three or four guys in the ASGCA [American Society of Golf Course Architects] I could even whip now.

Not that you'd ever get them to admit it.

In the competitive world of golf course design, many of the craft's practitioners believe potential clients expect them to be able to stay within a few strokes of Jack Nicklaus. If the truth was known, they fear it might cost them business. Graves doesn't buy it. He simply laughed when informed he had received more votes than anyone else from his peers in a recent Golf Course News survey asking who was the worst golfer among professionally trained golf course architects.

"If anything, being an average golfer has been a selling point Graves has used to bolster business. "Thirty years ago, I graphed to his advantage golfer has been a selling point course architects."

Golf Course News survey asked one else from his peers in a reply laughed when informed he it. Among professionally trained golfing who was the worst ing who were the practitioners believe potential clients expect them to be

Graves laid claim to architect for the fifth time in the award's five-year life, winning more than 20 percent of the votes cast in the annual Golf Course News poll.

This was the only year the poll has asked who is the best architect who is not a principal in his/her own firm. The strength of Fazio's design team was illustrated by nearly 20 percent of the ballots being cast for Banfield and 40 percent naming Banfield, Tom Marzoll, Dennis Wise or Jan

Belian - all Fazio associates.

"The secret of my success is my staff. They're all so different and it's not unusual for me to have them all involved in one project," Fazio said. "Our main strength is the talent and we can spend the time to have detail on each project. They have enthusiasm, energy and desire, and they work hard at it.

"It's important for me to have variety. If you have different opinions and ideas, you get that."

"There are so many good people with our company," said Banfield, who joined the firm 20 years ago when George Fazio was the lead architect. "Tom says we have to do something unique and creative, to try to create memorability on a

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"My people are devoted. They all like and love what they do. They’re committed to quality and to creating the best golf courses they can because they have a love of the game. If they aren’t committed that way, they don’t stay long with us," he said.

"We’re also doing a full range of projects — some public golf courses, some high-end, privately owned publics, as well as 18-hole renovations," he said. "And we’re seeing some of the highest end country club projects being done."

Landscapes Unlimited’s work is overseen by Kubly and four project managers — Kirk Kyster, Mike Oliphant, Roy Wilson and Roger Hodges. Kyster and Hodges have backgrounds and degrees in construction management; Wilson has a degree in business; and Oliphant is former greens superintendent.

Working out of the Lincoln office, each is assigned two or three projects and works closely with the on-site superintendents and owners. "A lot of our construction superintendents are past greens superintendents," Kubly said.

Indeed, Oklahoma State University golf coach Mike Holder, who arranged for Kubly to build his new university course, termed that job’s supervisor, Jim Barger, "All World."

Kubly sees two new trends in golf course construction: Developers “want us to be involved in more things like waterfalls, fancy planting and a lot of sod work.”

"And owners are “more and more concerned with getting their courses open faster and having them in terrific condition the day they open.”

They have put a major emphasis on quality," he said. "I think that's a reason why we've been able to stay busy, because we're very quality-oriented."

Kubly noted one project in which 125 acres of sod will be put down, and another on which "we're going to sod greens, tees and fairways — 105 acres — in Aspen. "In areas where there's such a short growing season, it's important to get it open for the membership."

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11,865 California golfers by handicap," he said. "The line rose steadily from the scratch golfer end, peaked in the 14-to-15 range, then descended slowly into the 20s. Two-thirds had handicaps 15 or higher.

"Many developers realize the difficulty of designing your own game out of the design process. It's hard for a top golfer not to make design decisions that match his game. The Tour won't be coming to your course every week. Most of the time it's normal guys with average games. That's the way I play. I design courses that fill their needs."

Added fellow architect Geoffrey Cornish: "From the blue tees, a Bob Graves' course is a challenge for a golfer of any ability. And from the regular tees, his courses provide a a relaxing, enjoyable round. That's what 80 percent of the golfers are looking for and for Bob understands that."

Has Graves filled the average golfer's needs successfully? According to Cornish's book The Architects of Golf, Graves has designed, remodeled or consulted on 650 courses since 1959.

"Enough said."

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Dye family patriarch Pete outpolled the opposition as the top architect golfer. Son P.B. also received a vote.

The elder Dye's closest competition came from Dan Maples and Steve Smyers.


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