A unique breed: supers-turned-designers

By Mark Leslie

Their number is so small they do not even constitute a fraternity — these superintendents-turned-architects. But their perspective is unique in the world of golf course design, construction and maintenance.

"I ruined two golf holes when I was a superintendent," admitted Keith Foster, and the architect was none other than Robert Trent Jones, who had done "a wonderful job."

"I've had a couple of courses I've taken my name off because maintenance was so poor that I didn't want anybody to know I had anything to do with them," said Jack Snyder, a Class AA superintendent and a fellow and former president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA).

Being a superintendent is not one of the easiest jobs in the world," said Jan Beljan, a former GCSSAA scholarship recipient who is now an ASGCA member and a lead architect with Tom Fazio Golf Course Designers, Inc. "As a golf course designer with a superintendent's background, you understand what the superintendent will have to face, what his budgets are now and what they will be, say, in the event the members buy the club in five years and won't maintain it the way it was designed."

The few supers-turned-architects "are not dealing with an ivory-tower approach, but with grunt-level determinations," declared Dr. Michael Hurdzan, who not only was a superintendent at one time but holds master's and doctoral degrees relating to turfgrass. He is also past president of the ASGCA.

Snyder, 76, of Phoenix, Ariz., is the dean of this group who once punched the time clock as superintendents but now does business under the moniker "Golf Course Designer." The group also numbers Bobby Weed of Ponte Vedra, Fla., Craig Schreiner of Kansas City and Brian Silva of Uxbridge, Mass.

Some feel an education in turfgrass management is crucial for a golf course designer, One Southeastern superintendent believes that a "lot of understanding of maintenance complexes" a "glaring hole" in the golf

Dye teams with Landmark Golf, Paiute Tribe on 4-course project

LAS VEGAS, Nev.—The first of four championship-caliber, public golf courses at the Las Vegas Paiute Resort, all designed by Pete Dye, will open next March, according to a joint announcement from the Las Vegas Paiute Tribal Council and Landmark Golf Co.

It is the first time Dye has created four golf courses at the same site, and he said: "It's hard to top yourself. But I'm going to try."

The courses will be built around a central resort core and have real-estate within them. The site, on the Paiute Reservation at Snow Mountain, about 18 miles north of downtown Las Vegas, is "a beautiful, natural desert setting," Dye said.

The first course, measuring 7,130 yards, features expansive views of Mount Charleston to the west and Sheep Mountain to the east.

In addition to the four courses, there will be a 42,100-square-foot resort clubhouse with views of the golf courses and surrounding mountainscapes.

Dr. Tom Climo, economic development director of the Paiute Indian Tribe, said the master plan calls for casinos, hotels and a 20,000-square-foot smoke shop.

Johnny Pott is project director and director of golf.

Landmark Golf is also involved in planning, development and management of Palm Springs Classic in Palm Springs, Calif.; Paradise Ridge in Phoenix, Ariz.; The Plantation in Indio, Calif.; Circle T Ranch in Dallas; and Rancho Vistoso in Tucson, Ariz.

Dick Nugent: An anchor in heartland

Dick Nugent, 63, has been arowed golf courses his entire life. He was a caddy in 1940 and later worked on the maintenance crew at Bob-O-Link Golf Club in Highland Park, Ill. Robert Bruce Harris hired Nugent after the aspiring young architect graduated from the University of Illinois in 1958. Six years later, Nugent and Ken Killian opened their own firm. The pair designed dozens of courses together, including Kemper Lakes in Long Grove, Ill., before parting professionally in 1983. Nugent formed his own company, which includes son Tim and daughter-in-law Andrea. While widely known for his Chicago-style layouts, Nugent has expanded his reach worldwide, designing courses in Hawaii, Europe and elsewhere.

Golf Course News: What differentiates your company from other architectural firms?

Dick Nugent: I guess you’d have to look at us long-term record. We’ve been in the business 36 years and hopefully we’ve learned something along the way.

We are also one of the few firms that practice true construction management. We make sure the project stays on schedule, remains within budget and that moneys are spent properly. That’s Tim and Andrea’s area of expertise. Tim has a degree in engineering construction management and a master’s in business administration. Andrea graduated number one in her industrial engineering class.

We put an on-site construction manager on every job. Dan Cunningham and Eric Wadsworth [Brent Wadsworth’s son] are our project managers. Tim and Andrea oversee their work.

GCN: How involved is Tim in the business?

DN: Tim is in the process of taking over the company. I’d like to always be around to meddle a bit, but we’re moving toward a full partnership. I have a house in Phoenix; I’m there half the time and here [Long Grove] the other half.

GCN: You’re considered one of the dominant architects in the Chicagoland market. Would you consider that your area?
Once a super...

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course design business. As an example of the lack of priority some architects give course maintenance, he pointed to a project that was designed without a maintenance building. "They had to take out two prime house lots for that building, after the fact," he said.

How has turfgrass education helped this clutch of architects?

"I think it’s quite important," Snyder said. "The experience I had as a kid working on a golf course and doing all the nasty jobs around a place — cleaning the sand traps on the course and the grease traps in the clubhouse — all helped prepare me for this.

Some of the lessons:

• Snyder’s Law, according to Jack, is "there are slopes beyond which you should not design."

"Look at the Flymo work that’s being done on steep slopes," Snyder said. "It’s not reasonable, or practical, and it has caused a host of problems at lots of courses that are just not maintainable — or if they are, you do it by hand, and what does that cost you?"

• "A lot of designers may have worked on a course or caddied," Snyder said. "But I spent years growing up riding all the maintenance equipment. And when you’re out there yourself, dawn to dark, and know what the equipment can and can’t do, you understand what design something that is impossible to maintain, like place a green in a valley surrounded by trees. That was done for many years."

"To me," said Hurdzan. "my background has been the greatest help in being able to deal with superintendents at a peer level, to break from the norm in the kinds of grasses and fertilizers we use and the kind of turf you design has to deal with environmentalists."

He added that architects without a background in turfgrass management are at a disadvantage when dealing with an environmental hearing or group and having to justify why golf courses are good neighbors to the environment. "They may have that background are able to speak forcefully about it because we have used those materials, and understand the research and interactions of turfgrass management and, more importantly, how to avoid problems and implement integrated Plant Management."

Yet, Hurdzan tempers the super talk with the admonishment that golf designers are in the entertainment business. "I look at us as being in the entertainment business and we’re trying to sell value to the golfer," he said. "We want the golfer to come to our golf course, give us 4-1/2 to 5 hours of his time and $30 to $50 of his money and walk away saying, ‘God, that was worth it’. So, what I think, personally (architect design), and what I think for a golf course to be profitable and for a golfer to feel like he has gotten the value out of a project, may clash."

"You’re trying to make golfers happy — I don’t care how difficult a feature is for the superintendent — it should be in there. I’m not a big fan of flowers, as an example. But if that makes people choose one course over another, put them in there. They can help tee complements. You may have to hire a horticulturist, but that could be the difference between success and failure in some places."

Yet, like his colleagues, Hurdzan maintains a healthy respect for the needs and desires of superintendents.

"I don’t think many superintendents try to cross over and do what I do," he said. "I find superintendents and the golfers recognize that feature is for the superintendent — it should be in there. I’m not a big fan of flowers, as an example. But if that makes people choose one course over another, put them in there. They can help tee complements. You may have to hire a horticulturist, but that could be the difference between success and failure in some places."

"One other thing is where we have a bluegrass collar and a bentgrass green, a green chairman will decide he wants a bentgrass collar. So they start mowing in on the green for a bentgrass collar. That also makes the green too small."

Superintendents, for better or worse, have a major impact on golf course design," Foster said. "Agree the good impact can far outweigh the bad, especially if the superintendent is brought aboard project early."

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(а blend of the two).

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Foster’s training has led him "always look, not at what I shouldn’t do but what I should do: positive drainage, surface drainage, air circulation around greens — all the things that allow a superintendent to do his job. What an architect can do is design something that is impossible to maintain, like place a green in a valley surrounded by trees. That was done for many years."

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