A unique breed: supers-turned-designers

By MARK LESLIE

Their number is so small they do not even constitute a fraternity — these superintendent-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 GCSAA 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 super-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 superintendent but now do 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 super-turned-architect even offers a degree in 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 golfcourses 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 at the site of one of his projects.

Dick Nugent, 63, has been arrouned 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 partnering professionally in 1983. Nugent formed his own company, which includes son Tim and daughter-in-law Andrea. While widely known for his Chicago-based layouts, Nugent has expanded his reach worldwide, designing courses in Hawaii, Europe and elsewhere.

Dick Nugent: An anchor in heartland

Dick Nugent guesses you'd have to look at our 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.

Dick Nugent: 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.

Dick Nugent: You're considered one of the dominant architects in the Chicago market. Would you consider that your area?

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Q&A with Dick Nugent

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DN: Actually, we’re getting very international. We’re working on a project in Croatia. We have contacts in Sweden, Austria and other parts of Europe.

People have asked us to look at projects in the Far East. Many of them are Japanese businesses that have played our Hawaii courses [Minami Golf Club and Makalei Hawaii Country Club] and referred us to their contacts back home.

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GCN: What is your design philosophy?

DN: I guess it would be to never lose sight of who your client really is — the golfer. Developers, resorts and municipalities all have their own goals and they must be factored into any design. But the end-user, the person who will actually play the course, is who you must keep in mind.

GCN: Who are your favorite old-time and contemporary architects?

DN: Alister Mackenzie, H.S. Colt and C.H. Alison are my favorite old-timers. Robert Trent Jones, Dick Wilson and Pete Dye are the best among my contemporaries. During their time, each pushed the envelope of course design.

While I might appreciate Donald Ross’ work, he did pretty traditional courses. The others pushed design to another level.

GCN: Do you have a favorite course that you designed?

DN: Not really. But I will say that people do their best work when they are challenged to come up with unique solutions. That’s what you learn from.

GCN: What are the major changes you’ve seen in course design over the past 36 years?

DN: The sites we’re getting today are much less desirable than they used to be. They have more problems and call for more creative solutions.

Fairway irrigation is another thing. If a course had it 30 years ago, it advertised the fact. Now it’s commonplace.

The acceptance of USGA [U.S. Golf Association] putting greens has gotten rid of the old 1-to-1-to-1 mystery mix. We used to make mud pots with different kinds of sand, top soil and organic mix, dry them in the oven, and then pour water over them to see which ones would absorb water and which ones fell apart. It was a lot less scientific.

Grasses have changed dramatically, too, with all the USGA and turf company research. It used to be that Bermuda was Bermuda was Bermuda. Now there are many different varieties for different applications.

GCN: Do you foresee new course development continuing at its current pace?

DN: Yes. The industry has several things going for it. Demographically, baby boomers are getting older, moving away from more active sports and toward golf.

We both feel strongly about the people who used to work for us — Bob Lohmann, Jeff Brauer, Bruce Borland, Jim Blaukovitch. We’ve been very lucky to have some good people here.

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We benefited when real estate was hot in the 1980s. Things have cooled off the past few years. But real estate is cyclical.

Then there are taxes and inflation. Golf courses should be viewed as a long-term investment and a hedge against those two things.

The industry should remain stable for the next five to 10 years. And alternative facilities, like ranges and short courses, should grow considerably.

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