

Tidewater's Tomlinson would repeat 'dream'

By PETER BLAIS

NORTH MYRTLE BEACH, S.C. — "It would probably sound good to say it was always my dream to design a golf course," said Ken Tomlinson, the tax attorney turned course architect and designer of Tidewater Golf Club & Plantation, the North Myrtle Beach layout that *GOLF* and *Golf Digest* magazines voted the best new public course of the year in 1990.

"But that wasn't the reason I designed the course. I did it because it had to be done and it just made sense for me to do it. Tidewater was a business investment.

We had a beautiful piece of land and knew a course would do well there. I was the designer, builder and construction superintendent because that was the only way the project would work financially."

Ken Tomlinson? Tidewater G&CC? 1990? Sound vaguely familiar? It should.

Tomlinson burst on the golf architecture scene with Tidewater seven years ago. The former tax attorney's only other design effort before that was Musgrove Mill in Clinton, which Tomlinson designed in 1987 with assistance from Arnold Palmer's design firm. Tidewater's success led golf writers to draw comparisons between Tomlinson and other famous amateur architects like George Crump (Pine Valley) and Jack Neville (Pebble Beach), both of whom enjoyed great success their first time out of the design blocks.

But since opening Tidewater, Tomlinson's name has disappeared from the golf design landscape.

"The economy was pretty bad back in the early 1990s," Tomlinson recalled, "and I've spent most of my time since then on the real estate surrounding Tidewater. I probably should have been building a course a year to cash in on my name recognition. But I had other responsibilities to take care of first."

Those responsibilities involved Tidewater's business side, which is the part of the golf industry Tomlinson, a self-described "numbers guy," truly loves.

"Any project has to make economic sense," he said. "I couldn't just design a course, move down the road with my architect's fee and not worry about whether a course survived financially. I like being part of the business decision whether to build a course or not."

Now that roughly half of Tidewater's 1,000 lots have been sold, Tomlinson is ready to re-enter the architectural waters.

"We'll start a golf course in the Myrtle Beach area either this year or by next spring at the latest," Tomlinson said. "But there isn't a lot of great land for a golf course still available around here."

By great land, Tomlinson means waterfront parcels with rolling topography requiring little earth moving. "Most of the remaining sites here are flat," he said, "with few ocean or marshland views. I have 20 sites I could build on tomorrow, but no great sites. If I moved a lot of dirt on a flat site and built an artificial-looking course, I wouldn't take any joy from that."

His success at Tidewater has given him confidence in not only his own design skills, but also the ability of contractors with little or no golf course construction experience to build a superior product.

"There is a mystique about experienced architects and shapers," said Tomlinson, who worked at Tidewater with contractors

and bulldozer operators who had never built a golf course. "I'm sure golf course architects and shapers sincerely believe what they are saying [about the importance of experience].

"I worked with amateur shapers at Tidewater. I trained them, explained to them what I wanted and we got a great course."

Tomlinson does believe an experienced superintendent is critical to a course's success. Tomlinson consulted with longtime Pine Valley superintendent Ed Stangler when he designed Musgrove Mill



Ken Tomlinson could be in demand as a golf course architect.

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Spin doctoring course design philosophy

By PETER BLAIS

As marketing unfriendly as it is to say your course is "hard" or, worse yet "easy," the kiss of death may be to label it "average"—the implication being that anybody could play it and have a reasonably good time doing so. Yawn...

But that's exactly what course

owners want. To pay off the massive investments they've made in building these properties, they must attract every kind of golfer — good, bad and the great majority flailing away somewhere in the middle.

So, in an attempt to spice up their rhetoric and earn their paychecks, architects and public

relations firms have come up with a number of semantic variations that basically say a course can be hard for the good golfer, easy for the bad, and a good time for just about anybody.

While we appreciate their literary efforts, as word-pinching editors we sorely want to boil these majestic, 50-word descrip-

tions down to "Everybody will like this course."

Someday.

In the meantime, here are some of the more imaginative course-for-one-and-all write-ups we've picked up along the way:

- A press release on Bealsville, Md.'s Four Streams National Golf Club, a Nick Price/Steve Smyers design scheduled to open in spring 1998: "The Price/Smyers Design Group plans the

golf course to challenge the shot-making strategy of the single-digit handicapper, and to be non-intimidating to the mid- and high-handicapper."

- Another release on Chantilly, Va.'s Fred Couples/Gene Bates-designed Westfield Golf Club scheduled to open in early summer 1998: "It will be fun and accessible for new golfers, yet provide terrific challenging options for the more-experienced golfer."

- Architect Jack Swayze on partner Steve Elkington's first complete golf course design, Mt. Arayat Golf Course, an 18-hole private country club in Arayat, The Philippines: "It will tax the strong player and be friendly to the novice."

- From a newspaper clipping describing Jack Nicklaus-designed Vermont National outside Burlington, scheduled to open in 1998: "The course is expected to appeal to both serious golfers and more casual weekend strollers."

- According to the developer, an Arnold Palmer-designed course to be built in India, "will be designed to provide a challenge to good golfers, without being intimidating as well as fun for beginners."

- This from British architect Jonathan Gaunt regarding his new Redlibbets course in Sevenoaks, Kent, England: "It is a private course 6,700 yards long which poses a challenge to experienced golfers but accommodates those of lesser ability — if they are fast learners!"

- "It is our goal," said J. David Everett, a principal in the Belfair development near Hilton Head Island, S.C., where a Tom Fazio course opened last year and another 18 is under construction, "and it's certainly Fazio's goal, to make the East Course equal to, if not better than, the first course. From the championship tees, it will be a difficult course. We believe that, for good players, a great course needs to present a certain degree of difficulty. But, like the West Course, this course will be very playable from the middle and forward tees. Creating that balance between difficulty and playability is not easy."

Certainly not.

Tomlinson

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and hired Will Holroyd, who has been head superintendent since the course opened.

Steve Long was superintendent at a course Tomlinson belonged to in Columbia. Long was one of Tomlinson's first hires when construction began at Tidewater, where Long has been head superintendent for eight years.

"Superintendents are the main guys," Tomlinson said. "I've always had the greatest respect for them."

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