

The architect and superintendent mix

LEADING ARCHITECTS AND SUPERINTENDENTS SHARE THE SECRETS OF SUCCESS IN TEAMING UP FOR A GREAT GOLF COURSE RENOVATION

by MARK LESLIE

What makes great golf courses great is creative design. What keeps them great is excellent maintenance. In a course renovation the challenge is to create an innovative course that can be maintained to its original specifications. And that requires teamwork between the architect and superintendent.

Walt Wilkinson, superintendent at the 36-hole Indian Creek Golf Club in the Dallas suburb of Carrollton, Texas, says the place to begin is by selecting an architect who is the best fit in terms of design capability and chemistry with the superintendent.

"The architect-superintendent relationship is critical in a renovation," says Wilkinson. "Choosing an architect who is going to be the best fit is not a question of the biggest name, but rather who you can work with to provide the end product that you and your membership want."

"My favorite renovations — the ones I love — are ones where the superintendent and I think the same way," agrees Jeffrey D. Brauer, owner of GolfScapes, an Arlington, Texas-based architectural firm. Brauer worked with Wilkinson to renovate Indian Creek's 18-hole Creek Course in 2002-2003. "Walt was a true partner in the design. I had the same great relationship with superintendent Dave Downing at WildWing at Myrtle Beach, and superintendent Brian Malloy at Great Southwest Golf Club in Grand Prairie, Texas. It's been my experience that renovations that turn out the best are those in which the superintendent is integral to the process."

One critical value the superintendent brings to the process is realism, says Ron Forse, a Hopwood, Pa., architect known for restoring classic courses.

"Our experience has been that it's a real joy to work with superintendents who have their feet fully in the real world and have a high appreciation for creative design. Those situations produce incredible teamwork."

"I had to enter into Forse's world of design," agrees superintendent Mike

McNulty, who successfully worked with Forse and Design Associate Jim Nagle, to restore nine holes each year for three years at the William Flynn-designed 27-hole Philadelphia Country Club.

Forse and McNulty say both parties should bring their expertise to the process with an open mind. The superintendent has an intimate knowledge of his property's microclimate, subsurface conditions, air circulation, drainage, other agronomic elements and the peculiarities of the club's membership. The architect's challenge is to take maximum advantage of the site's natural character — or to restore features according to the philosophy of the classic architect who designed it.

The superintendent's knowledge is invaluable, says architect Barry Serafin of New Albany, Ohio, who teamed up with superintendent Jim Cola of Worthington Hills Country Club in Columbus. Cola was able to show Serafin the location of underground springs and rock outcroppings, factors affecting the final design.

"I try to be sensitive to air circulation, traffic and shade," adds Brauer, "but the superintendent can tell you about the real and potential problems right away."

"The architect and superintendent are in a give-and-take relationship," says Rees Jones, nicknamed the "Open Doctor" for restoring classic courses that are preparing to host U.S. Opens. "The architect must have a melding of the mind with the superintendent because he will be the one left to maintain the course."

That melding should begin even before the architect is hired, advises Forse, who has renovated more than two dozen courses designed by Donald Ross, as well as others crafted by Alistair Mackenzie, A.W. Tillinghast, C.B. Macdonald and Seth Raynor.

The superintendent's role

From an architect's perspective, Forse says the superintendent's ideal role includes the following:

- Being the liaison between the architect

and the club's greens and executive committees.

- Serving as the club's representative.
- Being realistic — "understanding perspective and not allowing the architect to go wild."
- Knowing construction procedures.
- Understanding specifications.
- Serving as the purchasing agent.
- Selecting the proper turfgrasses.
- Communicating project status to club membership.
- Continuing maintenance of the course during construction.
- Pre-applying fertilizers and amendments.
- Controlling staging, storage and traffic.
- Being on top of the irrigation system.
- Researching materials, suppliers and outside expertise.

Faced with several hundred trees on the course that didn't exist when it was originally built, McNulty brought in ArborCom of Toronto, whose Shademaster software determined the agronomic impact of trees. The result was removal of 700 trees to improve sunlight and air circulation.

If the course creation involved a famous architect, McNulty adds, "gain a familiarity with the original designer." McNulty once dug into the history of his club and uprooted documentation and aerial photographs of the course. Doing such homework is invaluable. "Research will help you better understand what the architect is trying to say, and he will respect you more."

Communication hub

The importance of communication by the superintendent starts at the concept stage, says Forse, because he or she is often a key person in getting membership approval of the master plan. The superintendent's central role in communication then continues throughout construction.

"Usually my main line of contact with the club is the superintendent, who is the go-between between me, the club pro and the greens chairman," says Serafin. "A good

superintendent knows the members, their likes and dislikes, and keeps an open line of communication with the club during the renovation."

"A superintendent can be on top of everything that's happening because he is there constantly, while we are in and out of the site," Forse adds.

Ken Mangum, director of golf courses and grounds at Atlanta Athletic Club (AAC), where Jones has renovated both 18-hole courses, says educating club members about the whole process is a challenge. Mangum, who just completed his Riverside Course renovation in mid-November, used a Web site to keep members informed on a daily basis using photographs of the work and progress.

"Public relations goes along with coordination of the construction," Mangum says. "I also gave tours for members every two or three weeks."

At Indian Creek, architect Brauer altered superintendent Wilkinson's vision for the course, and then Wilkinson, in turn, sold that idea to city officials.

"My original vision within the initial budget was to resurface the greens and tees, and leave most of the rest of the course untouched," Wilkinson says. "The city wanted to turn the course's fortunes around and Brauer understood how much money that would require. He was able to say we could get a lot more for our money and go to the next level. I grabbed his vision — to rebuild the tees, redesign the greens complexes, add bunkers, modify the layout and add drainage. Once we shared that vision, I worked to get people talking about the possible changes."

Working together, Brauer and Wilkinson have seen their vision accomplished.

While the superintendent should serve as the liaison between the architect and club, sometimes the project is best served by the architect's personal contact with members. "In some situations the membership won't believe their superintendent about the club's needs," he says. "But the architect is viewed as the expert since he's the consultant — the guy from out of town who is carrying the briefcase. In such a situation, the architect can help the superintendent sell an idea to improve the course. Sometimes it's easier for the architect to ask."

Overseeing all details

In a renovation the superintendents are usually the best overseers of details because of their knowledge of local suppliers and contractors. They are familiar with traffic

patterns. And they know the course — prevailing winds, angles of the sun at different seasons, the best types of turfgrasses and the maintenance program.

To select the right turfgrasses, Wilkinson scrutinized the National Turfgrass Evaluation Program's Bermudagrass results, while McNulty visited other courses and tested varieties on one fairway before choosing the cultivars.

"Matching grass selections to the superintendent's maintenance program is crucial," Brauer says, "as well as types of bunkers. Do you build them flat, or with slope that is more attractive, like cape-and-bay bunkers? You need to balance design aesthetics versus maintenance concerns and budget. Similarly, if we go with cape-and-bay construction, what equipment do you have to use to mow around the bunkers? A good architect wants the superintendent to feel comfortable that the golf course is one that can be maintained."

In the renovation of his course, Wilkinson suggested moving the second green about 30 yards for better sunlight and circulation. The move had not been evident to Brauer because of the time of year he made his preliminary site visit, but it was adopted into the final design.

In-house construction?

While Wilkinson's course renovation was built entirely by GolfWorks, Inc., Austin, Texas; and Mangum served as general contractor at AAC; McNulty handled most of his renovation in-house, with some functions subcontracted.

"We tried to accomplish two things — keep our staff intact and save the club some money," Mangum says. "We subcontracted the major work. The benefit was that our guys got involved, were part of the process and had more pride in the finished product."

If a course is considering whether to handle work in-house, Forse says the superintendent should take into consideration several issues:

- The amount of work involved in major projects like irrigation
- The need to maintain the course during construction
- The overall size and scope of the work
- Crew abilities and experience
- The time of year
- Available equipment
- Member expectations in terms of construction quality

Smaller projects are easiest to handle in-house, including green expansion and modification, tree removal, fairway expansion, tee

construction, light irrigation and sod cutting, removal and placement.

Forse does not recommend that grounds crews undertake bunker renovation or construction because of the intricacy involved, and the need to maintain a style.

Respecting design issues

While teamwork means the architect is open to the superintendent's ideas, Forse says maintenance considerations cannot dictate the design.

"Some superintendents fear that sand will wash out of bunkers," he says, "so they want unnatural, severe lips. That hides the sand, but it looks homemade and is unnecessary if the bunker is built properly. Features need to be maintenance-friendly, but never at the expense of proper design."

Another frequent superintendent suggestion is to be able to mow around the bunkers with riding mowers.

The need to hand-mow is a real maintenance issue, Forse says, so architects have to go to bat for the superintendent to ensure that sufficient maintenance budget will be set aside to allow hand mowing. "Without hand-mowing, bunkers look anemic and unnatural," he says.

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"The process is similar to restoring a classic car," McNulty says.

Forse adds, "Superintendents care about what they're working on, so they're going to be very attentive to the needs of the project. We see the genuine love they have

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for their golf courses. It's a tough job, but a labor of love as well."

In a renovation, the superintendent and architect are "in the same boat," Mangum concludes. "You can't afford to be fighting in that boat. In our renovation I didn't claim to be a designer, and Rees didn't claim to be a superintendent. It's all about teamwork. Being able to bond and form a great friendship improves the end result." GCN

Mark Leslie is a freelance writer and consultant specializing in golf. Based in Monmouth, ME, Leslie was the founding editor of Golf Course News. He can be reached at gripfast@ctel.net.