Playing Politics

BY SHANE SHARP

Arizona’s Gary Panks, who designed the spectacular Sedona Golf Resort pictured above, is making a name for himself as a maintenance-friendly designer.

WHILE GOLF AS WE KNOW IT WAS not around during the Renaissance, it would have been something to see Michelangelo designing an upscale track while Galileo calculated the course’s watering requirements, drainage slopes and mowing strategies.

Today, a golf course designer gazes upon the land that is his canvas and envisions routing, slopes, bunkers, tees and greens. A superintendant, however, stares at the same land and sees drainage issues, bunker faces that will need to be walk-mowed and greens that will require more maintenance than a 1957 Chevy.

When art and science come together to produce 7,000 yards of golfing enjoyment, players assume that architects and superintendents have worked in harmonious fashion throughout a course’s development. But that’s not always the case.

“If the superintendent is knowledgeable about the game and knows how the game is played by skilled players, he or she can be more sensitive to what we’re doing as designers,” says Jan Beljan, a design associate for Tom Fazio Golf Course Designers. “If the superintendent is not sensitive to what we do, part of the artistry of the course is lost.”

But art is in the eye of the beholder, and there can be strain on the architect/superintendent relationship created by intense competition for golfing dollars. Now that the supply of new golf courses has caught up with the game’s burgeoning demand, course owners are looking for a competitive edge, which often involves owners hiring high-priced architects such as Tom Fazio or Pete Dye, and demanding the most awe-inspiring courses conceivable.

The competition between owners leads to more memorable, challenging golf courses for players, but it also translates into course conditions that are nearly impossible to maintain without generous maintenance budgets.

This brings to mind an important question at a time when golf has arguably never been more popular: Will the intricate relationship between architects and superintendents grow like healthy bentgrass, or will it fizzle under the strain of competitive pressure?

In Concert

They’re on different sides of the fairway, but architects and superintendents can work together harmoniously.
Maintaining your Mona Lisa

Just as it costs a museum more to preserve a painting from Pablo Picasso, it's often more expensive for owners to maintain layouts designed by today's pre-eminent architects.

"Certainly, it costs more to maintain a Pete Dye or P.B. Dye golf course," says Paul Kaufman, superintendent at Prestwick CC in Surfside Beach, S.C. "There's a lot of mounding, centipedegrass and areas you have to walk cut. [Architects] do a great job laying out challenging golf courses, but it's challenging for us, too."

But superintendents, after all, are trained and paid to maintain courses, no matter how demanding the maintenance or famous the designer. That's the attitude taken by David Downing, director of golf course operations at Barefoot Resort & GC in Myrtle Beach, S.C. Speaking of courses with big-name architects, Downing oversees tracks bearing the names of Fazio, Davis Love and Greg Norman.

"If you're looking for a great course, you have to deal with high maintenance," Downing says. "Green complexes are tough to maintain if they are dramatic. Part of what makes a course great are those things that are hard to maintain."

That's not to say there are no memorable low-maintenance courses. Some of the traditional layouts of Willard Byrd, Arthur Hills, Clyde Johnston and Russell Breeden require little maintenance outside of mowing fairways and greens, and routine maintenance such as spraying, overseeding and aerification.

Matt Sapochak believes that Winyah Bay GC in Georgetown, S.C., fits the bill as a memorable low-maintenance course. Sapochak redesigned the course in 1995 and was its superintendent for a year. "I was going to be superintendent here for a while, so I wanted to design a course that was low maintenance but had high-end conditions," says Sapochak, now general manager at Winyah Bay.

Who's the boss?

If you're under the impression that architects make all the calls when it comes to designing their layouts, then you may also believe the New York Yankees front-office makes decisions without input from owner George Steinbrenner. When you break down golf course development to its essence, the architect is merely the consultant to a client, who is the owner. While some owners let architects call the shots, others strong arm architects into producing the courses they want.

The architect's responsibility is to give the owner what he or she wants and is paying for, Beljan says. "If that requires a lot of detailed maintenance, and that is what the owner can afford, then that is what the architect will provide," she adds.

The owner usually determines when a superintendent is brought into the design process. Many architects depend on owners to have superintendents present during construction. Other architects, however, insist that superintendents be brought into the process early to eliminate unnecessary revisions.

"In most of my projects, we just deal with the owner," says architect Clyde Johnston. "But my contract states that the owner has to have the superintendent onboard before the irrigation goes in. If a superintendent wants to be around before that, that's even better."

But not every owner has the budget to bring in a Fazio or a Pete Dye to design a course, or has the desire to micromanage every aspect of a course's development. Kemp Causey, owner of the Calabash Golf Links in Calabash, N.C., wanted a simple, traditional course that was easy to maintain. So he selected Willard Byrd, known for his straightforward layouts, Continued on page 28
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to design his dream course.

"You won't find any bulkheads, bridges or
high-maintenance items here," Causey says. "I
just tried to take God's piece of land, which
only had 7 feet of elevation, and have Willard
build a good course."

Of philosophy, technology
To outside observers, architects and superin-
tendents may appear to be rivals. But the truth
is, the two professions are not as far apart as
they appear.

Chad Ritterbusch, director of communi-
cations for the American Society of Golf
Course Architects, explains that a healthy
give-and-take relationship enables architects
and superintendents to coexist.

"There's a trade-off that exists between
the two [professions], but with the advent of
new technology and design methods, archi-
tects are able to create more stunning designs
without impacting maintenance as much," Rit-
terbusch says.

In Arizona, Scottsdale-based Gary Panks is
making a name for himself as a maintenance-
friendly course designer with such tracks as The
Raven at South Mountain and the Sedona Golf
Resort. Arizona superintendent Bill Rupert says
Panks layouts are challenging and penal with-
out being extreme. It makes a big difference
when an architect considers the everyday job
of the superintendent and his staff when he's
designing a course, Rupert says.

"I was unfortunate enough to have main-
tained a Pete Dye course (Red Mountain Ranch
CC in Mesa) in the early 1980s with three-to-
one grass slopes that required a lot of hand
labor," Rupert adds. "Panks is more conscien-
tious about these things. There are ways of mak-
ing a course penal without compromising
the topography."

With more than 600 courses, Michigan has
become one of the hottest golfing destinations
in the country. Bill Kehoss, superintendent at
Timberstone GC in Iron Mountain, Mich.,
says a smattering of Michigan architects em-
brace the concept of getting superintendents
involved in building courses from the begin-
ning.

"At our course, the architect had the origi-
nal superintendent out from the start," Kehoss
says. "There was a good relationship between
the two, but this is probably an exception and
not the norm."

"The superintendent changed some of the
grass that was going to be used on the course
from the original recommendation," Kehoss
notes. "The course is already hard to maintain
because of the rocky terrain, and the recom-
modation [by the superintendent] saved us a
lot of additional work."

In Cherry Grove Beach, S.C., the Tidewa-
ter GC underwent a number of improvements,
many of which were designed to lighten su-
perintendent Bob Graunke's load. The
greens were replanted with A-1 bentgrass, an improved
strand that's more tolerant of the Southeastern
climate. Bunkers were rebuilt under the su-
prevision of course designer, Ken Tomlinson,
and they are easier to maintain.

At Bandon Dunes in Bandon, Ore., super-
intendent Troy Russell says the course's archi-
tect, Scotsman David McLay Kidd, had ease
of maintenance in mind when he designed the
course, which opened last year.

"During the course of construction, a great
deal of time was spent reviewing everything to
be sure it was as maintenance friendly as pos-
sible," Russell says. "In most cases, shapes or
traffic routes were altered if they required ex-
traordinary maintenance. The graceful con-
tours of the course are not only pleasing to view,
they also mean you don't have to put mowers
where they aren't designed to go."

Where credit is due
Architect and architecture historian Geoffrey
Cornish praises the eagerness and adaptability
of superintendents for maintaining the complex layouts produced by today's architects. "The game has changed, courses have changed, but the only thing that has not changed is the dedication of the superintendent," he says.

Cornish says designers and superintendents are intricately bound by the triangle of basic considerations — an equilateral triangle that espouses three essential factors when laying out a golf course: the game itself, eye appeal and maintainability. As long as the two professions adhere to the basic principles of the triangle, design and maintenance should be able to coexist in perpetuity.

"Some of the greatest courses we've seen are emerging from blackboards today," Cornish says. "Technology has helped vastly in terms of maintaining these courses."

Despite differences in their professions and their approaches, Cornish stresses that most superintendents and architects have a mutual respect for each other.

Good designers know the importance that superintendents play in their projects. "We respect the fact that they respect our design and our philosophy," Cornish says.

Shane Sharp is a free-lance writer from Charlotte, N.C.

The greens were replanted with A-1 bent, an improved strand that's more tolerant of the climate.

Bob Graunke
Tidewater GC

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