Historian James Hansen, Ph.D., may be best known for his many books about space (his biography “First Man: The Life of Neil A. Armstrong” made the New York Times’ bestsellers list) but before he could go to the moon, he had to mow around the trees.

“I got my start on a golf course. I was mowing grass at a public course in Fort Wayne, Ind., as an 11-year-old,” says Hansen, a 6-handicapper. “They told me to mow around the base of every tree, and once I finished, start over.”

His new book, “A Difficult Par: Robert Trent Jones Sr. and the Making of Modern Golf,” is a thorough, vivid and revealing 480-page epic on the game he loves. Available May 13th, 2014, the book is the result of exhaustive research and interviews, including unique access to RTJ’s personal collection of papers (350 file cabinets), drawings (literally hundreds) and, proudly, a run of Golfdom magazines dating back to the 1930s.

“A lot of people want to give back to the game of golf because it has given so much to them,” Hansen says. “To me, this was an extraordinary opportunity for me to give something back to golf that maybe it wouldn’t have had any other way, because of my training as a historian and a biographer.”

We sat down with Hansen to discuss his book, Golfdom’s impact on Jones’ career and why RTJ was the best
Superintendent in his blood, wasn't there?“Finance side of the game. There was some

started, let’s talk about RTJ’s early and

history of American golf. To get

really fascinating book on not just RTJ,

hood course called Hillcrest — Jones got a

He caddied, but there was a little neighbor-

Jones had experience in groundskeeping.

consent to allow him to get her husband’s book published. Though no

initiated a correspondence with Mrs. MacKenzie, asking if she would

College of Music, Cavendish Road, in Leeds, where Tony taught. Jones

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April 1934, to write again to Graffis:

doctor’s book, had decided that the market for the book was too small

had discussed with MacKenzie. Making inquiries around New York

city, Jones found that Scribner’s, the publisher initially interested in the

forts. (Upon receipt of the manuscript from Graffis, Jones had replied:

“Have just cleaned over it and received the same kick that I always do

to work on it at once.”

Once again, the truth was a little different than what Jones had related

Jones had learned about the MacKenzie manuscript a full
ten months earlier, upon reading Herb Graffis’s mention of it in

Golfdom’s February 1934 tribute to MacKenzie on his passing. Robert

had never spent a great deal of time with MacKenzie, nor personally

any of his other courses, but in early May 1932 he enjoyed a round

of golf with him on the day prior to the official opening of MacKenzie’s

new Bayside course, on the northwestern end of Long Island. Along

with MacKenzie, Jones had played that day with Inmis Brown, who with

Grantland Rice was co-editor of The American Golfer, the leading golf

magazine of its time.

Robert quickly made it known to Graffis that he was interested in

taking charge of the MacKenzie manuscript and also in being the chief

writer for Golfdom’s new architectural department — a spot that Graffis

discussed with MacKenzie. Making inquiries around New York

City, Jones found that Scribner’s, the publisher initially interested in the

doctor’s book, had decided that the market for the book was too small

to merit publication. That discovery prompted Jones, in mid-October

1934, to write again to Graffis:

The thought came to me that perhaps by combining the

Doctor’s ideas and our own book might still be published.

If so, it could be a fine and fitting tribute to the late Doctor

and his work. If the idea were feasible, Mrs. MacKenzie’s

consent would be needed. Any material that the Doctor had

written, and photographs of his work, could be sent to me. If

the book were published and any remuneration were forth-

coming, I would be willing that Mrs. MacKenzie receive the

lion’s share.

Graffis informed Jones that Hilda MacKenzie had returned to

England with her son Tony Haddock but could be reached in care of Leeds

College of Music, Cavendish Road, in Leeds, where Tony taught. Jones

initiated a correspondence with Mrs. MacKenzie, asking if she would

consent to allow him to get her husband’s book published. Though no

letter from Hilda MacKenzie seems to exist in Jones’s papers, she ap-

parently gave him the go-ahead, because Jones, after getting a copy of

the manuscript from Graffis (and apparently later another one from

Hilda), began to shop it around. Robert kept Graffis updated on his ef-

forts. (Upon receipt of the manuscript from Graffis, Jones had replied:

“I have just cleaned over it and received the same kick that I always do

when I glimpse the doctor’s art. He certainly was a genius.”) An editor at

McGraw-Hill showed interest, but the publisher wanted the help of a

large subsidy or a guaranteed advance sale of books, neither of which

Jones could arrange, although he tried. In late November 1936 he wrote
to Dixwell Davenport, a member of the USGA Green Section and chair-

man of the greens committee at San Francisco Golf Club (a Tillinghast

design from circa 1921):

I plan to bring out a new book in the Spring through the

McGraw Hill Publishing Company, which will discuss the

modern theories on trapping and green design. Part of this

volume is an unfinished manuscript by the late Dr. MacKen-

zie. His widow sent it on to me for completion, stating that

her late husband considered our work most similar to his in

strategy and beauty.

Not long after that, McGraw-Hill told Robert there was no deal. Pre-

occupied with a number of new design jobs, he stowed away his copy of

the MacKenzie manuscript in his files, where it remains to this day in the

Jones Papers at Cornell.

Dr. MacKenzie’s book, entitled The Spirit of St. Andrews, was event-

ually published, but not until 1995, after a copy of the manuscript was

reportedly found by Raymond M. Haddock among the papers of his late

father, Tony Haddock, MacKenzie’s stepson. Believing there was no

other copy, Sleeping Bear Press, the publisher, stamped the book with the

label “The Lost Manuscript” and advertised it as “golf’s equivalent to the

Dead Sea Scrolls.” The book became an instant classic and a must-have for
every golf library. The book’s acknowledgments made no mention of

Robert Trent Jones’s recognition of the book’s worth back in 1935
and his efforts to get it published sixty years earlier. (Robert Trent Jones
Jr. believes that it was his father’s copy of the MacKenzie manuscript,

which had been marked as “typed by Ione” — typed by her back in the

mid-1930s from MacKenzie’s handwritten manuscript — that somehow

found its way from his father’s office papers into the hands of Haddock

and from there to Sleeping Bear Press.)

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Hansen: Fortunately, Jones kept most of his back issues of Golfdom, I didn’t have to go to a special collection. Of course, when you come across something like that and you’re a historian, you tend to start reading it. I did that with Golfdom. I’d look for the Jones advertisements.

Golfdom: That’s really cool that RTJ saved those old issues of the magazine. How important was RTJ’s relationship with (Golfdom founders) the Graffis brothers (Herb and Joe) to his early career?

Hansen: His communication with the Graffis brothers really opened the window on golf and what was going on in other parts of the country, especially in the Midwest. Jones was a regular advertiser and a regular letter writer with the Graffis brothers, and in turn, they sort of scratched each other’s backs. Jones was giving them information, sharing stories, and actually writing some stories for the magazine in the 1930s.

In exchange, the Graffis’ were sharing news of courses being built. Jones’ first course in the Midwest was a connection the Graffis’ gave him. The relationship with Jones and the Graffis brothers was very important to Jones, especially early in his career.

I don’t know — it’d be interesting to learn — if the Graffis brothers took advantage of any investment opportunities that Jones may have told them about. It’s very possible, given how entrepreneurial Jones was. I don’t know how well off Herb or Joe were, how much money they actually made doing Golfdom.

Golfdom: I don’t know the answer to that either. The thing I always hear about Herb is that he had a great sense of humor. Based on some of the jokes I’ve made in this magazine, that tradition is now long dead... So why was RTJ the character whom you chose as the focus of your first golf biography?

Hansen: I suspected that one could tell the whole story of American golf in the 20th Century by looking at Jones’ career. It spans 70 years, Coolidge to Clinton! And so many important characters — Ouimet, Sarazen, Sneed, Hogan, and into the modern era. It’s an epic story.

I’m convinced there’s not another biography about a golf person that can tell you as much about the history of golf as RTJ.

Golfdom: Jim, thanks so much for taking the time to chat with us and for providing our readers this free sneak preview of the book. I look forward to seeing how your book is received once it’s released.

Hansen: I’m anxious too! Thank you, Seth, I appreciate it.