

*At Banyan Golf Club, the architect, greens chairman and superintendent have formed an unusually strong working relationship to help their golf course evolve.*

# How to build a golf course in only 19 years (and counting). . .

BY LARRY KIEFFER

LAKE WORTH — How long does it take to build a golf course?

“We’re at 19 years and counting,” says architect Joe Lee of Banyan GC, a very private club in central Palm Beach County just west of the Florida Turnpike. “One of the wonderful things about a golf course is that you are never finished.”

Writers have been using the cliché about “living, breathing golf courses” for decades but an unusually close relationship among the course’s architect, superintendent and greens chairman has made Banyan a work of art. . . perennially in progress.

“When you lay out a golf course,” says Lee, “you are working from the vertical with aerials and topographical maps to design something that will be built and used from the horizontal. You do your best on the drawing boards, but there’s no way you can really predict what is going to happen as you move across the land and as the land moves through time.

“The final payment is never the end of our obligation or responsibility. At Banyan, because of extraordinary cooperation with the board and management and a

superintendent who understands not only turf but also horticulture, it was the beginning of a privilege to be part of an evolutionary process that has lasted 19 years.”

Lee is quick to point out that he regularly revisits many other clients such as the National Cash Register GC in Dayton, Ohio (which he remodeled for the 1969 PGA Championship) and Royal Montreal. But he doesn’t play those famous venues regularly and he certainly doesn’t maintain a locker at either.

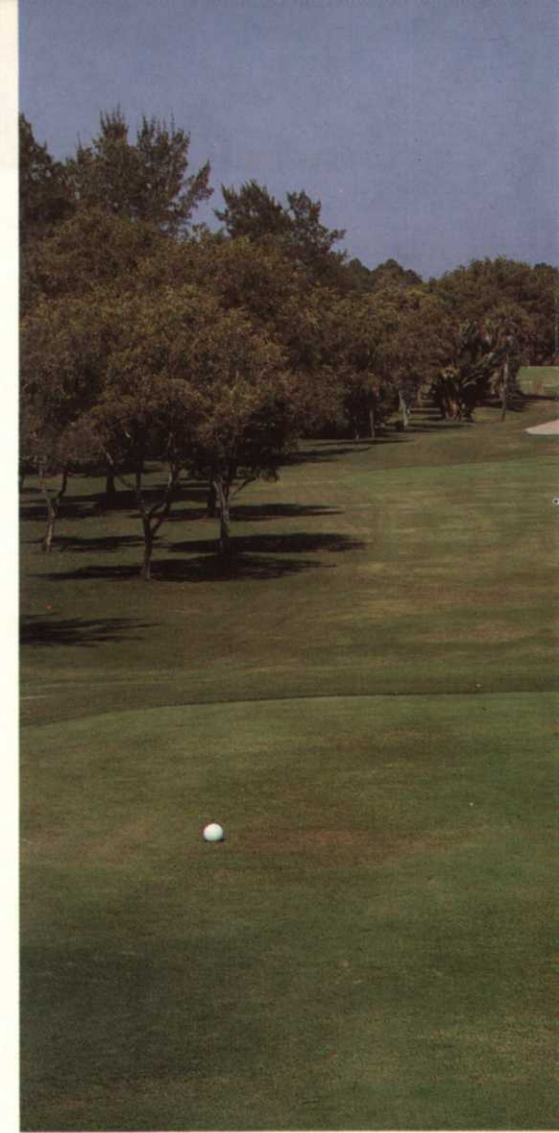
Because he lives nearby, he is able to do both at Banyan.

Lee maintains similarly close relationships with several other pieces of his handiwork in South Florida (*see story, page 28*), but his longtime relationship with Bob Jacobson, Banyan’s greens chairman, has given it a special place in his heart.

“This place is majestic,” he says.

“Joe Lee and I go back a long way,” says Jacobson, a 71-year-old New York stockbroker and one of Banyan’s founding members.

“I met Joe 30 years ago through Dick Wilson (with whom Lee worked for several years) and I was the one who forced Joe on this golf club. I must say, it was one



of the better decisions I ever made.

“I said to Joe, ‘Build a golf course that I can enjoy and one that my father can enjoy.’ And he did.”

“Golf is too important a game to design a course for one type of player,” responds Lee. “You don’t have to be a genius to design a course that can be enjoyed by very high handicappers and still be a challenge to the Tour players — you just have to give it a little thought. Just realize the abilities of all types of golfers and the types of shots you want to bring out and it’s largely automatic. If you listen, the land will tell you what to do.”

At Banyan, the members gave Lee 200 acres of land to work with — half of it heavily forested and the other half barren, pitted moonscape that had produced shell for the highways of South Florida in the 1950’s and ’60s. Construction began in



DANIEL ZEIAZER

1970.

No real estate development was involved. Banyan was to be strictly a golf club for 250 New Yorkers, most of whom wintered on oceanfront property 12 miles to the east and wanted a place to hang their spikes.

"We knew that 200 acres was more than adequate," said Dave Abrahamson, principal founder, who organized and built Banyan as a retirement diversion. He still plays regularly.

"But since this was to be a golf club rather than a country club, the emphasis obviously was going to be on golf. We wanted the best we could get."

"The shell pits were a great challenge," says Lee. "And they provided a great opportunity to give Banyan something rarely seen in South Florida — some elevation changes. I think we dredged up to 25 feet in some places."

"No, we stopped at 23," said Abrahamson. "We ran into budget problems and stopped two feet short."

Banyan may have opened with two feet less elevation change than planned but it also opened with a thousand trees more than planned on the back nine.

They came from a somewhat ironic source: a major highway construction project.

At the same time Banyan was abuilding, Interstate 95 was creeping northward through dense forest several miles to the east and Lee, Jacobson and Abrahamson got permission to take as many trees as they could remove from the path of the advancing backhoes.

"We didn't have the sophisticated equipment they have now," said Lee. "All we had was a flatbed truck and a crane. We didn't have time to root prune and trim

The par-three, 200-yard 13th hole is typical of the back nine at Banyan GC, which architect Joe Lee created from barren shell pits. Teeing off is Bob Jacobson, greens chairman. Waiting their turns are, from left, Sidney Kriser, greens committee member; Joe Lee, architect; and Dave Abrahamson, founding president. More than a thousand trees on the back nine were salvaged from the construction site of I-95, which was creeping up Palm Beach County in the early 1970s, the same time Banyan was built.

them back and let them acclimate. We had to get in there, get them out, plant 'em and go back for more. A lot of them didn't make it."

"Yes, but more than a thousand did," said Abrahamson. "And it's a miracle, too, when you consider that we didn't have any kind of a water system. All we had was a water wagon we hauled around the place twice a week."

Of all those trees, how many were banyans?

"Three, I think," said Abrahamson. "But they didn't have anything to do with the name of the club. When we were organizing, I made up a list of about 30 possible names. Banyan was one of them because it was the name of a street I had to drive by every day and I sort of liked the sound of it."

"I took the list to the wife of one of the members and Banyan was the one she picked. That's how the club got its name."

Busy with his work, Jacobson did not take on the greens committee when Banyan opened. Nonetheless, with modern fertilization and irrigation programs, the vegetation flourished over the next eight

*(Please see IT LOOKED, page 24)*

*Melaleucas provide a lovely backdrop to the 16th green but the exotic trees, which are short-lived, brittle and very susceptible to storm damage, grow up to 8 feet a year with irrigation and fertilization, crowding out the native vegetation. Superintendent Dan Jones has developed a plan to replace the foreign invaders with native stands without ever losing the forested setting.*



DANIEL ZELAZEK

## It looked pretty, but all was not well

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years, particularly the exotic Brazilian peppers, acacia and melaleuca trees. Banyan was set in a tropical rainforest.

Enter the third member of Banyan's guiding *troika*, superintendent Dan Jones.

Jones, a naturalist, mechanical engineer and certified golf course superintendent, came to Banyan from Aventura (now known as Turnberry Isle) in North Miami Beach. Before that, he had been director of grounds and building maintenance for Rock Resorts' four courses in Puerto Rico — two at Dorado Beach and two at Cerramar Beach, comprising 1700 acres in all — supervising 215 employees.

He took one look and quickly saw that all was not well in paradise.

"The members thought the melaleucas were beautiful, but what they didn't realize was that they were killing all the native trees — the pines, oaks and especially the cypress," says Jones.

With irrigation and fertilizer, melaleucas — sometimes called "punk" trees — can grow up to 8 feet a year, enabling them quickly to overshadow the competing plants. Their aerial assault, combined with frontal and subterranean attacks from Brazilian pepper soon would spell the end for the natives.

And not too long after that, Jones knew, the exotics themselves would die, leaving the whole of Banyan as naked as half of it once had been.

"Since all my previous experience had been working for one owner who just told me to get the job done, I set about doing what I thought needed to be done," relates Jones. Among the things he thought needed to be done was to start tearing out the exotics.

"I almost got fired," he said, chuckling now at his naivete about the workings of private clubs. "I soon learned that I don't work for one owner, I work for 250!"

Jones and Banyan weathered the political storm. . . but the exotics stayed.

The one significant change he was able to effect — with Lee's blessing — was the elimination of overseeded greens in winter.

"That first year, I thought I was going to get killed," Jones said. "The members kept complaining about the color of the greens."

"But how do they putt?" I asked.

"Well, they putt fine, but they look awful," they would say.

"Which would you rather have?" I asked. "Greens that look great but don't putt true until late in the season or greens that always putt well but turn brown for a couple

of days when the weather gets real cold?"

"More often than not they would say they wanted both — greens that look great and putted well all the time — but they got my point," Jones said.

"I am not generally in favor of overseeding," says Lee. "At this latitude, you have a much better putting surface without overseeding."

"I can understand very well that when you are in a selling program — where you are predicated on things being green all the time — that's different from a strictly private course.

"But all golfers should realize that just because the color is green, that does not mean the putt is going to roll as smooth or as fast as they would like."

For the next few years, Jones quietly went about his business, gathering the support and respect of the members as he maintained their course the way they wanted it, melaleucas and all.

Then five years ago, Jacobson agreed to take the greens committee post and the trio was off to the races.

They embarked on a quiet program to remove most of the underbrush from the forested areas and to start the process of replacing the exotic trees with natives. Two

*(Please see COUNTRY CLUB, page 26)*



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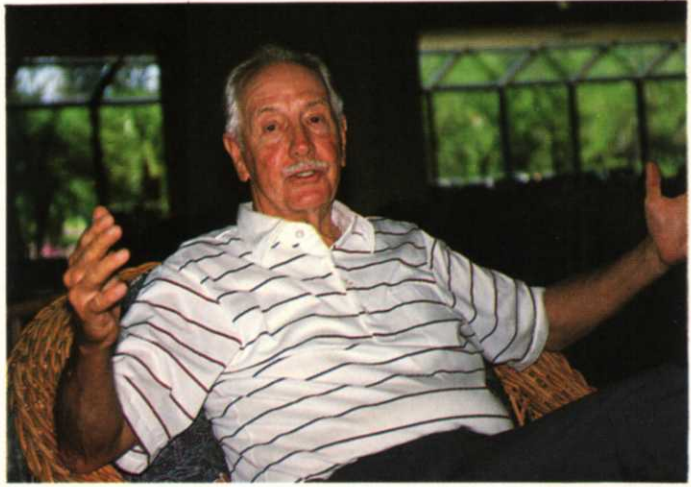
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### COVER STORY



DAN JONES/FLORIDA GREEN

*'If you can get a chairman who understands playing conditions and can intercede between the superintendent and the board in getting a good program established, that's when you can develop a truly great golf course' ..... Joe Lee*

## Country club is no place to go to save money, says Lee

(Continued from page 24)

men were hired part-time specifically for that task. A full-time horticulturist joined the staff and soon native plants — annuals and perennials — began blossoming everywhere.

Small fruit trees appeared, enabling members who were so inclined to eat their way around the course. And the limes in the restaurant's key lime pies were really fresh.

"When they asked me to be greens chairman, I said, 'Okay, I'll do it, but please remember that I'm a spender!'" recalls Jacobson. "I won't waste any money," I told them, "but I will spend it. But we'll give you a great golf course in five years."

"We did it in four."

"And I must say that Mr. Abrahamson, who was not entirely in favor of all the things we were doing, has been saying that this place is beginning to look like a park."

Lee picks up the story:

"In general, the worst thing in the world that can happen to a board is to get efficiency experts. The first thing they are going to do is save the club a lot of money.

"Well, the country club is just not a place you go to save money.

"It's no place to waste money — I don't know of any place that is — but it's certainly not where you go to save money. If you want to save money, go to K-mart or something. . . not the country club."

If penny-pinching is the worst sin to visit a golf club, rapid turnover in management is next, according to Lee.

"You begin to have people who shoulder their way into power

to get things to their liking," he says. "It never happened here, but we see it so much.

"If you can get a good chairman who understands playing conditions and can intercede between the superintendent and the board in getting a good program established, that's when you can develop a truly great golf course.

"That's what Bob brings to this club. He brings a different dimension that you don't often see. He has good playing ability and appreciates good conditions.

At age 35, Jacobson gave up competitive golf after 20 straight years as club champion of Hollywood CC in Deal, N.J. in order to concentrate on his new assignment as greens chairman, working with the legendary superintendent, Sherwood Moore.

"One of the jobs that the chairman of the greens committee has to do is defend what the superintendent is doing," says Lee. "That's unique at this club."

"In my opinion," says Jacobson, "the superintendent never does anything wrong. Whatever he does, the superintendent gets all the credit and the chairman takes all the blame. If there's anything wrong, it's my fault.

"As good as he is — and I have worked with two of the very best in the business — a superintendent is going to make mistakes. But if you are afraid you are going to make mistakes, you are never going to accomplish anything.

"Beyond that, the chairman must have some knowledge of what a golf course should look like and he must know what playing conditions are best for the members so he can give the superintendent some direction."

"I depend on Mr. Jacobson 100 percent for telling me what playing conditions the course should offer," says Jones. "He tells me what he wants and it's up to me to deliver it.

"But he doesn't tell me *how* to do it.

"Dan has made me something of a naturalist," says Jacobson, "but not an agronomist. That's his territory. I'll tell him the things that need to be done but it's up to him to set them in priority. 'Always do first things first,' I tell him. 'And you know that better than I do.'"

"That's the key to mutual respect," responds Jones. "And as for me, the most important thing I must do is never, ever put him in an embarrassing position. If I screw up, the first telephone call he

*(Please see FIVE-YEAR, page 28)*

***'The superintendent never does anything wrong. Whatever he does, the superintendent gets all the credit and the chairman takes all the blame.'***

**Bob Jacobson**  
Greens Chairman



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## It's been a mutual admiration society

Perhaps more so than any other golf course architect, Joe Lee is a hero to the men who maintain the courses he has designed.

That is particularly the case in South Florida, where, it seems, every major highway leads to at least a couple of his layouts. Perhaps the adulation stems from the fact that Lee, who lives in the area, finds his way back to all of them frequently.

A year ago, 22 superintendents from Lee-designed golf courses in South Florida surprised "Mr. Lee" with a testimonial at Pine Tree CC in Boynton Beach.

(An observation: When talking *to* him, generally superintendents call the 68-year-old native of Oviedo "Joe" but when talking *about* him, invariably he's "Mr. Lee.")

On the pretext of a quiet dinner with Mike Bailey, superintendent of The Falls CC in Lantana, and their wives — both named Jenny — Lee walked onto the veranda at Pine Tree and into the view of 22 familiar faces: 21 superintendents and Betty Peter, his office manager and chief assistant.

"Betty is a great designer," Lee said while getting his back slapped, hand shaken and picture taken. "Give her a bloody Mary and she can dogleg a par-three!"

"What we are here to say," said Dan Jones, superintendent of Banyan GC in West Palm Beach and master of ceremonies for the evening, "is very simply that we appreciate you. We appreciate the way you work with us as superintendents. When we have problems, you come and work with us.

"You are there during construction and you're there 15 years



Among those attending the surprise tribute to Joe Lee at Pine Tree CC May 15, 1988, from left, are Dan DuPree, Broken Sound GC; Mark Jarrell, Palm Beach National GC; Dan Nichols, Laguna GC; Richard Lemmel, Royal Palm CC; David Holler, Quail Ridge CC; Tom Burrows, Turtle Creek Club; Dan Jones, Banyan GC; Tim Hiers, John's Island Club; Lee; Mike Bailey, The Falls CC; Dale Witting, Woodfield CC; David Bailey, High Ridge CC; George Ord, Harbor Ridge CC; Ken Anderson, Broken Sound GC; Dick Blake, Bocaire CC; unidentified; Hal Hicks, Pine Tree GC; and Sam Kruger, Boca Greens CC.

later, still looking after your babies, your golf courses, and we appreciate that. It makes our job ten times easier to have someone like you who can work with us on the golf course."

After accepting a straw hat, a pair of Mucker shoes, a plaque and 22 golf shirts (none of them pink or green, per instructions from Jenny Lee), Lee responded to the love-fest in kind:

"You fellows have certainly elevated your profession to a very high degree in what I consider probably the most discriminating area of the country as far as the condition of golf courses goes. I think the standards you have set are a tribute to the professionalism of the superintendents in this latitude. It really has made myself and others in my profession perhaps look much better than they are."

## Five-year plan tackles encroaching civilization

(Continued from page 27)

will get is going to come from me.

"I know he is going to get calls from the members and I don't ever want him to have to say to a member, 'Gee, I didn't know about that.'"

Jones and Jacobson recently obligated

themselves to a five-year plan to complete the transition to native vegetation and isolate the club from encroaching civilization.

"Dan and I were beginning to get a little complacent," says Jacobson. "Things were getting a little too set. So that's when I came up with the idea of a five-year plan

and now we are ready to get to work!"

"That's the beauty of designing and maintaining golf courses," said Lee. "They're living things. If you pay attention, the vegetation will direct you. It takes years, but when you see it and understand it, that's what it is all about."