

The shape of things to come: The men behind architects' creations

By MARK LESLIE

Part artist, part blueprint follower cum mind-reader, part heavy-equipment operator yet with a soft touch. Golf course shapers are all these things — and more.

"They put the heart and soul into a golf course," Jan Beljan of Fazio Golf Course Designers will tell you.

"They're the prima donnas of our industry. They're crucial to us," said Bill Kubly, president of golf course builder Landscapes Unlimited, Inc.

"You can't overdramatize how important the shaper is," said architect John LaFoy.

"Shapers literally are architects," said Dana Fry of Hurdzan Design Group in Columbus, Ohio. "They often are designing as they go on a bulldozer."

To golfers, the big names are the Nicklauses, Fazios, Joneses, Palmers, Hills, Morrishes and Cupps of the design industry.

To those designers, the big names are the Truman Williamses, Sonny McNeils, Don Thomases, Lewis Stones and Lou Cappellis of the shaping world.

These are the men who fine-tune their creations — who turn two-dimensional drawings and verbal directions into three-dimensional earth forms.

When the Vintage Club decided to do a renovation, the owner asked architect Tom Fazio to make sure he sent shaper Cappelli, who was instrumental in building the original design.

In Puerto Rico they call Cappelli "Louis the Magnifico," Fazio said.

"It shows they like your work and attitude. Workmanship means a lot," said Cappelli, the late George Fazio's personal shaper, who has perhaps worked on more golf courses than any man alive.

"If you do everything else right and you don't have shapers capable of doing what you want, the finished product can be entirely ruined," said LaFoy, of Greenville, S.C. "The final six inches is what the golfer sees."

"With several architects, we get projects because we have certain shapers," Kubly said. "The architects try to instill in the owners the importance of the shapers. A lot of times the owners will say they can get a local earth-mover. 'Why hire shapers?' they ask. It makes a world of difference."

"They can recognize and help you overcome problems, like surface drainage, that you haven't noticed," said architect Ted McAnlis of North Palm Beach, Fla.

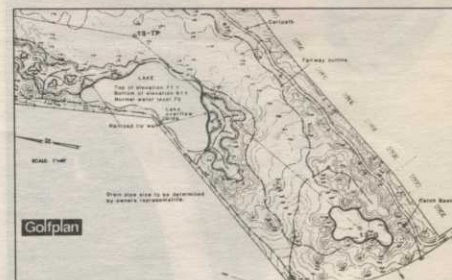


Ponko of Ponko Construction Corp. in Virginia Beach, Va., who worked 10 years for Robert Trent Jones Sr. before forming his own company in 1985, said: "You can only put so much on paper. Someone has to interpret the architect's plans and implement them. You can set everything up with grade stakes with a certain amount of artistic freedom that makes it all work... A topo map can change quite a bit after removing the trees, stumps and topsoil. You're often two feet lower."

Ponko said shapers perform some common sense tasks that make a course work — "such as elongating slopes to fit in with areas you're not disturbing, or taking care of surface drainage that was not indicated on the plans but common sense tells you to surface-drain, or drain to a point."

"You have to have a natural knack," said Marvin Schlauch, who has worked with a number of architects

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Above is an example of a working drawing showing contour sculpturing for an individual hole — provided by Golfplan.

Johnny Christiansen, a shaper for golf course builder Landscapes Unlimited, won the prestigious Building Congress Award for Craftsman of the Year in the Baltimore metropolitan area, for his work on the course at left — Caves Valley. The Craftsman of the Year Award is usually presented to masons who work with their hands. Christiansen receives the award in November. Bill Kubly of Landscapes Unlimited said 12 people from the Building Congress inspected the site of Tom Fazio-designed Caves Valley, the first golf course built in environmentally stringent Baltimore County, Maryland, in 25 years. The project management company explained to them what Christiansen did with the bulldozer to shape the course.

Photo by Hal Phillips

California wins 'honors' as Toughest State for Permitting

By MARK LESLIE

California is the runaway sweeps takes winner, staking claim to the title of Toughest State in Which To Gain Golf Course Permits.

According to a Golf Course News poll of leading course architects and builders, California is in another zone altogether from other states. The Golden State got far more votes than second-place Florida, third-place New Jersey and fourth-place Maryland.

Of the 40 people responding to the questionnaire, 15 tapped California as the toughest, while New Jersey received six first-place votes, Florida five, and Maryland four.

Little consensus was found for easiest permitting state, however, with Texas receiving the most votes among 32 nominees. Nebraska and Louisiana tied for second place.

"It's not 'easy' anymore," wrote architect Clyde Johnston of Hilton Head Island, S.C.

The survey asked for the three toughest and three easiest states. First-, second- and third-place votes garnered three, two and one points, respectively. Among the toughest states, California totaled 62 to Florida's 33, New Jersey's 27 and Maryland's 17.

Voting was so sparse for the easiest states,



that leading Texas had four first places and 17 points. Nebraska had three first and Louisiana one in tying with 12 points apiece.

An intriguing result of the voting — showing that individual experiences can vary widely — is that eight states were named on both lists: Arizona, Connecticut, Georgia,

Michigan, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Texas (Austin, specifically).

Also interesting was that the two states with the most golf courses — California and Florida — were the two most difficult in which to obtain permits. And Hawaii received only one first-place and four second-place votes — perhaps because so few architects and builders do work there.

THE FALLOUT

"California. California. California," responded architect Maury Miller of Golf Resources Inc. in Dallas. "No one else comes close."

"Honolulu is tougher. Over there we're not even allowed to ask," joked builder/architect Perry Dye. He added that already difficult California regulations became even tougher when the Coastal Commission increased its power to 10 miles inland because of salt marshes.

Architect Bob Cupp of Atlanta, Ga., and Jay Morrish of Tulsa, Okla., had particularly harsh words for California.

"The inmates are running the asylum," Morrish said. "The Sierra Club has a strong toehold there. I'm not saying they're bad but they're swaying people's opinions. The

Coastal Commission is really difficult to work with. And there is a general group of environmental whackballs who are against everything. They're always malcontent."

"The higher the population the more complex the approval process and the more crazies you have," Cupp said. "You have people who are ultimately determined to be activists ... not to necessarily stand for anything; just to be activists."

Robert Trent Jones Jr., whose worldwide practice is headquartered in Palo Alto, Calif., said "obstacles (in his home state) are far more difficult than any other place in the country."

Speaking of San Mateo County's 17-year effort to build a public course, Jones said: "It's brutal to get anything built there. It's 60-percent open space, but that doesn't matter to the environmental movement or anti-growth people. Getting a permit is like climbing Mt. Everest with tennis shoes."

Dye said: "In California the gnat catcher and San Francisco garter snake are having almost as many rights as people."

"The spotted owl put 500,000 people out of work and we wonder why it's hard to get a golf course built?"

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Course shapers: Adding substance to form

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over 25 years. "It's like an artist who draws a picture of a mountain. He's an artist. That's in him. You don't learn that.

"You have to have good eye for it and a feel for building a green. You have a design from an architect and you have to be able to read his mind and know what he's looking for. If you can put those together you can be a shaper."

Yet, Schlauch said, it takes years to be good. He points to his 23-year-old sidekick Casey Fraser as "a natural" who can read blueprints, knows grades and golf, and is beyond his years in expertise.



Shaper Marvin Schlauch, right, with architect Stephen Kay.

SET APART BY TALENT

What's the difference between the bulldozer operator the owner might like to hire and the professional shaper?

"Nothing is perfect. Everything is free-flow. It looks like God created it. That's the difference between a bulldozer operator and shaper," said Greg Will, of Classic Land Shapers, a division of Sporting Valley Turf in Lancaster, Pa. "The dozer operator tends to get things more level, round and symmetrical. It's probably easier to never have worked on a dozer before and shape than to change from dozer work to shaping."

Pitches. Dips. Rolls. Bunkers cut into

the faces of greens.

Shapers have to form a mental picture of all these land forms "and know ahead of time what you're going to do," Ponko said.

Cappelli, who started shaping for George Fazio at the age of 29 in 1959, is particularly fond of bunkers.

"I think traps make the golf course," he said, "their ins and outs, ups and downs, different shapes."

Cappelli feels fortunate he could free-style for so many years when George was alive.

"When I started playing, I got fascinated in the game and I got new ideas from building golf courses," he said. "I saw a lot of greens were small for long holes. The tees were too small and didn't have many angles to shoot from. The bunkers were too round, with no character. There was no variety of lies on the fairways. Things like that. Plus George taught me a lot. I started doing things on my own and he thought they were great. Routing of the holes was mostly on paper. But sight and feel was done the most."

Other shapers who can't freelance so much, have earned their reputations by learning architects' tastes and tendencies.

"With Trent Jones, we could have phone discussions and I knew exactly what they wanted," said Ponko. "I knew both Roger [lead designer Rulewich] and Trent real well, so when they talked about wrapping a green into a mound, I had a mental picture of it right away."

"Richard and I have developed a rapport about how things should look," said McAnlis of Richard Laconte of Golf Tractor Inc. in Stuart, Fla. "It's very important to have a shaper who knows you, your style. And the more skillful the shaper, the fewer problems you have on the course."

"A shaper is a sculptor of the earth," said Beljan. "You have to see them in action on those D6s and D8s. They start with something big and whittle away at it. It's sheer artistry. No moves are wasted. Shapers don't get the credit they deserve."

For many of the shapers, their reward is the work itself.

"It's a great way to make a living," Ponko said. "I truly love building greens. It's rewarding when you finish and you can stand back and look at it. I also like to travel. So it fits my lifestyle."

"I never tire of going to work in the morning," Will said. "Everything is different every day. If you take a year to do a course, it's long. You're always working someplace else. The area is different. The architect is different. Every hole is different. Every green is different."

Crucial inches

The top six inches of soil is the most crucial part of construction. That is where you want your most highly skilled equipment operators working, builders say.

Ground on a course is moved in three ways and by three types of equipment: heavy earth-moving by D6s, John Deere 850s and similar bulldozers; fine shaping by D3s, John Deere 550s and similar dozers; and finish shaping by a rubber-tire tractor pulling an instrument like a gill pulverizer or a harrow or another type of finishing implement.

Shaper Marvin Schlauch said greens are much easier to shape today than in times past. "Years ago they didn't have the kind of equipment we have. They had straight-blade dozers," Schlauch said. "Now we have the best equipment, the easiest to run. We have six-way blades that angle and tilt."



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