

Course shapers: Adding substance to form



Shaper Marvin Schlauch, right, with architect Stephen Kay.

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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.

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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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