

Johnson on his own, eyes int'l canvass

By MARK LESLIE

MT. VERNON, Wash. — Despite what he calls a "glut of golf course architects" around the world, Tom Johnson is testing the waters by opening his own design firm here.

The 39-year-old North Carolinian, who has worked the past seven years with Denis Griffiths and Associates in Braselton, Ga., is concerned about the future of his profession.

"Weekly, there's somebody putting up their shingle," he said. "There is a glut of architects, not only in the U.S. but around the world. Is it going to take a golf recession to slow that down? I question whether the business can support all these people. How long it is going to last?"

Johnson already has three projects in planning — one in the Seattle suburb of Conway and two in Japan, where he has worked for most of the past 13 years, first with Gary Player and Ron Kirby from 1981-83. The North Carolina State graduate, with degrees in turfgrass management and landscape architecture, also labored as a job superintendent with Wadsworth Golf Construction Co. from 1983-87 in the Midwest and Texas before joining



Tom Johnson

Griffiths. The member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects has his own ideas on golf design, declaring: "The one problem I have with most designers is that they say they want to build a course everybody can play. I dispute that. The flat statement that everybody is going to enjoy [a certain] course, or that you're going to make it playable for everybody, is a misnomer."

"The difference in capabilities of golfers is so vast," he added. "You play with people who shoot 118 and then you play with one-handicappers the next day. The same golf course just does not work. You've got to decide not only what the site dictates, but what the client wants. Then you have to go after the best golf course. It's not going to work for the entire golfing population."

Johnson, whose favorite architects are Charles Blair Macdonald and Alister Mackenzie, said: "I don't like to cubbyhole myself into the minimal

look, or traditional, or Scottish. The terrain dictates more than the type of player."

He said he uses bunkers "not only as strategy to tell people where to hit the ball, but to hide things. Golf needs to be part mystery. You just can't lay it out on a piece of paper and expect it to work."

The golf courses Johnson doesn't like are what he calls "sod farms."

"The client's trying to save money and the superintendent wants to mow the entire course with a seven-gang mower. You end up with a sod farm. For the 70-year-old, retired crowd in South Florida, that might be the right golf course. But those are very boring to play, very un-eye-appealing," he said.

In contrast, he said his favorite American courses are Shinnecock Hills in Southampton, N.Y., from the old school, and Harbour Town Golf Links in Hilton Head Island, S.C., from the new.

"You have a big gap in the U.S. between the old and the new," he said. "Harbour Town [designed by Pete and Alice Dye] is like the headlight of new American golf course architecture from the '60s to the '80s. They've been



Tom Johnson was the lead designer for Denis Griffiths & Associates on this project — Chiang Mai Green Valley Country Club in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

playing there since '69, and it's a wonderful setting, wonderful golf course and wonderful strategy."

The lead designer for much of Denis Griffiths' Asian courses, Johnson expects to continue to work extensively there, and is now just an eight-hour flight away from Japan.

"I enjoy working in Japan," he said. "The biggest difference [from the United States] is, golf

course architects are more designers in Japan. We're not belabored too much with environmental and engineering problems. The client takes care of those parts of the job. Architects wear more hats inside the U.S. We're the liaison. We're in charge of the budget, in charge of grow-in sometimes...

"But in Asia, and especially Japan, we're basically designers: the creative thinkers of the job. I really like that."

Q&A: Robinson's design cup overfloweth

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GCN: How did waterscapes become such an important part of your work?

TR: It started in the Coachella Valley [near Palm Springs, Calif.]. I'm doing my 23rd course there now [Tahquitz Creek] for the city of Palm Springs. The developers of Sunrise CC [in Rancho Mirage] 15

years ago sent out questionnaires to 13,000 golfers. They asked them to pick their nine favorite holes in the area. Eight of them had water. We learned from that. We try to incorporate the sight and sound of water. It's the one hazard that does not slow up play. The key is to give golfers a way around it, to give the high handicapper an out.

GCN: With the water shortages in many parts of the country, is it becoming more difficult to get water features approved?

TR: Lakes actually save water. It takes 104 inches of water annually to keep grass green in the desert. If a lake is properly sealed, it loses just 64 inches to evaporation. So you save water by using lakes and ponds rather than grass.

GCN: What is your design philosophy?

TR: We want our courses to be as natural as possible; challenging for the low-handicapper but not discouraging for the high-handicapper; rewarding for the good shot but not overly penal for the bad one; with greens flexible enough to accommodate many pin placements. You can change average scores on a hole by as much as half a stroke through pin placements. There are two ways to build a course. First, there is the trial-and-error method, where you rough things out, move some dirt, look at it, then move it again if you

want to change something. It's creative, but it can be costly to keep moving things around. We use the second method, working everything out on paper or the computer. It's less expensive because you move things once and that's it.

GCN: How do you view the role of the superintendent?

TR: A good superintendent can take a mediocre design and make it look very good. He can also take a great design and make it look pretty bad. The designer and superintendent are dependent on each other. I like to get the superintendent involved during construction so he can point out maintenance issues we need to consider.

GCN: How involved is Ted Jr. in the business?

TR: He used to be with Wells Fargo Bank, so he's been very helpful from the financing end. In fact, we're looking at financing a course of our own in the LA area. He's also been computerizing everything around here. He's going to be a darn good architect before

long. We'll make sure he has several more courses under his belt before applying for ASGCA membership.

GCN: What is the future of golf development?

TR: It depends on the economy. Things certainly aren't as hectic around here as they were a few years ago. A lot of our courses are pending because of a lack of financing.

GCN: Has the Asian market helped pick up the slack on the domestic side?

TR: Definitely. We have a course going in Jakarta, another one pending in South Korea and one in Tomoika, Japan, that will open this fall. Environmentalists are a threat to Asian development. They're clamping down in some areas. There's a growing feeling that golf courses are detrimental. We have to combat that by bringing in environmental consultants early, publishing research on the safety of properly applied pesticides, and preserving wetlands by incorporating them into the design.

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Vintage Group plans half dozen 'downtown' projects

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"We want to replicate, for the most part, what we've done here, which is a significant practice area," Tourtellotte said. "We want to focus on being a learning center and to promote teaching. We have two nationally recognized instructors — Mike McGetrick and Don Hurter. We've got some very high-tech teaching facilities, with indoor and outdoor video cameras. We will have covered, heated tee stalls this fall." You can practice your long game

on the driving range, your short game on the par-3 course, and your chipping and putting on a 7,000-square-foot green and green-side bunkers.

Dye Designs International of Denver designed the par-3 course here and will be given first consideration for design of the future projects, Tourtellotte said.

"Perry has done a great job here and one of the things he does very well is par-3s, especially on tight sites," he said.

Tourtellotte said future sites need not be large. The Illinois Golf Center covers 30 acres, five of which are a public park. The San Diego property is 24 acres and is not downtown, "but it's urban in the sense that we want 500,000 people in daily-worker density within a 10-mile radius," he said.

"We're the good guys and ride into the cities with the white hats," Tourtellotte said, "because we're creating green open space as opposed to high-rises."