

Freeman has a hand in shape of things to come

By MARK LESLIE

MONMOUTH, Maine — From a real world of “doing odds and ends” for his little hometown of Monmouth, to a fantasy life of shaping great golf courses from coast to coast, at the age of 33 Joe Freeman has already run the gamut in life.

“I found a talent I didn’t know I had,” said Freeman from his interim home in Painesville, Ohio, where he was putting intricate touches to Little Mountain Country Club.

Eleven years ago Freeman had dropped out of a vocational college engineering program, opting to follow in his father Charlie’s footsteps and operate heavy equipment. He had bought an excavator and his Dad had purchased a bulldozer. Charlie was working on a hotel construction site in South Portland and heard that golf course contractor Vinnie Bartlett was hiring equipment operators to build the hotel’s Sable Oaks golf course.

That’s when Joe’s life changed. Father called son, and today that son is among a small group of men who are a much-sought-after commodity: experienced golf course shapers. These are the dozer operators who take a topographic map and an architect’s rendering and shape the land into greens, bunkers and flowing fairways.

“I give credit where it’s due,” he said. “People dug that talent out of me. My Dad, Vinnie Bartlett, [shapers] Randy Tobin and Rick Markos, guys who make you strive to reach up. Everybody, bar none, is an end-product of the people we’ve been around. We interact with each other positively or negatively. If you see things people do that you like, you try to emulate them.”

To Freeman’s credit: The Sanctuary, a Colorado mountain course designed by Jim Engh that won *Golf Digest’s* selection as 1997 Best New Private Course, and various other courses designed by the likes of Tom Weiskopf, Arthur Hills, Jerry Matthews, Keith Foster, Mike Hurdzan and Dana Fry, Brian Silva and Clive Clark.

Freeman’s life in the 1980s could be titled “*Hometown Joe*.” His life today: “*On the Road Again*.”

Much like other shapers, every three to six months he and wife Judi pack their bags and head to the next project, find an apartment and set up house. There, Freeman fine-tunes someone’s design handiwork and, voila!, you have Weiskopf’s Castle Pines North (now The Ridge), or Silva’s Passaconaway Country Club in Litchfield, N.H., or Matthews’ St. Clair Country Club in Port Huron, Mich., or Clark’s Belgrade Lakes Golf Club in Maine.

“We both hate moving but love traveling,” Freeman said. But most of all he enjoys doing a project through to completion and seeing the finished product.

“Once I started shaping at Sable Oaks, it tickled an artistic flair in me,” he said. “It seemed so neat to be able to create such aesthetically pleasing features. Anyone stopping to take in the beauty would admire it. You’re creating lasting beauty that pleases people long after you leave. I saw that very early on.”

With a decade of shaping experience under his belt, Freeman said: “I like doing it all, embellishing [the design] with bunkers, with rolling fairways...”

Bunkers, he said, are the most fun. “Usually, in this economy, it seems the steeper and more radical the bunker, the more they like it. They want the stark visual effect.”

He also enjoys tackling special problems. Like at Little Mountain, where one parcel of land “just would not permit a golf hole,” he said. “You start moving quantities of earth and, all of a sudden, a golf hole appears. And everyone says, ‘Wow! It’s awesome.’”

Freeman said he works with designers who are strict about following their contoured maps, and with “freelancers.”

“When I did Jim Engh’s Sanctuary, everything was staked, stern to stern. In some ways it speeded up the process and I got pretty good at it. I would leave the stake there to prove I met the requirements.”

Then, with Fry, “Dana will give you a concept of what he wants to see, and he gives you freedom to try to see his vision on the earth. If it doesn’t work, he’d just as soon you create something that does work.”

“They are the extreme opposite ends of the spectrum, but I



Joe Freeman with his “partner” in the trade of shaping.

enjoy working both ways.”

Both architects, in fact, have asked Freeman to join them on other projects. His schedule allowed him to shape Fry’s Little Mountain here, being built by Quality Golf, but not Engh projects in Bismarck, S.D., or Richmond, Wash.

Freeman’s biggest thrill building a golf course?

“The Sanctuary,” he said. “It was a combination of the people involved, the challenge of the project and, obviously, the gratification of it being named Best Private Course in 1997.”

His most challenging course?

“Belgrade Lakes, hands down,” he said. “You could take any of the others and multiply by 10 and it is not Belgrade. There was no blasting and some of the rocks were as big as a house. We had to move them or bury them. It was amazing.”

Each project, Freeman said, takes on a life of its own.

“We live for the project, it seems,” he said. “We work 65, 70 hours a week sometimes. We’re there to get the next hole built. Then you come to a screeching halt.”

When a job is nearing completion, Freeman begins networking with people in the industry to get the word out that he is available. “You put out broad, grassroots feelers and start getting offers back,” he said. “Normally you have several offers, and you choose where you want to go next.”

“The architects know who you are because of where you’ve

been and what you’ve done. If you give architects what they want, normally speaking, you have a job with that design group. But, it’s important to do what you say, be there when you say. Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no.’”

Freeman, like others in the back-breaking profession, does not intend to be a shaper forever. But while he’s young and strong enough, he intends to soak in every moment.

The career, he said, “was an act of God — totally apart from me. I praise the Lord for it. I didn’t premeditate it at all and I couldn’t have done it without Him.”

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