

Making a splash in the turf business

Jerry Pate is swimming in just about every pond in golf

BY PAT JONES

He's the unlikeliest of renaissance men. He doesn't necessarily have the flair of most Tour players – despite being responsible for memorable moments during the U.S. Open and The Players Championship. People forget he was a color commentator on TV long before Johnny Miller started talking grain. He isn't the first name that pops to mind when you think of successful golf course architects, but his courses are lauded for their beauty and playability. He doesn't act like a business mogul, yet he operates one of the largest turf equipment companies in the Southeast. He sure as heck doesn't come off as a farmer, but he owns a sod farm that provides turf for the courses he builds and others in the region.

Jerry Pate has an iron in the fire of just about every aspect of golf but, like Rodney Dangerfield, he doesn't seem to get the respect that more flamboyant figures might command.

Pate broke into prominence three decades ago with a win at the U.S. Amateur in 1975 and a spot on the winning team at the Walker Cup that same year. But, a year later, he defined "rookie sensation" by winning the U.S. Open and the Canadian Open during his first year as a pro. He went on to win six more times on the regular Tour, including the inaugural Players Championship at the nasty TPC Sawgrass Stadium Course. Though already an Open champion, he gained immortality and expressed the opinion of many of his colleagues by tossing designer Pete Dye and then-commissioner Deane Beman into the pond on the 18th hole before joining them for a celebratory swim.

Like many pros, he got older (and had a succession of injuries) and his playing skills couldn't quite keep up with the young guns. Thus, he began to diversify into broadcasting, turf sales, design and even sod production. Still, when he turned 50 two years ago, he joined the Champions Tour and played regularly. Last year, before shoulder surgery cut his season short, he won his first tournament in 23 years (and claimed his largest-ever paycheck) at the Outback Steakhouse Pro-Am in Tampa, Fla. Yes,



Photo: Courtesy of the PGA Tour.

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the 2007 Outback was a bigger payday than the '76 U.S. Open. That should tell you a lot about how the game has changed during three decades.

Despite the day job that keeps him busy selling Toro, Echo and Lawn-Boy products (among many others), Pate and his recently rebuilt shoulder are doing well on the Champions Tour this year. Earlier this month, he returned from the Senior British Open after shooting 5 under par in the first round of the 3M Championship in Minneapolis. He eventually finished in a tie for 16th place and, at press time, was ranked 46th on the money list. Not bad for something he does in his spare time when he's not pushing red iron.

But, when we talked, the game was secondary, and Pate was all business – focused on what he's learned from working with superintendents, his different kind of design philosophy and the joy of building a business that now serves courses in seven different states.

HOW WAS THE SENIOR BRITISH OPEN?

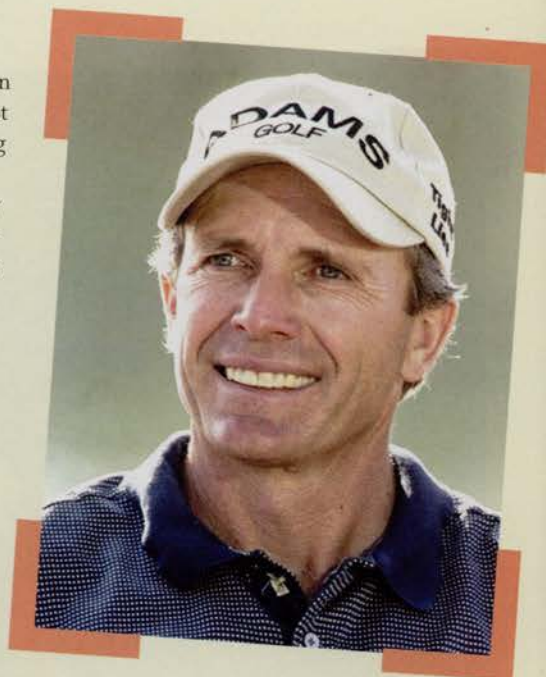
It was terrific. I was striking the ball purely and putting with confidence. That's something I hadn't done since my last shoulder surgery and all the rehab. I hit the ball spectacularly well and had a great time over there.

AS AN ARCHITECT, WHAT WAS YOUR TAKE ON MUIRFIELD?

It's one of the great golf courses in world. There's so much history and tradition there. The club started in 1744. I played that Wednesday with Ben Crenshaw, and we talked about greens and bunkers throughout the round. The conclusion we came up with is you can't build golf courses like Muirfield in America is because golfers want them green. The superintendent would get fired. But I love that sandy turf in combination of a little bit of rye. When they get firm, they're just great to play.

WHAT COURSES DO YOU KEEP IN THE BACK OF YOUR MIND WHEN DESIGNING A COURSE?

I try not to emulate other courses. The biggest strategic elements of any golf course are hazards. In sandy soils, you want to try to use cape bunkers like George Thomas did at Riviera or the



Other than playing golf professionally, Jerry Pate designs golf courses, owns a sod farm and operates a turf equipment company. Photo: courtesy of the PGA Tour

L.A. Country Club or MacKenzie at Cypress and Augusta. The sand stays up on the face and makes it much more interesting. We did a course called Kiva Dunes (in the Alabama Gulf Shores area) where we were able to use that look.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE CURRENT STATE OF THE DESIGN BUSINESS?

My biggest concern about design right now is that architects are trying to outdo each other – too many bunkers, too much undulation, too long and too penal. They keep forgetting the game is about recreation. Unfortunately, the golf magazines have touted those kind of courses for years instead of those that were well-constructed and playable.

I don't see many renovations designed to make a course more playable. Pebble Beach took the fourth green and others and flattened them out. It gave them more putting surface. Jack Nicklaus did a really good job of redoing them. I'm getting to be more of a minimalist. We're losing golfers because the game is too difficult and it takes too long. We have to focus more on playability instead of designing for Tiger and Vijay.

WHO INFLUENCES YOU AS A DESIGNER?

I like the simplicity of Tom Doak and Crenshaw/Coore. Their courses are “on the ground.” They’re not trying to move a world of dirt. On the other hand, they’re getting some nice sites. I’ve also always been a big fan of Tom Fazio. He gets the cream of the clients. It would be hard to not build a great-looking course with a great piece of land or great clients.

I love the look of Pete Dye’s courses. He has an imagination like no one else. Some of his better-known courses that challenge me are Casa de Campo, TPC Sawgrass, Oak Tree and Whistling Straights. On Pete’s courses, there are always a few holes where you can barely miss a pin and take a six or a seven. It looks great, but I don’t know if it’s good for the average player. Kiva Dunes has a Pete Dye look with sort of George Thomas bunkering. Pete’s courses are tough, but he was my mentor, and I love him.

HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN THE TURF BUSINESS?

In 1997, I was a customer of a small Toro distributor. I owned a few courses, and I liked Toro and what they represent – quality and innovation. I went and met with the owner who wanted to sell the business and bought it. We’ve grown a lot, and we’re now in seven states. We sell Toro, Echo, Standard Golf, Dakota, Tycrop and a bunch of other strong lines. It’s not a business in which you’re going to become wealthy, but it’s a nice business. People outside the industry laugh when they find out I play golf on weekends and work the rest of the week selling turf equipment.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOUR WEEKEND JOB OVERLAPS WITH YOUR WEEKDAY JOB?

Well, Mike Hoffman (the c.e.o. of Toro) followed me around at the 3M Championship wearing a “Pate’s Posse” golf shirt. That was funny and kind of neat to have the big boss following me around and rooting for me.

WHAT’S YOUR PRIMARY ROLE WITH THE TURF COMPANY?

I meet with customers and try to understand their needs. Superintendents need support. They want the best they can get and always have to negotiate with their owners or boards. We try to partner with them and make sure they can get the best they can and still afford it. Most courses now are leasing – three-year leases, just

like cars. It’s a great option for them.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED DURING A DECADE IN THE TURF BUSINESS?

The biggest lesson? It’s just dealing with people. The toughest thing is that people just think I’m a “face.” Hey, I’m the owner. I have to be on top of things every day. You have to hire quality people with a good conscience and a good heart. The message always has to be that we’re there for superintendents when they need us.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO DEALERS AND DISTRIBUTORS FACE THAT SUPERINTENDENTS NEED TO UNDERSTAND?

You have to make sure you make a profit. You’re always working on the margins and everything constantly goes up in cost. Everything is related to the cost of oil: steel, coal, rubber and plastics ... it’s an ongoing struggle to remain profitable. But you still have to back it up with customer service and care. You can make mistakes, but you can’t hit the ball out of bounds on every shot. You just have to keep moving the ball forward and keep a good attitude. We have to go above and beyond the call of duty every day. Toro is keenly on top of all those issues. It has a great presence in the market.

YOU EVEN OWN A SOD FARM. HOW’S THAT GOING?

I kept revisiting the courses we’d built and finding mutations and problems with the Bermuda-grass we’d put in and I said, “What the heck, I’ll just plant my own.” That way I know what I have. We grow 419 and Tifdwarf as well as MiniVerde. Putting green grasses are always in an evolutionary and revolutionary state. Particularly Bermuda in the Southeast.

ARE YOU DESIGNING ANY NEW COURSES?

We just finished The Preserve in VanCleave, Miss., and we have a project in the works, Jubilee in Pace, Fla. To be honest, I haven’t worked hard on trying to build a lot of courses. I’d love to do more, but it’s not an everyday thing. We don’t build superexpensive golf courses. The greatest compliment I get is that we design fair golf courses that a high-handicapper can play but the best player in the world can play if we move the pins. When Doak said, “I hope Tiger does as well as Pate did on his first course,” that

was a nice compliment.

If we’re not careful, architects – with their high and mighty opinions of themselves – are going to ruin this market. My sole interest is preserving the integrity of the game. People should have fun, not throw clubs.

WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE AT MOST COURSES YOU SEE?

Raise the height of cut, put the pins in the middle of the green and quit taking backhoes to the bunkers, and the members will love it.

HOW DO YOU RATE THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPERINTENDENTS IN THE INDUSTRY?

In terms of golf course superintendents, it’s hard to be objective because they’re my customers, and I have tremendous respect for what they do. I compare golf courses to an aircraft carrier that simply can’t run without the guys in the engine room. The pros are sort of like the fighter pilots who get all the credit. The superintendents are the ones who make the ships run.

The reality is they make the industry work. The thing that’s so important is they understand what they want and, when they understand what the designer has laid out on the ground, it’s a recipe for greatness.

HOW DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED 100 YEARS FROM NOW?

I want to be remembered as a person with many interests. I try to learn from my mistakes and pass on what I’ve learned. I’ve had an unbelievable life. I wouldn’t trade it with anybody. Faith is a big part of my life. I was the U.S. Amateur champ at 20 and the Open champ at 22. I took that fast start and realized that I had to put faith first, family second and my job third. That made the landings a lot softer when I crashed.

Golf’s such a great game. I have a drive to try to make the world better and make the game better. Everybody wants a sense of self-worth. That comes in a lot of different packages. But, it’s easy to figure out when you ask, “What would my God want me to do.” You boil it down to the Ten Commandments. If you can live by those rules, you’ll be just fine.

In the end, I just keep trying to chase the rainbow and see where it takes me. **GCI**

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