



Each hole on The Water's Edge offers a view of the water.

Loving care

Attention to detail during a renovation preserves the original character of The Water's Edge Country Club, a Buddy Loving Jr. design

BY MARGARET HEPP

Some builders might find Ronald Willard Sr. a difficult owner to work with. First, there's the perfectionist mantra of The Willard Cos.: "Good enough is not OK. It must be right."

Then there's Willard's hands-on approach to ownership, which, at best, borders on micromanagement, and, at worst, has been mistaken for vandalism.

But Donnie Adkins, co-owner of Aspen Corp., understands Willard's style. Adkins understands what it's like to build a family business from the ground up. And he understands, that for a particular breed of owner, a golf course holds much more than monetary value.

A native of greater Roanoke, Va., Willard started local operation of his construction company in 1973. Expanding his business, he chose and purchased the land for Smith Mountain Lake's first golf course and largest residential community, The Waterfront, in 1976. He began development on The Water's Edge Country Club, another lakefront property, in 1985. Willard chose architect Raymond "Buddy" Loving Jr. to design the second 18-hole course in Penhook, Va. Together, Willard and Loving walked the grounds and staked out spots for every tee, tree and green – and not just any spots, the right spots.

So, when Aspen was hired for an 18-hole renovation of The Water's Edge in 2006, Adkins had an idea of what he was getting

himself into. The job included a thorough upgrade based on significant maintenance challenges:

- Reshape and drain all bunkers;
- Update irrigation on all holes;
- Replace all greens, surrounds and tees; and
- Improve landing areas in the fairways as required.

Adkins was inspired by Willard's desire to improve what he started more than 20 years earlier.

"Ron has blood, sweat and tears equity in this course," Adkins says. "I've never seen an owner develop such a vision."

That vision ultimately doubled in scope – and price – under Willard's direction. But during the renovation, improvements gradually became less about looking back than looking forward.

EYES ON THE PRIZE

Each hole on The Water's Edge offers a view of the water. Nine holes provide unobstructed vistas of Smith Mountain Lake. During the original course construction, Willard sacrificed close to 2.5 miles of lakefront positioning to build that amenity into the golf course and the community.

Views are of utmost importance to Willard, and he and Loving ensured there were windows to the water, as well as opportunities to enjoy the natural beauty of the course and

'09 *Legacy*
Award Winner

The Water's Edge Country Club

Location: Penhook, Va.

Web site: thewatersedgecc.com

Type of project: Renovation

Cost: More than \$5 million

Construction started: July 2006

Course opened: May 2008

Architectural firm: Richard Mandell Golf Architecture

Builder: Aspen Corp.

Manager, golf course maintenance: Jeff Snyder

Owner representatives: Ronald Willard, Ronald Willard II

land. When Willard's son and partner, Ron Willard II, hired architect Richard Mandell of Richard Mandell Golf Architecture, Willard was pleased with Mandell's reverence for the lay of the land and respect for nature. But Willard was vehemently opposed to the removal of trees on the property – even for the sake of a clearer view.

Mandell is perhaps the only architect in the industry who also shares the title of certified arborist. Still, it took a lot of effort to convince Willard they were on the same team.

"One tree can limit the survival of five other trees right behind it," Mandell says. "It can also create erosion and difficulty for growing grass. A true environmental advocate understands all elements of the golf course."

Willard became that environmental advocate as the project progressed, Mandell says, but only after he relinquished his tendencies toward tree-hugging. Adkins recalls the early process of tagging trees for removal at each hole.

"We would go out and tag a bunch of trees according to Richard's plan, and by the next morning, almost all of the tags would be gone," Adkins says. "We thought it was vandalism, local kids playing a prank. Then we found out Willard was walking the course at night and pulling marking tape from trees."

Though he remains somewhat proud of his rebellious antics, Willard explains he and Mandell eventually saw eye-to-eye when he realized their mutual desire to preserve the property.

"We chose Mandell because he was the one guy who didn't want to destroy the design or change Loving's architecture," Willard says. "He refined it."

REDESIGNED AND REFINED

Mandell recognized the unique responsibility of his role in such a sensitive renovation.

"With a new project, you have a virgin piece of property," he says. "With a renovation, you have a piece of property with 18 existing holes. There are roads and homes. You can't just build or rebuild wherever you want. You have to take into account where things are and how things work."

Mandell's goal from a practical standpoint was to make the rest of the course less maintenance intensive and create less handwork. The biggest challenge came with the sand bunkers, Mandell says. Loving's course de-

sign is typical of the 1970s, complete with large, serpentine bunkers. Mandell stayed close to Loving's style, softening bunker faces but maintaining the original flashed-sand appearance.

"The flashed bunkers are so much more maintenance intensive than flat bunkers," he says. "I haven't worked with this style of bunker before. It was a fun challenge."

Aspen used Luck Stone white sand to fill several new bunkers, created on the course as needed.

Another issue was tee-box drainage.

"We enlarged all the tees to spread out wear and tear," Mandell says. "We softened slopes here and there. The square tee got a little bit away from the kidney shape of the '60s and '70s, but we maximized the usable tee shape."

Tees were seeded with L-93 bentgrass once the crucial earthmoving process was complete.

"We enhanced the ability to move water with proper shaping and earthwork and modern interior drainage systems," Adkins says.

One detail of Loving's original design that wasn't honored is part of hole eight. A tiny old chapel – just 30 feet by 20 feet – that had been frequented by black workers in the area stood here on the grounds. During the original course construction in 1986 the dozer operator was ordered to level it.

"They called me in on the two-way radio," Willard recalls. "I knew we'd bought a church, but I'd never really thought about it. When I got there, the African-American operator insisted he wouldn't move God's house."

Loving amended his original blueprint to preserve the chapel. It was renovated and used as storage space – but the second time around, Willard recognized the strength and potential within the four walls.

"During this renovation, we gutted the church and restored it to its original condition," he says. "We added a copper steeple and made sure it was lit at night. It became a focal point of the project."

Four weddings were held at the renovated chapel during the summer of 2008.

GETTING TO THE GREEN

Jeff Snyder, manager of golf course maintenance and son of The Water's Edge's original golf professional, made the initial contact with Aspen in 2005.

WHAT THE JUDGES SAID

"Aspen delivered the project on time within two weeks of the scheduled date, with substantial changes that were added by the owner. There was an excellent relationship between the owner and Aspen, which contributed to the finished product. It sounds like Aspen was able to help the owners see opportunities for expanded vistas and tree removal that the owner was unable to see originally. It was a good coordination between all parties, and it shows in the end product."

– Mike Bylen, owner, Shepherd's Hollow Golf Club, Clarkston, Mich., and Pine Trace Golf Club, Rochester Hills, Mich.

"Aspen was able to open up more views on the golf course and create a better and more enhanced golf course compared to what was there originally. The ability of the contractor to find a sod supplier on short notice to put more sod down on the golf course was noteworthy, as well as the contractor's willingness to supply and install plastic liner around the greens at its own cost to help those areas. The club is generating more revenue than it's seen during past years."

– Mike Benkusky, golf course architect and president of Michael J. Benkusky Golf Course Architecture, Lake in the Hills, Ill.

"Aspen worked daily with an owner who was heavily involved financially and emotionally in the project. Aspen was able to take and modernize an old facility. It looks like it belongs where it is today. The architect was happy and recommends working with Aspen again. The quality of the work presented is outstanding."

– Tommy Sasser, vice president of development, Linger Longer Communities, Greensboro, Ga.

"We had *Poa annua* issues on our greens, and we were thinking of renovating them in the future," Snyder says.

Snyder had to put his dream of faster greens on hold until the following year, when Aspen's schedule opened up and renovation got underway. The goal was to make the greens as fast as possible without struggling to manage two different types of grasses on the greens during the summer. To accomplish

this goal, the team focused on new grass and irrigation.

In addition to considerable drainage problems, irrigation at the Water's Edge was hindered by an old pump station.

"It was a clay-valve system with a very high-demand electrical system," Snyder says. "The pump station was always trying to give us hundreds of gallons of water, even if we only needed 50."

Course irrigation is now fueled by a VFD pump station, which supplies only as much water as required.

"We save electricity and wear and tear on our piping system," Snyder says. "Our irrigation breaks were cut dramatically, our electrical use was cut dramatically, and we have more water flow. We were able to go from 1,000 gallons per minute to 1,300."

Using a double-row system, more than 1,000 Toro 854S and 855S sprinkler heads are in use now – about a 30-percent increase in head quantity from the previous system, Snyder says. The team also added an OSMAC control system.

But the irrigation installation process turned out to be much more complicated than originally planned. The irrigation had to be addressed as the project unfolded, Adkins explains, because about a month into the project, Willard decided to change from seeding to

sodding the A1/A4 greens. Unfortunately for Aspen, winter was fast approaching, bringing with it a nightmare for sod installation.

"The only company that could cut the sod during the wintertime was a vendor in Delaware," Adkins says. "In freezing, windy temperatures, we had to take every precaution not to let the sod freeze in transport. We've had a lot of experience in grow-in projects in the wintertime. We made sure to keep the sod fresh the evening before. On the tractor-trailers, it had to be netted, covered and brought in."

Installing as many as two to three acres of sod per day, Aspen had to move quickly.

"It had to arrive fresh and be laid immediately to avoid freezing," Adkins says. "Sodding in the wintertime was the only way to get it green fast enough."

This labor-intensive work required high levels of quality control for hours and weeks.

"There were many seven-day weeks to get it all done," Snyder says. "Aspen didn't miss a beat."

In hindsight, Willard wishes he would've elected to sod the golf course completely.

"It's more money, but it balances out," he says.

COMMUNICATION

The biggest success of the whole project was

the communication and the ability of the team to work together, Snyder says. What he appreciated most was the transparency of Aspen.

"There weren't any secrets or hidden costs," Snyder says. "Whether we wanted to add a little drainage or sod, it was easy for us to do the math with the contractor."

Mandell had high praise for Aspen's project superintendent Joe Kubin.

"Kubin is one of the finest project managers I've had the pleasure of working with," he says. "For the most part, I describe this project as a nonevent. To me, the term 'nonevent' is the highest mark I could give to a contractor because it means there were few issues and dramas."

But perhaps most indicative of Aspen's success is the fact the team was just two weeks past the original deadline, despite receiving almost twice the original workload. Getting it all done in time required daily input from every single member of The Water's Edge renovation team, from Kubin, Mandell, Snyder and Willard.

"If you wanted to do a case study of teamwork, you could do it on this project," Adkins says. **GCI**

Margaret Hepp is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

The owner of The Water's Edge was vehemently opposed to removing trees on property.

