

The road less traveled

Ron Dodson helped change the environmental path of golf over the past 20 years. Now he has his sights set on even bigger goals.

BY PAT JONES

What in the heck does poet Robert Frost have to do with golf? Well, just read the best-known passage from Frost's famous poem, "The Road Not Taken," and you'll gain an important insight about someone who's had a huge impact on our business:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

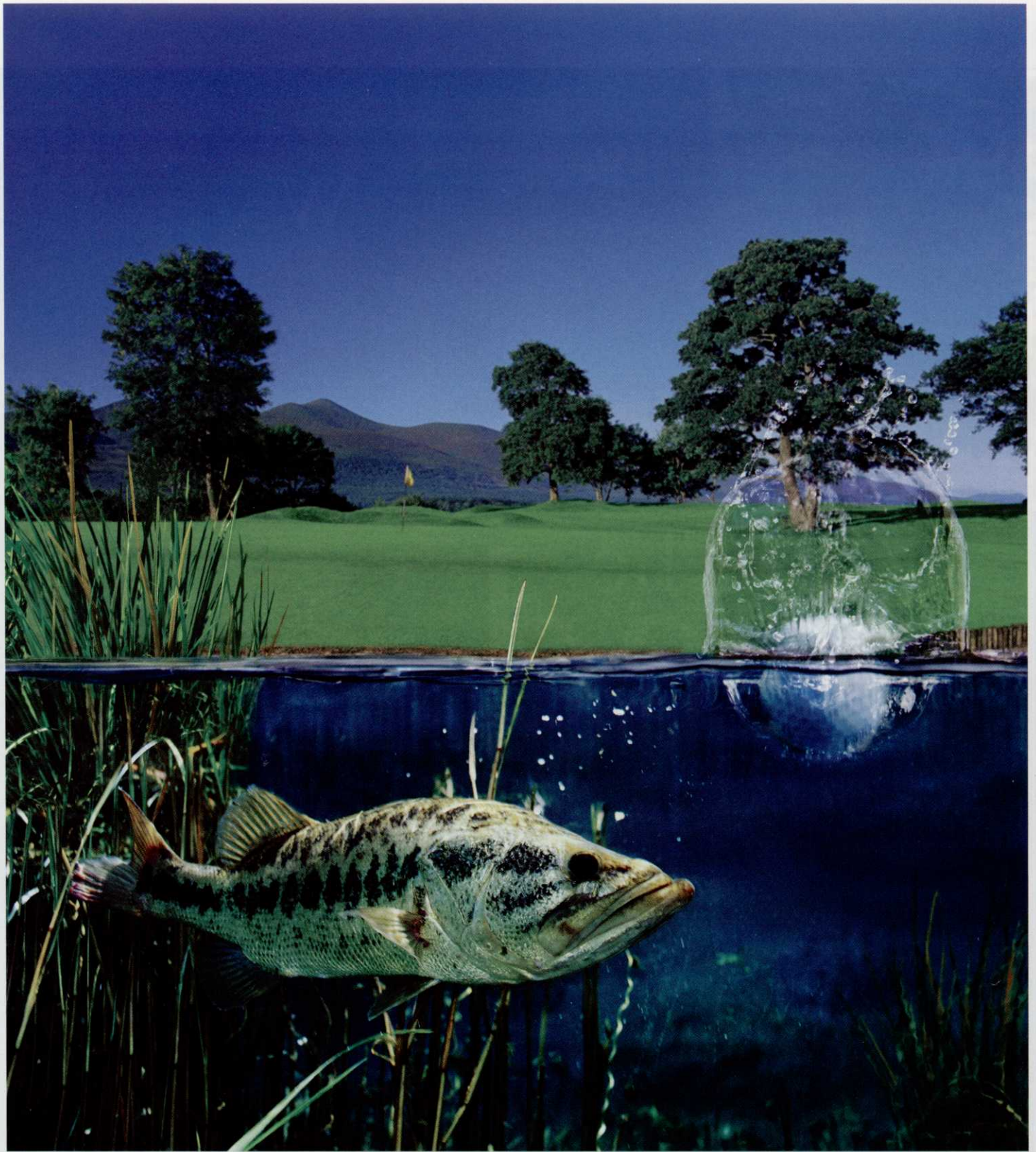
Ron Dodson not only took the road less traveled, but those he has traversed have made all the difference for golf. And now, Dodson is blazing a new trail that may ultimately mean even more to our industry.

Dodson is, of course, best known for creating Audubon International and the Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses. The program has arguably had as much influence as any single effort in educating those inside and outside the industry about how courses can coexist harmoniously with Mother Nature.

He's an Indiana native who combined a passion for golf – he played at Oakland City University – with a degree in wildlife biology. An educator at heart, Dodson manned a classroom for several years after graduation before moving on to a corporate position in aluminum manufacturing in Henderson, Ky., a little town best known for the fact that famed naturalist John James Audubon called it home for many years. His love of the outdoors drew him into volunteering at nearby Audubon State Park and he became increasingly involved with the local Audubon Society and other environmental groups.

He made his way up the convoluted ladder of Audubon's volunteer organization and eventually was hired as a regional vice president for the National Audubon Society.

In 1987, after five years of lobbying, politics and fundraising for NAS, Dodson found himself out of a job – corporations aren't the only organizations that downsize when budgets get cut – and looking for a new challenge. That's when he was approached by a group that wanted to revitalize the moribund Audubon Society of New York State (which, because of a byzantine political structure, is completely separate from the National Audubon Society). He jumped in with both feet and espoused a revolutionary philosophy: Maybe, just maybe, if environmental groups reached out to and worked with industry instead of picketing and suing, they might solve



...ative that creates conditions of government... industry, communities, non-profits and universities to launch localized sustainability programs. And he believes golf can be a big part of it -- if the business comes to grips with the notion that courses can be much more than just isolated playing fields.

What was the genesis of what's now Audubon International?
Believe it or not, it was skunk. A golf course up in Clear Falls, N.Y., had big problems with grubs and the skunks were digging up the course in order to get rid of them and get in touch with ANNY. I went up there as a wildlife biologist and figured out they needed to have a "limiting factor" -- some modification of habitat that would change the critters' behavior. The skunks were living in none walks around the course so we plugged up the holes in the walls. They went away. After that, the superintendent introduced me to some other guys in the area and that turned me on to the USGA. I wrote them about my ideas and eventually got a letter back inviting me to speak at the USGA section at the GCSAA show in Orlando in 1989. I figured it was just some little event and of course, when I showed up there were 50 billion people walking around! I was shocked, but I made my presentation and that got things started.

Are you satisfied with how much of your original vision for golf has been accomplished?
I feel pretty satisfied. Since then, there has been major change in the general perception about the positive role that golf plays in designing a better world. I think the general feeling is now that it's a very kind of the first solution to the world with the approach that we've taken -- and we've been successful. That's been a major standard for the industry. I think that's a pretty good thing.

What's the most interesting thing you've learned about the golf industry since you started?
I think the most interesting thing I've learned is that there's a real change beyond golf that has been embraced by policy. I've never met a superintendent who wanted to use more

organization evolved gradually into Audubon International, the concept remained the same: promote wildlife conservation, water conservation and stewardship where people live, work and play.
Twenty-two years later, Dobson's quest for his wings led to some exciting flying away from it to build the International Sustainability Council, an even more ambitious in-

some problems and make real progress.
Dobson's father was the person who pointed him toward golf, suggesting that courses had lots of land, lots of potential wildlife areas and plenty of incentive to change given the intense christian golf was taking from the media and government in the late 1980s. That, the ANNY Cooperative Society Program for Golf Courses was born. Through the

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some problems and make real progress.

Dodson's father was the person who pointed him toward golf, suggesting that courses had lots of land, lots of potential wildlife areas and plenty of incentive to change given the intense criticism golf was taking from the media and government in the late 1980s. Thus, the ASNY Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses was born. Though the

organization evolved quickly into Audubon International, the concept remained the same: promote wildlife conservation, water conservation and stewardship where people live, work and play.

Nearly two decades later, Dodson is spreading his wings and, to some extent, flying away from AI to build the International Sustainability Council, an even more ambitious ini-

tiative that creates coalitions of governments, industry, communities, non-profits and universities to launch localized sustainability programs. And he believes golf can be a big part of it – if the business comes to grip with the notion that courses can be much more than just isolated playing fields.

What was the genesis of what's now Audubon International?

Believe it or not, it was skunks. A golf course up in Glens Falls, N.Y., had big problems with grubs and the skunks were ripping up the course to get to them. They were looking for a better way to fix the problem and got in touch with ASNY. I went up there as a wildlife biologist and figured out they needed to find a "limiting factor" – some modification of habitat that would change the critters' behavior. The skunks were living in stone walls around the course so we plugged up the holes in the walls. They went away. After that, the superintendent introduced me to some other guys in the area and that turned me on to the USGA. I wrote them about my ideas and eventually got a letter back inviting me to speak at the USGA session at the GCSAA show in Orlando in 1989. I figured it was just some little event and, of course, when I showed up there were 50 billion people walking around! I was shocked, but I made my presentation and that got things started.

Are you satisfied with how much of your original vision for golf has been accomplished?

I feel pretty satisfied. Since then, there has been major change in the general perception about the positive role that properly sited, designed and maintained courses can play in the community. I think the general feeling is more positive. We were kind of the first soldiers on the field with the approach that it was good to work *with* industry – and we took a lot of shots about that from traditional environmental groups. Today that's becoming the norm. It's literally become standard operating procedure for a lot of those groups that beat up on us in the past. I feel pretty good about that.

What's most frustrating about what hasn't happened?

I don't feel like the idea of using courses as a catalyst for change beyond golf has been embraced by golfers. I've never met a superintendent who wanted to use more or spend more. Most of them are intuitive

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conservationists and very frugal. On the other hand, golfers and members have completely unrealistic expectations and, of course, know more than superintendents (laughs). That's been very frustrating since players need to embrace what's going on because it's good for the game in the long run.

How about AI membership?

On a percent basis, it's still fairly small. For years, we had around 2,300 courses (in the program). Today, it's less. It's holding steady or going down. The good news is that we haven't seen any drastic drops because of the economy. It's only \$200 a year. The real "expense" is what they invest in their program. But, much of that investment ultimately saves them money in terms of water, inputs, electricity, etc.

Whenever I say stuff like this, people think I'm trying to sell memberships. But, it has less to do with selling than the fact that it really is good for the environment and good for golf. I want superintendents and courses and architects to become proactively involved in stewardship. All our program does is to create a framework they can gather around. It's not meant to cause economic pain or change the vision of the course design. It's really an education program. The certification program – which was kind of an afterthought – isn't as important as the process of learning about stewardship and how it can be applied to that particular property.

Do most facilities really understand what AI is about?

Other than superintendents, the vast majority of people directly associated with courses – pros, owners, members – don't have a clue. Sure, there are good examples of facilities where everyone gets active, but not nearly enough. That said, golfers are a perfect group to engage in this stuff. It's amazing how many times I'd been riding around a course with the super and word would get out that I was there and golfers would stop me and ask me bird questions. I used to do a lot of talks about birds, do bird walks, etc., for members. Every time we did those they had more people show up than almost any other event they'd had (at the club). I know there's a huge interest – most clubs just don't have a way to connect the interest in golf with the interest in nature among members.

Has AI's mission changed?

I've become a little bit frustrated over the last 10 years. We used to be an environmental education organization. Then we developed a

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Though Rod Dodson is proud of what Audubon International has accomplished, he regrets it's strayed somewhat from its mission as an education program in favor of a certification vehicle.

certification program. It seems like it's flip-flopped a bit now. Sometimes, the processes and the paperwork we created for certification have become more important than the reasons we created them for. We should be thinking more about the topics – energy, water, resource stewardship, biodiversity, etc. It's not about the bird boxes, it's about the reason we put them up. Putting up bird boxes is not the goal. The goal is to get people to understand why cavity-nesting birds are important and what that represents.

So, I'm trying to help the organization get refocused on the real mission, the real reason we were created – which really wasn't testing and certification – it's about spreading the word. That's our traditional mission.

That collective spirit needs to stay there and the (new) board will really guide that. Also, it needs to be a good business model, not just a philanthropic group that's engrossed in fundraising.

Your role has changed. Tell us about what you're doing now.

I have interests that are pretty broad in terms of sustainability and how it impacts everything in life. It's partly my fault that AI has lost focus on its core mission, but it's pushed me to go all over the place. I'm working in far-flung places like Alaska, Italy, China and even little old Fairhope, Ala. I'm now doing stuff that has nothing to do with golf or AI and I love it.

What I'm doing now just doesn't fit AI's mission, so we've started the International

Sustainability Council. It's big-picture stuff. In my mind, AI has the preeminent stewardship program focusing on landscapes, particularly water and wildlife in those landscapes. At ISC, we're talking about larger issues like economic sustainability, social betterment and affordable housing based on a sound environmental approach. It's more of a world view.

Is there room for your old buddies in golf in this world view?

Absolutely. Golf can and should be front and center. What can courses do? Join. Sure, it's a vehicle for things like CSP, but it goes beyond that. It's a chance for golf to really show that golf is a model for what others can do. Golf has done a lot, but it's time to reach beyond the course itself into the community and demonstrate what can be done environmentally. Obviously, that helps the community but it will do tremendous things for golf as well.

ISC is a not-for-profit. I don't get paid through it and we're not looking for donations. ISC doesn't have any money and we don't want any. It's a collection of governments, non-profits, companies, universities – and hopefully golf courses – that adopt a set of guidelines, adopt an ISC charter and create a guiding set of principles. We simply help to facilitate that process.

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them and for me. I'm also doing sustainability advising through another organization my son, Eric, created called Audubon Lifestyles. I get to walk a mile in the shoes of a lot of other people – just like I did with superintendents 20 years ago. It's great!

So what's the difference between Audubon Lifestyles and ISC?

Audubon Lifestyles is like personal training – I work directly with all the parties involved to write sustainable business plans. I do these projects as a contractor through Audubon Lifestyles. I sit down directly with them to help them understand why a sustainable approach is important to their non-profit or community or company. Sometimes it's a contentious situation and I say, "You all should take a breath and see how you can work together." From there, they can reach out through ISC and form other partnerships with universities, consulting firms, etc. The ISC is kind of the thread that binds pieces of cloth together into a quilt. We connect the dots.

How can golf be a part of that?

There's a chance right now for golf to become far more proactive in communitywide environmental stewardship. It takes a leap of faith to think beyond the borders of the course, but enlightened facilities can use this to become models for their cities or states or regions. Don't you think something like that would help courses solve some of their perception problems? Don't you think it would be rewarding for the facility and make them a shining star locally? It's enlightened self-interest. It's good for the community, good for the course and good for golf. For once, others will be following golf's lead instead of criticizing them and the industry will no longer be on the defensive.

Okay, so you're reinventing yourself – again. Are you having any fun, playing any golf?

I still love golf but I don't shoot any better scores. I'm probably worse at the damn game, but I enjoy it more. I'm relaxed – my whole attitude is better because I just don't

care anymore. I also still do photography and I'm really interested in genealogy and family history. I still like to fish but just don't have the time.

A superintendent once told me that touring his course with you changed his whole vision of his job. How does that make you feel?

That's the ultimate satisfaction – on a personal level – when that light bulb suddenly goes on for a superintendent, or a businessman or a community leader or anyone else.

For me, as a teacher, that's the ultimate. It's even better when I can help them take the next step and prod them to bring that inspiration out to a larger community. ISC and things like it need to be "viral." If we can help others articulate the vision, get excited about it and communicate it to others, you can change an entire community's attitude. But, it has to happen one person at a time. That's what I love about the road I'm on now. I get to help create a better future one person at a time. GCI

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