

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

Ben Around

**The veteran captain Crenshaw speaks
with Golfdom on the setup at Brookline,
design and the dreaded Stimpmeter**

Editor's note: In a recent interview conducted inside a Pacific Palisades, Calif., coffee shop, Golfdom's Geoff Shackelford and 1999 Ryder Cup captain Ben Crenshaw talked about course maintenance, Crenshaw's love of golf architecture, the state of the game and preparations for the upcoming Ryder Cup.

Crenshaw recalls how during an airplane flyby, he was mesmerized by the eroded dunes that would one day become part of Sand Hills CC, his most distinguished design with partner Bill Coore. He also shares his thoughts on everything from ryegrass and the Stimpmeter's effects on the game to what he would do if he was the USGA's executive committee and the PGA Tour commissioner for one day.

In general, how do you expect The Country Club at Brookline, Mass., to play for the Ryder Cup, particularly with regard to rough height?

Crenshaw: (I favor) having something that's fairly conducive to match play. To me, that means rough that runs 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 inches, maybe 4. The superintendent, Bill Spence, says the course will reflect the kind of year the (Boston area has had) weatherwise. It's a difficult thing trying to figure exactly how to take advantage of your team. We do have some long hitters, but so do the Europeans.

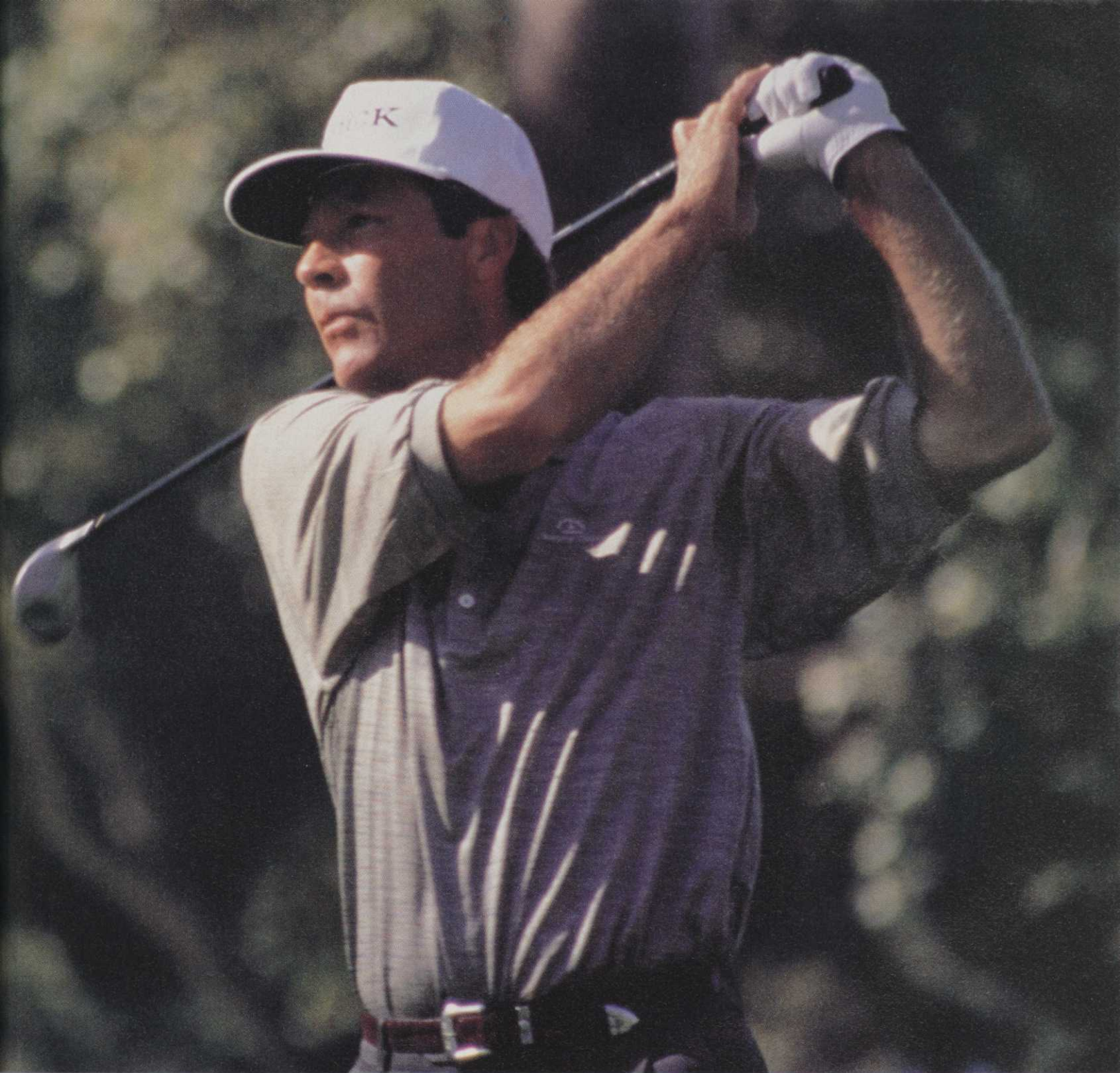
A lot of people don't understand how proficient the Europeans are. They've seen all kinds of conditions. (At the 1995 Ryder Cup), Lanny Wadkins (team captain) grew heavy rough around the greens at Oak Hills CC (in Rochester, N.Y.), and it didn't phase them. I'm probably going to pay more attention to the rough around the greens than around the fairways.

Chipping areas?

Crenshaw: I don't think so. Brookline doesn't lend itself to that.

Can you name a handful of designers that people should study in terms of the greens complex?

Crenshaw: (Alister) Mackenzie and (Perry) Maxwell were incredible green builders. They had the most vivid shapes. People should study Maxwell's convex slopes. Gosh, they're fascinating. Very tough, too. Mackenzie's greens were most fascinating for their actual shapes and outlines.



The Stimpmeter has cut down both in our playability and in our day-to-day decisions on what you can do with a green. I couldn't agree more with Pete Dye about undulations and keeping greens too fast. Pine Valley is a great example of a place where, basically, it should be the goal to get the greens to a certain speed so that you open up the possibilities of more pin placements. But the faster speeds render a lot of pin placements on those greens obsolete.

To my mind, if you can't defend a green in terms of its undulations and its character, then you play right into

the hands of technology. There are some naysayers who are going to say, "How are you going to challenge anyone with a Stimpmeter reading of eight?" Well, if they had some undulations to putt over, and you had to put your ball in the proper compartment, that's how you challenge them.

Which designers should every student of course design study in terms of bunkering?

Crenshaw: The more pictures (of classic old courses) I

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see, it seems like everyone did artful bunkers back then. It wasn't just two or three guys. Everyone, it seemed, strived for having either something that mimics nature or portrays erosion. There are a million people who will say it looks unkempt, but it's the very thing we try and work on.

Do you think many modern courses are devoid of strategy? If so, why?

Crenshaw: I'll say this in defense of modern courses, and I mean it. Some guys would like to do some things, but they're harnessed in a lot of ways, particularly with time constraints. Sometimes the piece of ground doesn't allow you to do things without completely rearranging the landscape. It's not always the architect's fault. I can't say that in every case. There are a lot (of architects) who try to put thought into it, but it's a race to cut that ribbon on opening day.

Ben Crenshaw at a glance

Age: 47

Residence: Austin, Texas

Career victories: 23

Major victories: 1, 1995 Masters

Turned professional: 1973

First PGA win: 1973, San Antonio-Texas Open

Other achievements: four-time Ryder Cup Team member (1981, '83, '87, '95); three-time NCAA champion, 1971-73, University of Texas.

If a club asked you to cite some examples of excellent restoration work, what courses would you recommend that they visit and study?

Crenshaw: Baltimore CC is excellent. I wish people knew what they tackled there — what Doug Petersan (the former course superintendent) did and the club president did. They took the bull by the horns and said, "Look, we are going to protect this in the right way." And look at the results.

A lot of it does involve trees. It's myriad things that trees do to affect courses. The two factors are: One, they cut down on the avenues of play that the architect intended; and two, the superintendent can't grow any grass.

It's extremely important for people to compile documentation and photos to understand these courses. Photos are the benchmark of any restoration. I just have to say to the people out there who have these classic courses: Protect them; do as little as possible to them and preserve them. To me, it's absolutely no different

than what's at the Getty Art Museum or the National Gallery of Art in Washington. You find impressionism, all the things that you view in art, and that's what these courses are — art.

How much has the quality of maintenance of PGA Tour courses changed since you started playing in the early '70s?

Crenshaw: The grooming of the grass is better; the putting surfaces themselves are so much better. The fairways provide much better lies, which is not necessarily always a great thing, but it's more consistent. The greens are immaculate, just immaculate. My gosh, way too many people need to understand that if the surfaces are prepared better, they're going to shoot better. It's gotten so good that it has an effect on the scores these guys shoot every week.

The courses are groomed to peak when they host a tournament, but that reminds me of the wonderful line that (early 1900s architect) H.S. Colt said about Sunningdale GC (in Berkshire, England) after he walked the course and said, "The lies are too good."

Then there's all the ryegrass. I'm sick of the rye, I'm in it all the time (laughs). It's a cultivated grass; it doesn't grow in the wild. Not like a bermuda. Rye and those who sell it, I'm sure, guarantee color and a certain density, but I think most of it's for color.

Talk about Sand Hills GC. Is it true you kept an article on the Sand Hills region in Mullen, Neb., many years ago from National Geographic magazine?

Crenshaw: It was in an art publication, *Southwest Art*, on the region and the cattle ranches out there. There was also an article in *National Geographic*, but *Southwest Art* was the first one. Great pictures. I cut it out and just stared at it. All those eroded dunes. I thought, my God. Then I saw a picture in *The Golf Course*, and then, Dick Youngscap, (Sand Hills founder) called. We broke our necks looking at stuff there. I'll never forget, we did a fly-over in an airplane and we just looked at it and laughed, thinking how good it looked. And then we got out on the property and it got better.

Talk about your architecture partner, Bill Coore.

Crenshaw: I've described him as one of the most fortunate things to ever happen to me. He has given me a great appreciation for what we try to do. He's extremely knowledgeable and patient. He is very good personnel-wise. He treats all of our guys with a lot of respect. He tells them to have fun and they do. And it's an integral part of how we believe that it's as

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much their work, with occasional guidance from us. A lot of times Bill has told me that if you leave these guys alone, they do beautiful work that can't be improved on, and he made me believe that. He's a real friend.

After the Ryder Cup, do think you two will stick to your current method of designing and building about two courses a year?

Crenshaw: Well, we're just comfortable with it. Neither Bill nor I have ever done anything real fast. We don't like to be rushed.

Have you run into many problems with developers, cities or counties because Coore and Crenshaw don't do extensive plans? Or do you just work with people who understand how you work?

Crenshaw: We tell them up front: If you want some documents, we will do the most rudimentary ones. If you need intricate drawings, we are not your architects. We just don't do it. It's not because we can't. We just don't work that way. For some reason, it seems to me that if you plan something, it's going to change in the field anyway. And you've got to have an ability to change when we are talking about small details. It's not like you're changing green sites and tees. We're not changing entire holes. In terms of features, bunkers, shapes and outlines of greens, those are things that change in the field. The more you get into the ground, the more you realize that rigid documents can be a problem.



Crenshaw and Coore transformed a desolate chunk of Nebraska into a masterpiece – Sand Hills.

Besides making the paddle grip legal again, are there any other rule changes you would make if you were the USGA executive committee for a day?

Crenshaw: Well, I think the putter, the long putter, needs to go. I'd get rid of it (laughs). I just don't think it's a free expression of the stroke, among a lot of other things. And the golf ball. Whatever the overall distance standard is, I'd have to look hard at that, especially now, and it has been coming for a long time.

What about a competition ball?

Crenshaw: I'm warming to that. Jack (Nicklaus) came forward with that thought very early. And he has been very consistent with that, and he's right. The ball is one component of it all, but it is extremely important. Shafts, components of the head are another thing; the length of the club is another thing to be looked at. I don't see why it needs to be more than 46 inches long. That's a good cut-off point.

You're commissioner of the PGA Tour for a day. Anything you would do to the general makeup of the Tour schedule or direction it's headed?

Crenshaw: We should have fewer tournaments. I worry about all of these tournaments running together and losing their importance. How are you supposed to differentiate? I worry about a dilution factor.

It seems to me there was a great effort to put a lot more product out that contained golf, which got the prize money up to take care of a lot of players. That was the thrust and that's OK, but still it should be the quality of the events. I just don't know what these tournament sponsors are going to do to compete. A guy just can't, especially with the World Tour, play more than 24 events.

What about PGA Tour courses and setup?

Crenshaw: They do a pretty good job. If somebody took away Riviera CC, Colonial, Westchester and maybe one or two more, say Pebble Beach, it's hard for me not to look on the side of tradition, which helped build our Tour.

Imagine what the L.A. Open would be without Riviera CC? When (PGA Tour) Commissioner (Timothy) Finchem took the job, he stated that his goal was to protect and promote our brand product. And there is a vast complexity as to how to interpret that, but I have always fallen on the side of looking at those who have come before us both in terms of players and places, and that's just far too important to jettison.

If I'm accused of living in the past, so be it. I don't care anymore. ■

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