

Cain

An Able Landscape Architect

BY MARK LESLIE

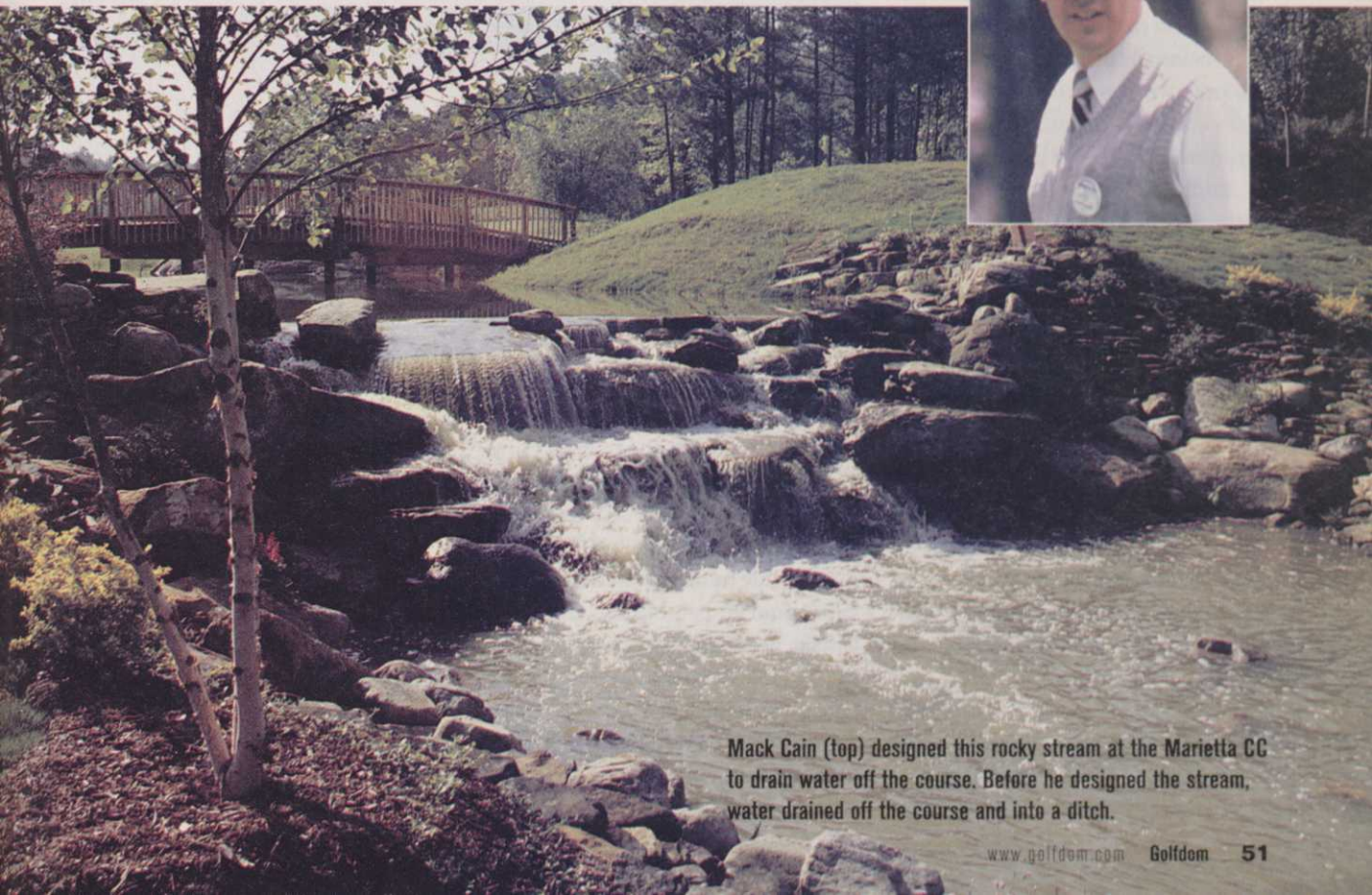
Theme. Consistency. Aesthetics. Naturalness. These are terms as inherent to Mack Cain as breathing.

When a golf course grapples to establish an identity — enter Cain. When it sees nonindigenous trees and shrubs struggling to survive on its grounds — enter Cain. When its character is changed by the loss of trees to a hurricane — enter Cain. Even before it opens, if construction has damaged adjacent vegetation and it needs to be dressed up to attract golfers and sell real estate — enter Cain.

A lead architect with Franzman, Davis, Jordan, Jones and Goulding in Atlanta, Cain cut his teeth at the South's quintessential poster course for great looks and good grooming. Since then, he has plied his trade — as a landscape architect specializing in landscaping (not designing) golf courses — at such storied venues as Atlanta CC,

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Grooming golf courses — horticulturally — is his specialty, as the Country Club of Mobile attests



Mack Cain (top) designed this rocky stream at the Marietta CC to drain water off the course. Before he designed the stream, water drained off the course and into a ditch.

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Country Club of Louisiana, Capitol City Club, Golf Club of the South, Atlanta Athletic Club, Charlotte CC and Carolina CC in Raleigh. He has also landscaped at many Caribbean-based courses.

Cain's latest project is Country Club of Mobile (Ala.), home to 1,350 members, including 500 golfers. A historic club, it was organized in 1899, added a golf course in 1915 designed by Donald Ross, and three years ago engaged Pennsylvanian Ron Forse to completely rebuild the course.

Last August, CC of Mobile unveiled its "new yet classic look" to the world, marking its "return to its glory days," says Don Vance, the club's general manager. At that point, the property was ready for Cain to wield his magic.

Cain was excited and felt challenged because he says golf courses present him with creative opportunities that often surpass what he could accomplish at industrial parks, corporate headquarters or other projects. That's because courses deal with a vast amount of space, and the landscaping must marry with a game that demands absence of unnecessary distractions.

It's also a challenge because some golf courses install landscape materials haphazardly, with no theme or consistency, Cain insists. "It changes with each new board and new superintendent," he adds.

Adding to the problem is most superintendents are trained in turfgrass culture, not horticulture, Cain adds.

"They know how to make grass live and tend to treat all other plants like stepchildren," he says. "If the greens and tees aren't [in good shape], they're in trouble. If a tree dies or a flower doesn't bloom, people can still play, and superintendents won't be in trouble."

Cain drafts long-range master plans that facilities can use as road maps for five, 10 and even 15 years. The plans maintain a consistency of design, regardless of the green committee or the superintendent.

At CC of Mobile, Cain's plan calls for spending \$500,000 over the next 10 years, accomplishing a much-needed facelift.

"Landscaping is critical," Vance says,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MACK CAIN

(Above) The planting of ornamental grasses around a tee box at the Royal Westmoreland GC reveals how plantings in a concentrated area can produce a strong visual impact.

(Below) An army of wildflowers help a fairway blend into the forest.

in explaining the hiring of Cain's firm. "The curb appeal — the first impression a person receives — is crucial to his overall impression of the club. Most of our members are coming to use the fitness facility, pool and clubhouse amenities. They're not going to see the golf course, just the grounds and area around the clubhouse. Landscaping is important to them."

Calling his club "the crown jewel of the neighborhood of Pleasant Hill," Vance says Cain's beautification project parallels the

restoration of the clubhouse, which features the addition of several thousand square feet, a fitness facility and tennis shop.

"We had a 100,000-square-foot clubhouse with a 25,000-square-foot sports center, 14 tennis courts and all the rest, but precious little landscaping," Vance says. "Since Mack came on board, there is a lot of landscaping around those areas, as well as around many of the islands of the parking lot and elsewhere."

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Key to Cain's master plan is to complement Forse's design, which became a completely new course inspired by classic architect Ross. When Cain saw Forse's blueprints, he scrapped his original master plan for the golf course's landscaping. He opted to wait until Forse finished his work before he began his project.

Coordination and cooperation with a course architect is vital, Cain and Forse agree.

"Landscape architects look at design from a different perspective," Cain says. "We're not looking at a golf course in terms of play, cart traffic or the other things architects, pros and superintendents look at. We're looking strictly at aesthetics and how pleasant it can look. We're basically decorating and trying to enhance the beauty of the overall experience, but not necessarily the experience of the play.

"But we need to blend our work and their work together so they don't conflict," Cain says. "We want the azaleas to be beautiful, but not close to a prime landing zone. Then they become an annoyance to the players rather than a beauty to look at."

When Cain and Forse met, they superimposed their plans one over the other and then made hole-by-hole revisions.

"We modified my plan to fit his plan and his goals for the course," Cain explains. "There were some views and approaches that he wanted to have open, landing areas he wanted to be free from interference."

Forse says, "The key [for the landscaper] is not to interfere with the play of the game." He adds jokingly, "We have one rule: Do not plant petunias around the bunkers."

Forse says it's the first time in his career that a landscape plan and a course renovation have been so interconnected.

"We gave Mack two goals — the first was to keep play unaffected; the second was to keep the vistas open on each hole," he says. "There are certain guidelines. We need the golfers to be able to hit recovery shots around greens; we don't want



Mack Cain will give the Country Club of Mobile a much-needed landscape facelift over the next several years.

them blocked by trees. Recovery is impossible when you have bunkers and trees in the same line of play. The golf corridor has to be sufficiently wide so people can hit long shots, play the ground features and pull off recovery shots. You want a general sense of playability."

Cain discussed the options for the CC of Mobile with Forse, Vance and superintendent Steve Wright.

"They wanted the grand, old-park style of the turn of the century, where you could see from fairway to fairway but they were still defined by plant materials," Cain says. "The No. 1 thing was to start taking out trees that were closing views, making the fairways like long tunnels, and crowding and choking out more important plants. Then we started to introduce accent color, creating masses close to the back of greens or close to tees that can be seen from a great distance."

Crews also trimmed up the property's massive oaks and pines, and are removing hundreds of dead Siberian elms. "Back in the 1980s, the club planted hundreds of them, perhaps because they grow so fast, but they are meant to grow no further south than Minnesota," Cain says.

To add zest to the property with splashes of colors, Cain is overseeing plantings of an array of items. At the same club that held the Azalea Open about 50 years ago, it's appropriate that Cain is planting azaleas, along with dogwoods and red buds in the "understory" of existing trees, while adding Asiatic jasmine as a ground cover in ornamental gardens around the clubhouse.

Cain's selection of free-standing species

includes magnolia, crepe myrtle, Carolina holly, bald cypress, Chinese pistachio and Chinese elm, as well as sugar maple.

Besides the clubhouse surrounds, places to be planted include:

- a pool building behind the 18th green;
- a pump station on the course; and
- the par-3 14th hole where housing needs to be screened in an area.

"The most challenging task in golf course landscape design philosophy is scale," Cain says. "You don't plant five azaleas, you plant 500. You don't put in four dogwoods, you put in 50. So when golfers play a hole, they see this mass of color from a distance. That sort of massive planting would be out of scale for somebody's house, but it's perfectly in scale for a golf course.

"Also, you don't plant an area with shrubbery that's the same age and size," he adds. Otherwise, it won't look natural."

Cain encourages clubs to use plant materials that are native, indigenous or naturalized that will live without a lot of maintenance.

Despite the help that Cain and others can offer, many clubs never hire a landscape architect, especially public courses, because of cost. But Vance spoke for the courses that do, underscoring landscaping's importance to the CC of Mobile.

"We have some beautiful grounds and Mack's work will greatly enhance them," Vance says. "When he finishes, it will be, 'Wow.'" ■

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