

# Superintendent Gone ARCHITECT

Kris Spence is trying to make a name for himself as a golf course designer

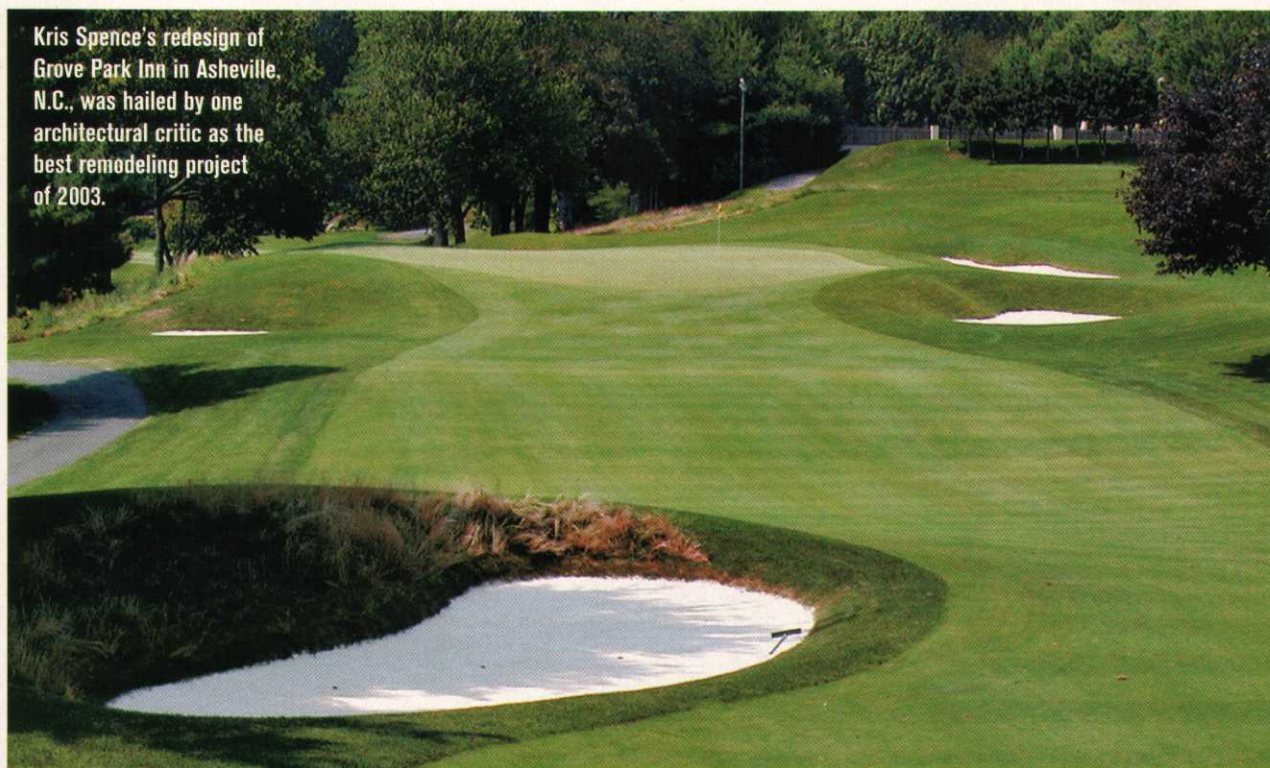
BY SHANE SHARP

**K**ris Spence has spent countless hours pouring over original design sketches from Donald Ross and Ellis Maples. He's consumed numerous books on golf course architecture and can recall the smallest details about Alister MacKenzie's bunkers and A.W. Tillinghast's green complexes. The Greensboro, N.C., native even practices his passion: He has a handful of redesigns to his name, including a remake of the Ross course at the Grove Park Inn in Asheville, N.C., that one

prominent architecture critic hailed as the best remodeling project of 2003.

The catch? Spence, by trade and training, is a *superintendent*. The 41-year-old Ernie Els look-alike graduated from Lake City (Fla.) Community College's Golf Operations and Landscape program in 1985. He cut his superintendent teeth at the Atlanta Athletic Club and Forrest Oaks Country Club in Greensboro, where he was heavily involved in bunker and green remodeling projects and prepping both courses for PGA Tour events. However, his true

Kris Spence's redesign of Grove Park Inn in Asheville, N.C., was hailed by one architectural critic as the best remodeling project of 2003.



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passion lies in the practice of what he dubs “traditional” golf course architecture.

“It is ironic, really,” Spence says. “Both Ross and Maples got their starts in the business as greenskeepers, and it evolved for them. The same thing happened to me. My formal education is in agronomy, not landscape architecture like most designers these days.”

Despite his lack of “formal” training, Spence recently hung his own design shingle, specializing in the restoration of Ross and Maples courses. In addition to the Grove Park Inn, he also has redesign projects at Mimosa Hills Country Club (Ross) in Morganton, N.C.; Carolina Golf and Country Club (Ross) in Charlotte; and the Greensboro Country Club (Maples) under his belt. While solo projects aren’t his bag (yet), he’s designing a par-3, Ross-inspired course in Greensboro and has his name in the hat for a couple full-scale projects.

“I am in some light discussions with some folks about designing some new courses,” Spence says. “There have been some offers and opportunities in Florida to build some generic courses for senior citizens, but I just can’t get excited about that. I’m looking for clients who want a true golf experience.”

A true golf experience, according to Spence, means designing a course heavy on strategy and light on bells and whistles. Modern golf course

design emphasizes aesthetics with little attention to strategy, he opines. Spence is quick to point out that Ross and Maples were masters of envisioning two or three ways to play a golf hole without moving tons of dirt or using fancy window dressing. This stance has garnered Spence some detractors in the industry. Some golf course architects have attacked his résumé, citing his lack of a from-scratch solo project.

“The only guys who criticize me are my competitors,” Spence says. “They try to criticize my background, and they say I’m never going to be a member of the ASGCA (American Society of Golf Course Architects). That’s funny because the guys that started [the ASGCA] were superintendents (including Ross.)”

Not only does Spence defend his profession and background, he thinks his superintendent skill set is the most valuable thing he has to offer his clients. An intimate knowledge of course maintenance and operations is just as important in the design process as a grasp of landscape architecture, he believes.

Greg Benton, superintendent of Grove Park Inn, says Spence was able to talk golf course maintenance with him during the course’s renovation.

“He could relate to us when we asked particular questions,” Benton says of he and his

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**Kris Spence (right) confers with Gaston Country Club superintendent Tim Carpenter. Spence is doing a major restoration of the Ellis Maples-designed course.**



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crew. "He knew why we were asking such questions."

Benton says he was impressed with Spence's knowledge of bunkers. Spence agreed with Benton that bunkers should be designed so maintenance crews don't have to spend several hours dealing with washed-out sand after a rainstorm.

"His knowledge of pin placements was also helpful," says Benton, noting that Spence realizes not to design greens with so many undulations that pin placement is limited.

Spence's superintendent training proved invaluable at the Grove Park Inn. More recently, it came in handy at the aforementioned Mimosa Hills, a private

Ross-designed course in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The course opened in 1928 and is one of the few Ross designs in North Carolina to have remained virtually untouched over the years. Spence worked closely with the membership and head professional Dan Dobson to restore the course to its 1930s specs. He laboriously scraped away seven decades worth of topdressing to unearth the original greens and studied Ross' original plans to get a feel for the original bunkers.

"The first thing golfers will notice from a before-and-after sense are the bunkers," Dobson says. "It used to seem like there were a few of them speckled around the course, but now we have deeper, steep-faced bunkers that are the real deal."

The same could be said for the putting surfaces. A number of the greens had shrunk to thumbnail-like proportions, severely limiting the number of pin placements and, according to Spence, the strategic value of the entire course.

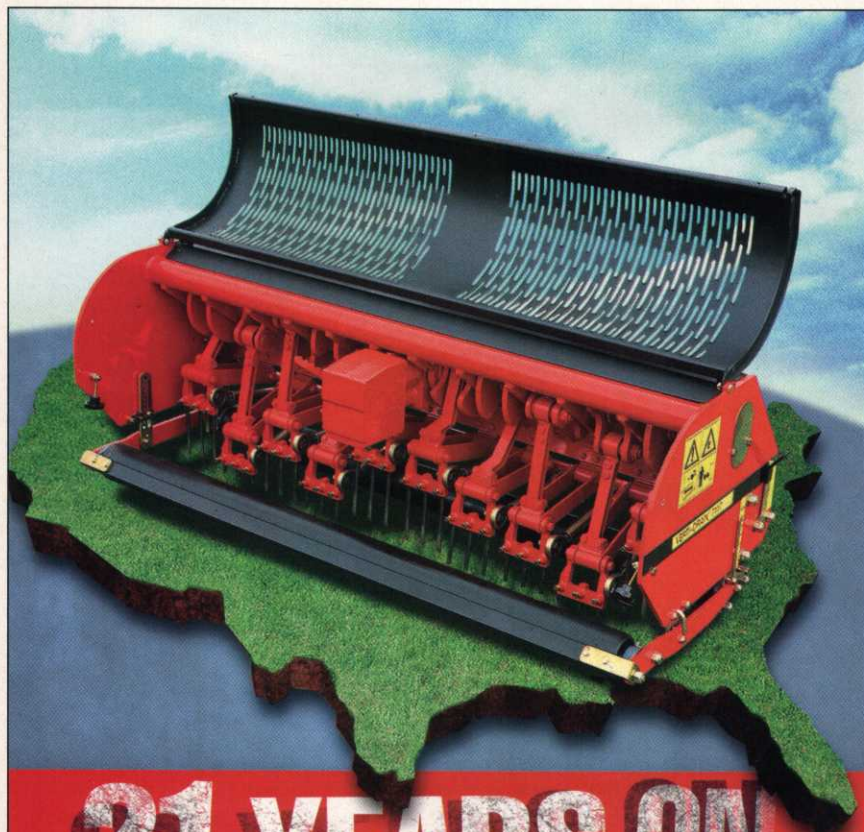
"Strategic green corners are very important with Ross courses," Spence says. "You have to be able to place the hole as close to the greenside bunkers as possible to force the strategy off the tee and determine the ideal approach into the green."

With a few Ross projects under his belt, Spence is turning his attention to the often-under-appreciated Maples, who worked for Ross in Pinehurst toward the end of Ross' career. Spence says the similarities between the two men are striking.

"They had similar thoughts about how golfers should have ground options available to them," Spence says. "It was hard to get the ball up in the air back in those days with that equipment. They also offered similar rewards to golfers who could get the ball up in the air and hit it a long way."

For example, both Maples and Ross made use of natural ridge lines when laying out fairways. Often, a par 4 or 5 was routed over a ridge about 220 yards to 250 yards from the middle and back tees. Golfers who could fly the ridge were rewarded with downhill "power chutes"

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that would add 10 yards to 20 yards to their tee shots. Those who couldn't were left with long-irons into par 4s and lay-up shots on par 5s.

"People are starting to realize that Maples' work is worth saving," Spence says. "He did some wonderful work and designed beautiful bunkers."

Spence and his partner/mentor Jim Ganley are working on restoration plans for three Maples-designed courses: the Gaston Country Club (Gastonia, N.C.), Cedarwood Country Club (Charlotte) and the Chatmoss Country Club (Martinsville, Va.). The partners go back a long way: Ganley hired Spence at the Atlanta Athletic Club, where he was the head superintendent from 1980 to 1988. The two worked together for six months before Ganley recommended Spence for the Forest Oaks job. Ganley went on to start his own contracting service but decided to team with Spence last year

when his travel schedule became too much to bear.

"The thing we have in common is a deep appreciation for classic golf design and a love of Donald Ross courses," Ganley says of his relationship with Spence.

And the fact that they're both superintendents at heart. Ganley also realizes he and Spence could be up against some stiff and even skeptical competition on future jobs.

"There are some architects we might go up against on projects who say, 'He's a superintendent. What does he know?'" Ganley says. "But they really shouldn't. Even if he was an insurance salesman like Pete Dye, he understands the game. Kris is a good player in his own right, and he's dedicated to classical design. He has a creative mind in terms of playability and aesthetics. And the maintenance... well, that's what he knows best."

Still, Spence realizes that making the leap from maintenance to architecture

isn't the predominant career path. For every superintendent longing to get his or her hands dirty in design and redesign, a 100 will stay the course as maintenance professionals. That said, Spence does have some strong feelings about the superintendent's role in the design process.

"It would do every golf course owner a huge favor, prior to selecting the architect, to have a superintendent there," he says. "In the worst-case scenario, there should be a superintendent there from the start."

"With me, I don't want to be so heavy into maintenance that we build a bland golf course. But I don't want to go so heavy into the design that maintenance goes to the wind. It is a fine line."

Spence, for one, knows all about fine lines. ■

*Sharp is a freelance writer from Charlotte, N.C.*

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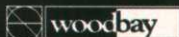
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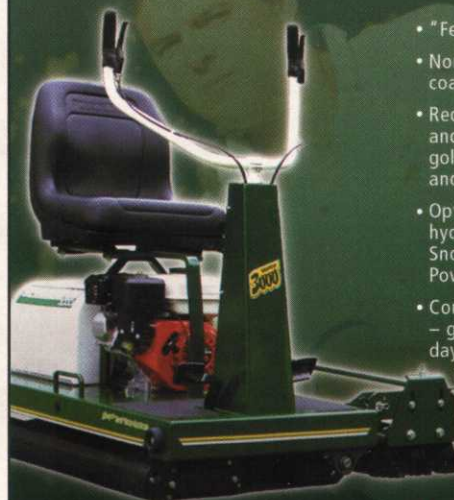
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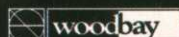
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