

Mr. Sand Man

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY

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Nobody crafts a bunker better than Jeff Bradley, the shaper of the Coore-Crenshaw design team

Jeff Bradley's status as golf's bunker guru became official during a recent project when the 38-year-old member of Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw's design team was on a project site with Coore and his associate Dave Axland.

The three were discussing design details when the project superintendent and a visiting turf student arrived. Introductions were made, but only when he met Bradley did the turf student light up.

"Oh, Mr. Bradley, I've admired your work," the student said, oblivious to the well-regarded Coore or Axland.

Shapers are almost never recognized for their work, even though most architects will tell you that their work depends on those who sculpt the soil into place. As contractors became more prevalent, the shapers loyal to certain architects have become less common. But with Coore and Crenshaw's old-style approach, their talented team hearkens back to the Alister MacKenzie era, where

a devoted band moves from project to project, with each member specializing in certain tasks.

Bradley's role became defined not long after working on the maintenance crew at Hot Springs Country Club, where a mid-1990s renovation by Coore and Crenshaw introduced them to the man who would become their bunker finisher. Or as Bradley's own Web site and independent consulting business self-proclaims — the "bunker guru."

"Bill [Coore] was looking for a guy like me — artistic, creative, someone he could mold and who didn't know anything else about golf," says Bradley, who lives in Phoenix with his wife Ronda and two children. "It was divine intervention. Really, it was a miracle for me at the time and it probably saved my life."

Bradley was struggling at the time,

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Jeff Bradley is the self-proclaimed "bunker guru." One of his specialties is the rugged look, as the way this bunker appears.



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but as then-Hot Springs superintendent Rusty Mercer says, "Jeff has come as far in life as anyone I know."

By crafting the rugged, lacey-edged bunkers on revered Coore and Crenshaw designs like Cuscowilla, Notre Dame, Chechessee Creek, Talking Stick, Austin Golf Club, East Hampton, Friar's Head, Old Sandwich and the soon to open Bandon Trails, Bradley's touch has become synonymous with a Coore-Crenshaw design.

"Jeff has an artistic bent about him and we know that he sees things that you couldn't describe to someone over a period of time," says Crenshaw. "He just sees little twists and turns before he creates them. He knows how to capture that feeling of randomness and that look of utter abandonment. It's art, and you have to get over a feeling that you're inhibited. He's like a painter who's not afraid to try something."



Before

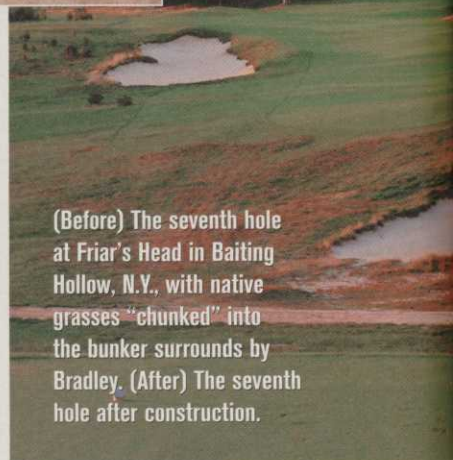


After

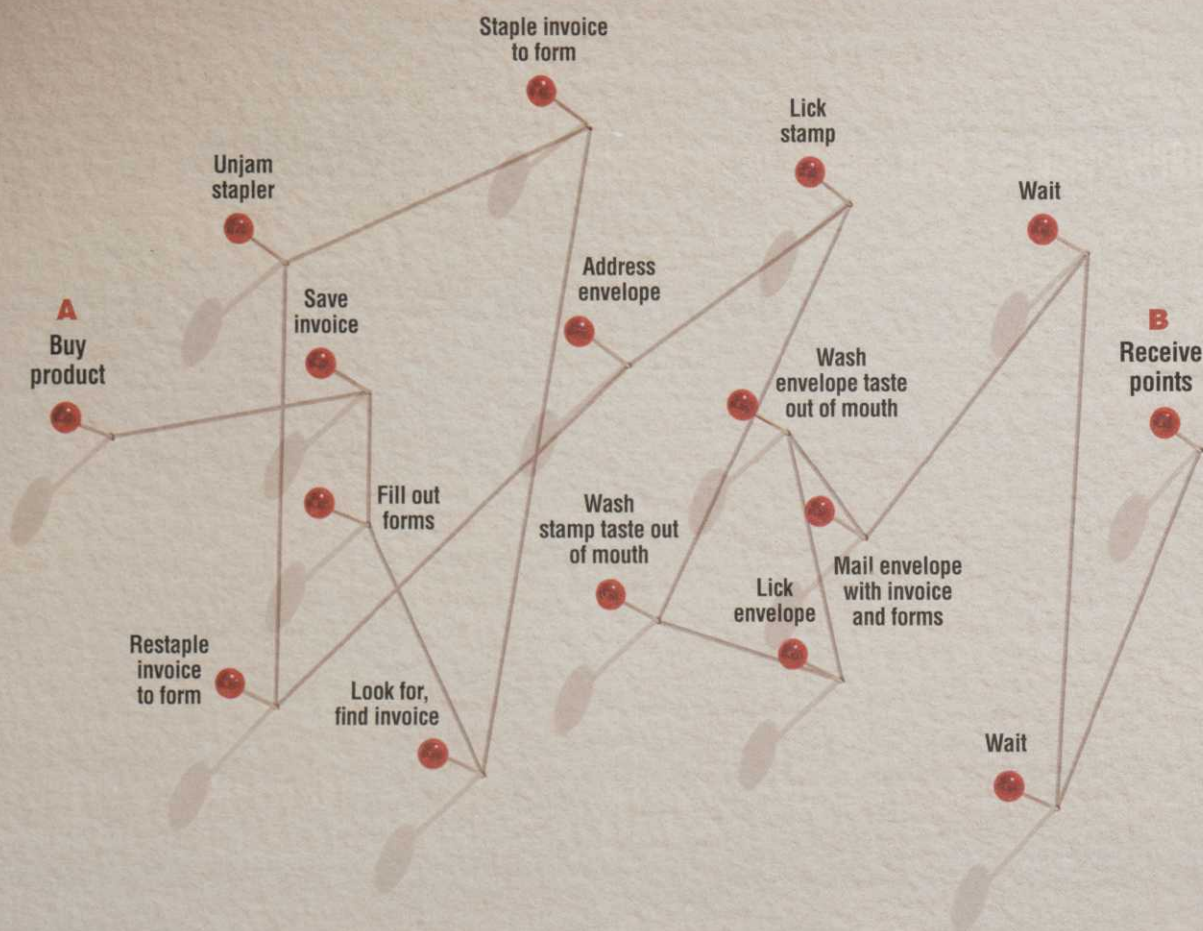
Bradley's education began at Hot Springs under the tutelage of Axland, a Coore-Crenshaw associate. After that project, Axland brought Bradley to the firm's epic Sand Hills project, where Bradley made \$7 an hour doing grunt work and the occasional bunker enhancement.

"Bill said he felt Jeff could be our bunker man," says Crenshaw. "He felt that he would work well with the mix of people that we had. And it's turned out that way."

It was not until the group's Cuscow-



(Before) The seventh hole at Friar's Head in Baiting Hollow, N.Y., with native grasses "chunked" into the bunker surrounds by Bradley. (After) The seventh hole after construction.





illa project that Bradley was turned into the full-fledged bunker finisher.

"Dave and Tom Beck both trained Jeff," says Coore. "And of course, now Jeff gets a lot of publicity. But we kid him about it all the time."

Bradley's role in the design process comes toward the middle and end of a project.

The Coore-Crenshaw team handles nearly all aspects of construction, including clearing, rough grading and finish work. Craftsmen like Tom Beck, Jimbo Wright, Jim Craig, Axland, Dave Zinkand, Rod Whitman, Dan Proctor and James Duncan often rough-in bunkers before Bradley does even more rough shaping.

Once Coore and Crenshaw have settled on a bunker location and the rough state of the hazard is in place to Bradley's liking, the outer area of the hazard is hydro-seeded. Only then has Bradley's task begun.

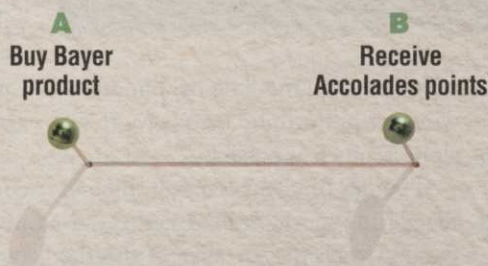
"What he allows Ben and me to do is deal in generalities," Coore says. "We can go out there and say, 'Jeff, let's talk about bunkers in this location.' Maybe a cluster, maybe one, we might talk about certain angles and how they might influence play. But we don't have to worry about the detail of it. There was a time we used to mark the lines for him, and now he just goes and creates the most beautiful bunkers."

Bradley uses painted lines and a shovel to handcraft the finished look that appears aged and eroded by water, wind and play.

In Northern climates, Bradley prefers to seed fescues, paint out lines and use his shovel months after the bunker edges have had a chance to evolve. In Southern climates the process differs by using 1 bermudagrass sod and a greater emphasis on drainage.

Bradley admits it's a "fluid process"

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The work of Jeff Bradley will not be lost in history like the shapers of long ago, says Bill Coore.

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where he likes to let things sit for as long as six months before settling on the final shaping and the addition of the occasional native grasses before the sand is dispersed for play. His deliberate process has been aided by Coore and Crenshaw's project selectivity, which means working for clients who embrace the unique bunker style.

Still, the rugged look frequently is met with questions of whether it requires too much effort to maintain. Superintendents at Coore-Crenshaw courses laugh at that notion and enjoy the challenge of "selling" the rugged look to their golfers.

"They're much easier to maintain than the laser-edge look," says Mercer, who left Hot Springs for Lake Oconee, Ga.-based Cuscowilla Golf Club, a 1997 Coore-Crenshaw design ranked in *Golfweek's* Top 100 Modern Courses. "We do have to hand-rake the bunkers,

which we don't mind doing, but otherwise our philosophy is to leave them alone as much as possible."

Though Bradley's star will shine in the glaring spotlight of Oregon's new Bandon Trails project, there is also the new Shelter Harbor Golf Club, his first project apart from "the boys" (as the design team is affectionately called by Coore and Crenshaw).

A Michael Hurdzan-Dana Fry design in Charlestown, R.I., Shelter Harbor is a classic big-budget, high-end club built by Landscapes Unlimited. Fry, one of the design business's most passionate and open-minded practitioners, was looking to craft a unique look for Shelter Harbor.

"Our hope is that our courses constantly change and we don't become repetitious," says Fry.

After experimenting with a more irregularly edged bunker style at their her-

alded Hamilton Farm design in New Jersey, Coore suggested that Fry consider employing Bradley at Shelter Harbor. Fry met Bradley at Friar's Head, played golf with him, and a temporary partnership was born.

"He's one of the most creative people I've met," Fry says. "The bunkers look like they've been there 100 years."

Fry explains that Bradley first hydroseeds bunkers at a fairly light rate, and then lets them grow in for three to four months. He doesn't mind if rainstorms cause washouts — he likes when nature create its own edge. Then Bradley plants natives grasses from site.

"They look unbelievable a year after they're done," Fry says. "The overall edges are simple, but the lines are so intricate. It's a unique process to watch."

Fry says the look created by Bradley "takes the commitment of the superintendent after the fact and an understanding that the bunkers are a continuous evolution."

At Shelter Harbor, that task goes to industry veteran Ed Walsh.

"The job is not done even with the final plantings," Fry says. "Some plants will be added, some will come out. It's just an experimentation. It takes a guy with a mentality that it's going to evolve, and Ed understands that."

Though Bradley has started his own consulting business to work on other new projects or select restoration jobs (www.bunkerguru.com), he hopes to continue primarily with Coore and Crenshaw, where the feeling is mutual.

"You think about those guys who did those old lacey-edge bunkers for the master architects," Coore says. "Alister MacKenzie didn't go and cut those edges out. And who knows who did the bunkers for Billy Bell and so many of those other bunker creations. Those men who were so talented, so artistic, they're lost in history. No one knows who they were."

"The fact that Jeff Bradley is being recognized for his talents is just a good thing. Because those other guys didn't get recognized." ■