

Attempting the Master Plan

By Ted Baker, President
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(Editor's Note: This interesting and well written piece by Ted Baker is accompanied by some equally interesting side-notes by Bill Newton. This feature for this issue should be named FROM ACROSS NORTH AMERICA this time. It is an original piece that appeared in the Winter 1993 issue of Ontario GREENS. Doug Suter, golf course superintendent at the Credit Valley Golf Club, is the Ontario editor and distributed issues to those of us attending the Chapter Editors' seminar in Dallas. Both Baker and Newton are Canadians; Bill operates a firm called Golf Images. Thanks to Bill for permission to reprint; Doug was on "holiday" when I was at presstime. The advice and observations of these Canadian friends will please all who read them.)

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The construction of a golf course is like building a house—neither is ever finished. Always, there are changes and improvements to be made.

For example, the critical list for a course includes areas of poor drainage, places where grass will not grow, trees to be planted or cut down, greens that settle—the job never ends.

Nonetheless, because a golf course evolves over many years, the business of being involved in design refinements can be exciting.

It is the job of management and/or the green committee to keep up with various problems and to use capital wisely to correct the offending areas. Golf course deficiencies, such as those mentioned, are often only symptoms of underlying design or structural problems. And, at most clubs, there are dozens of expert opinions of what the problem is and how to rectify it.

The ultimate answer is for management and the green committee to work with a golf course architect to develop a master plan. This is usually a phased program of five to ten years during which improvements will be made to the course in a logical, sequential manner to avoid duplication of construction. More importantly, a good plan can avoid replacing one problem with another.

The evaluation process usually started by the green committee, which eventually leads to the preparation of a master plan, starts by defining all the things that are wrong with the golf course. Although this information is critical, I believe it is the wrong place to start.

A golf course has a very special place in the lives of members. It is a property they usually cherish and regard as theirs. The club they have chosen to join, and often at great expense, becomes an extension of their home. The course they love has features which make it unique to them,

challenging and ultimately worth their investment of time and money.

Thus, if the deficiencies of the course are the factors that lead to the exploration of a master plan, it is the amenities of the course that should become the foundation of that plan.

I believe very strongly that prior to tackling the problems of the course, or even identifying those issues, the golf course architect—in consultation with the membership—should record those holes or features found on the property that make it special to the membership.

The identification of these features will also start to define the original style of the design. This is important given that each property lends itself to a particular architectural approach. Assuming the first attempt correctly captured the spirit, a good master plan should identify the particular signature of the original designers and reflect those characteristics in any changes made to the course.

Typically, the style of berming, contouring and shaping must be consistent. It is only through discovering the merits of the golf course that the plan can ultimately be judged.

On completion, the master plan should ensure that those features that were found to be exemplary in the beginning remain, and, perhaps, are reinforced. As well, the design recommendations must be in keeping with the heritage of the property.

Every golf course generates many positive thoughts. Think about yours. Here is a check list I often use in the pre-design process. Certainly, it is a kind of mental gymnastic I go through to describe my own course during conversation.

Thinking about your own course

- *Think about the holes* that make you comfortable.
- *Think about the greens* you wait with anticipation to hit into.
- *Think about the places* where you will find yourself turning in a slow circle to take in the full panoramic view.
- *Think about those warm, protective places* in early spring or late fall and the cool-shaded areas that are a welcome relief during hot summer days.
- *Think about the hole* which, every year, is the turning point in the club championship.

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Get all these thoughts in your mind—or better still, write them down. You are now in a frame of mind to constructively discuss the master plan.

To paraphrase an old song, “concentrate on the positive, eliminate the negative.”

About the Author

Ted Baker, principal in Ted Baker & Associates, is an accomplished designer and planner. His recent election as a Fellow of the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects reflects this.

Assignments have included innovative solutions for public parks, major corporate centers, municipal landfill sites and master planning for residential and commercial developments.

But, perhaps his foremost interest is the design of golf courses where he can respect the best traditions of golf course architecture—enhanced by the modern techniques of landscape architecture.

Baker has designed many courses including the now well-regarded Lionhead. Currently, he is working on more than a dozen courses. He firmly believes that a golf course must exist in harmony with nature—giving the impression that it has always been there.

Ted Baker, like so many good Canadian architects, has

links to Stanley Thompson, Howard Watson and Robbie Robinson.

The natural approach to design, as practiced by Ted Baker, began with a job acquired during summer university days when he worked for one of Canada's dean of architects, Howard Watson.

Over two decades Watson continued to be his mentor. For example, Ted learned from Howard that counting empty fertilizer bags was one way of checking a supplier's invoice.

Baker also tells the story related to him by Howard about the early work days under Stanley Thompson.

Apparently, the young Watson and a fellow worker, Robert Trent Jones, came to an agreement. Jones was anxious to learn more about the backroom studio techniques that Howard had mastered. At the same time, Watson was keen to become a better golfer. Jones was an accomplished amateur out of upper New York State.

They struck a deal—Watson would teach Jones more about the technical aspects of architecture and Jones would teach Watson to play better golf.

Watson, many years later, confided to Baker: “Obviously, I did a better job than Trent.”

—Bill Newton

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