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Vol. 10, No. 1

Designing Championship Quality Golf with Legendary Course Designer Rees Jones



PHOTOS: LEFT: LARRY LAMBRECHT

GROWING UP WITH A FAMOUS GOLF COURSE ARCHITECT, REES Jones was born into the business. It was a natural fit for the son of Robert Trent Jones, Sr., the preeminent architect of the post-war golf era.

The younger Jones had plenty of other interests growing up besides golf, and was a pretty good baseball player in his day. Still, Jones will tell you there's an element of inevitability about following in his father's footsteps.

"I mean, look at Barry Bonds and Bobby Bonds. Ken Griffey, Jr. and Ken Griffey, Sr.," says Jones, an avid baseball fan, referring to a pair of famous father-son acts. "People ask me that all the time, and I say, look at my lawyer's father who was a lawyer. You're just sort of influenced, and you learn by observing and osmosis, I guess. So it's a natural thing even though you don't think about it as a kid.

"My mother wanted me to get a liberal arts education, which I got [at Yale University]. I have multiple interests so I didn't become too taken up with my job. But that didn't work. I got taken up with my job!"

Thirty-four years after starting his own design firm, Rees Jones, Inc., golfers and real estate developers couldn't be happier about the career path Jones followed.

It's a path that has taken the 65-year-old architect to the hallowed golf grounds of eastern Long Island, where Jones designed acclaimed Atlantic Golf Club and The Bridge Golf Club, to the storied sand hills of Pinehurst, NC, where Jones designed the exclusive No. 7 course, to the treasured coasts of Nantucket (Nantucket GC), San Diego (Santaluz GC), Sea Island, GA, (Ocean Forest GC), Sunset Beach, NC (Sea Trail Golf Resort & Convention Center) and to delightful desert locales such as Las Vegas (Cascata GC), La Quinta, CA, (Andalusia CC) and Peoria, AZ, (Quintero Golf and County Club).

In all, Jones has designed more than 100 courses in 35 states and six countries—not to mention another 70 courses he has renovated or restored over the years, including many of the recent U.S. Open venues (thus his popular nickname 'The Open Doctor').

"I can't speak any more highly of a quality individual than Rees. He was a real treat to work with. You can't find a better gentleman than Rees Jones."

Pat Cuning, CEO,
Woodside Development Co.

Above: No. 9 at Daniel Island's Jones-designed Ralston Creek course



Left: The sun rises over the Oconee course at Reynolds Plantation in Greensboro, GA
Right: Rees Jones



PHOTOS: LEFT: REYNOLDS PLANTATION; RIGHT: LARRY LAMBERT

Pat Cunning, CEO of Woodside Development Co., is extremely fond of Jones and the work he does. In the mid-to-late '80s, Cunning and his team hired Jones to build the first golf course at Woodside Plantation, and the 2,961-acre community in Aiken, SC, has been a hit ever since.

"One of the best things about Rees is he does it himself," says Cunning, whose community has two other 18-hole courses by Bob Cupp and Nicklaus Design, and recently opened 10 holes of the new Fuzzy Zoeller/Clyde Johnston layout. "He doesn't farm it out to other folks. He actually designed every hole, and I think he did a fabulous job. It's probably one of the reasons why we had the success we did."

Indeed, when the Jones course opened in the fall of '87, Woodside sold 115 lots on the first day of sales, ranging in price from \$47,000 to \$52,000, according to Cunning. Today, golf course lots at Woodside cost approximately \$90,000, with home and lot packages starting at \$325,000.

"I think a lot of [our success] had to do with Rees Jones and the fact that the land was so beautiful," adds Cunning, whose 1,700-home development is in the process of building a new village center anchored by shops and medical, health and wellness facilities. "The other thing about Rees is he was very generous with the golf course envelope. He built the golf course in the valleys which meant the real estate overlooked it. He just

did a wonderful job on the golf course.

"Plus, I can't speak any more highly of a quality individual than Rees. He was a real treat to work with. You can't find a better gentleman than Rees Jones. To be honest with you, it was a difficult decision not to choose Rees for the second golf course."

In addition to his personable attitude and professionalism, one of the key ingredients in Jones' success is his ability to not only to build remarkable golf courses, but to design them in such a way that they can entertain and service the entire spectrum of golfers—from the high-handicapper resort guest to the private club member to the game's most elite amateurs and professionals.

A perfect example is the Oconee course at Reynolds Plantation, which played host to the prestigious PGA of America International Cup matches this year as well as the NCAA Division I men's match-play championship.

"What Rees did here at the Oconee course is create an aesthetically beautiful golf course that allows the hotel guest who would not necessarily be your avid everyday golfer to actually enjoy the golf course and have an absolute blast, as well as our private membership," says Bob Mauragas, Reynolds Plantation's vice president of golf operations. "And yet we can also put some of the best players in the world back there at 7,600 yards.

"To give you an example, for the NCAA and PGA of



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"He sort of sees his job as not just getting the course sold, but helping you spread your wings and fly. So he had an ongoing personal interest in how well our business was doing and how successful we were. It was very nice and showed that he cares."

Matt Sloan, president, Daniel Island Co.

America events this year, we did not grow the rough up nor did we narrow the fairways. We didn't do anything to the golf course and it stood the test of time. That's a rare breed and Rees really did that here."

Another thing that is certainly rare is the inordinate amount of quality personal time that the high-profile architect invests in most projects—both before and after the course is completed. That was certainly the experience for real estate developer Matt Sloan at Daniel Island, a 36-hole private community near Charleston, where newly released homesites on Jones' Ralston Creek course start in the mid-\$400,000s. Last year, Ralston Creek hosted the inaugural PGA Nationwide Tour PalmettoPride Classic to rave reviews.

"Our experience with Rees was he took a really genuine personal interest, not just in our golf course but our whole development and business model," says Sloan, president of the Daniel Island Co. "His level of commitment exceeded my best expectations. He was on property far more than I expected, and intellectually and emotionally invested at the highest level. He puts so much blood, sweat and tears (into golf courses) they become like extensions of his family, I think."

To be sure, Jones has a pair of great associates working alongside him (Greg Muirhead assisted Jones at Reynolds Plantation and Bryce Swanson was a regular at Daniel

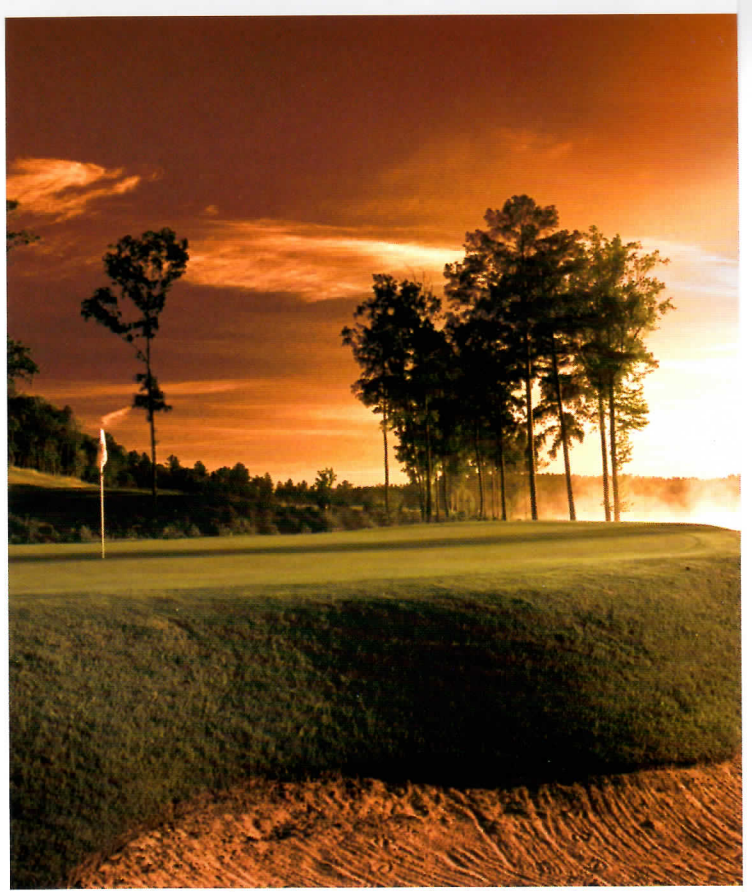
Island). Still, his personal touch is unmistakable. One of the main reasons Jones has been able to give his clients so much personal attention over the years is his longstanding belief in limiting his annual workload of golf projects. That in turn allowed Jones, a devoted family man, to be extremely active in the upbringing of his two grown daughters.

"My father was never there and I wanted to partake in my kids' upbringing," Jones says. "I did coach my daughter's basketball team and only missed one game. I worked my schedule around it."

His clients rarely were shortchanged. An example of Jones going "above and beyond," according to Sloan, are the subtle sightings of Jones wearing Daniel Island apparel in very high-profile TV moments. For instance, there was the time one particular Daniel Island golf shirt caught the eye of broadcaster Katie Couric.

"Maybe he just likes getting free shirts and windbreakers or whatever. But he would grab a few things when he was down to visit us, which we were happy to give," Sloan recalls with a smile. "And then he would wear them at the right places. I think he went to two U.S. Opens wearing our logo. And I think he wore our logo on the Today Show. And it's not like we asked him to. But Katie Couric turns around and goes 'what's that?' (pointing to the logo).

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had an ongoing personal interest in how well our business was doing and how successful we were. It was very nice and showed that he cares.”

Jones’ career in golf course design began in 1964. After graduating from Yale and studying for a year at Harvard University, he became a principal in his father’s firm, Robert Trent Jones, Inc. In the early years, Rees ran his father’s East Coast office and had a hand in designing several courses. Meanwhile, Rees’ older brother, Robert Trent Jones, Jr., another highly acclaimed golf course architect, was plying his trade for dad in other pockets of the globe.

After a decade with his family, it was time for the youngest Jones to go out on his own. He formed his own firm in 1974, and more than 30 years later, is still headquartered in his hometown of Montclair, NJ.

While Rees’ brother adhered more to their father’s “tough par, easy bogey” approach in his respective solo career, Rees made a conscious effort to make his courses not a test of brute strength so much as an exercise of skill, shot-making ingenuity and character.

Arguably, Jones first started to achieve national prominence in 1986 when Haig Point opened for play and Pinehurst unveiled his No. 7 course. It wasn’t until his sensitive restoration of The Country Club in Brookline, MA for the 1988 U.S. Open, however, that Jones became a global household name and the ‘Open Doctor’

tag was born.

Not only was the Brookline job a defining moment in Jones’ career, it revolutionized the industry by introducing the concept of ‘restoration’ to modern-day golf course architecture. Previously, older courses were typically just ‘renovated’ or ‘modernized,’ but at Brookline, Jones showed the value of recapturing traditional lost design elements by poring over old maps and course photos.

“I dedicated myself to (Brookline) and I started this whole trend of restoration,” says Jones, who plays to a single-digit handicap, principally out of Seminole Golf Club during the winter months and Maidstone Club in the summer. “What we did was take out all the new and put back the old. I think restoration is a term that’s been misused a lot. And I think you can’t restore a golf course and restore it back to the old.

“You have to restore it in style and bring it into today’s game. And I think that was the first real restoration and it was a true restoration. But I think the term has been overused and misused a bit.”

The same can be said for modern-day golf course architecture, particularly in the 1980s, when many of Jones’ peers were building extreme, penal courses. Jones stayed true to the classic lines of many of the great courses and architects he admired, such as A.W. Tillinghast.

“Our courses are classic, a blend of traditional design

It wasn’t until his sensitive restoration of The Country Club in Brookline, MA for the 1988 U.S. Open, however, that Jones became a global household name and the ‘Open Doctor’ tag was born.

Left: Hole number two at Pinehurst No. 7

Center: The Ralston Creek course at the Daniel Island Club

Right: Woodside Plantation



"I'm entrusted in taking these great golf courses and bringing them into the 21st century, bringing them into the competitive world today with all the equipment changes."

Rees Jones

Bunkers surround the green at Hole 5 on the Jones-designed Pinehurst No. 2 course

and innovative style," Jones says. "I admire the great old Scottish courses. I was awestruck from the first time I played St. Andrews as a teenager. I am also influenced by the legendary masters of American design, especially those whose courses I have worked to restore.

"My style is based in this rich tradition. I stood the classic ground two decades ago when penal course designs abounded and contrived features were the order of the day."

At a time when Jack Nicklaus and Pete Dye were building modern-day monsters at Grand Traverse Resort and PGA West, the '88 Open at Brookline proved that courses do not have "bells and whistles" to be a champion, Jones has said.

Apparently, the formula works, because no other architect has been asked to restore and remodel more major championship venues. For example, in 2008 alone, Jones will have a hand in the U.S. Open, PGA Championship, U.S. Amateur and five PGA tour events. In the next four years, the Open Doctor will be tending to three of the U.S. Opens and three of the PGA Championships.

Jones, who never had a nickname growing up, admittedly likes the 'Open Doctor' label. When asked what this precious reference means to him, he replies: "It means I'm entrusted in taking these great golf courses and bringing them into the 21st century, bringing them into the competitive world today with all the equipment changes."

Jones goes on to say, "The fact that I'm on seven U.S.

Opens, and now six PGAs and I guess four Ryder Cups eventually, is that they're all different. Like at Baltusrol ['93 U.S. Open and '05 PGA Championship], I didn't change it much but lengthened it. At Pinehurst No. 2 ['99 and '05 U.S. Opens] I basically restored it.

"I think I look at each one very carefully and see what needs to be done. At Congressional ['97 U.S. Open], East Lake [annual PGA Tour Championship since '98] and Atlanta Athletic Club ['01 PGA Championship], they had to be completely rebuilt and redesigned. So each one, I know what to leave alone and I know what to change. I guess that's what the Open Doctor's all about."

When Jones retires from the industry, he says he would like to be remembered as someone who brought public golf back into the forefront, thanks to the hugely successful 2002 U.S. Open at Bethpage State Park in Farmingdale, NY, and critically acclaimed work on the South Course at Torrey Pines, which hosts the '08 U.S. Open.

"We really brought many, many more people into the fan base of golf through those two venues," Jones adds. "But I'm probably going to be remembered as the Open Doctor because those are the courses that continue to get the publicity and the championships keep going back there.

"I also hope I'm remembered as someone who followed a famous father and pulled it off."

Like Barry Bonds and Ken Griffey, Jr., two baseball players destined for the Hall of Fame, Jones is already guaranteed a place in history. ☀