

*Autobiographical Sketch*

*Ron Prichard*  
*Golf Architect*

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As a young boy, I lived in Fayson Lakes, New Jersey; a small community nestled in the heavily wooded hills of Morris County. My twin brother and I spent our days exploring the deep woods and swimming in the clear cool streams and lakes. During the school year, we attended a little four-room schoolhouse with two grades occupying each room. I can't imagine a better boyhood.

Growing up in a lakeside community where athletic emphasis was on swimming, it was natural for me to compete in that sport. At the age of thirteen, I won the New Jersey State Senior Men's 100-yard and 200 yard backstroke championships and held these titles for five years.

Our home was a few miles from the Knoll Golf Club and its wonderful old classic golf course, which was designed by Charles H. Banks, and had opened for play in 1929. In the summertime, I often rode my bicycle the seven miles to this club and spent the day as a caddy. As I walked the course, I began to appreciate and understand the characteristics of traditional golf architecture as practiced by Banks, who had apprenticed with both Charles Blair Macdonald and Seth Raynor.

My father had immigrated from Wales in 1922 and owned a development and homebuilding company in northern New Jersey. Ours was a family business with my mother, and as we reached age, all three sons working together.

In many ways, this early work experience provided the most valuable lessons of my life. I learned the rewards of hard work and the satisfaction earned from creation of high quality results with a team of conscientious men and women. Understanding the operation of heavy grading equipment, such as bulldozers, trackhoes, and scrapers, has proven continually beneficial in the supervision of golf course construction.

I attended Middlebury College, in Middlebury, Vermont and concentrated my studies on Economics and Fine Arts. In athletics I enjoyed alpine skiing and played varsity lacrosse and golf. During our short Fall and Spring golf seasons, our team traveled throughout New England to play many wonderful old golf courses.

Following graduation in June of 1963, I began two years of service as an officer in the U.S. Army. My first stop was Fort Benning, Georgia for Infantry Officer's Basic Training. I was first assigned to remain at Fort Benning and was later reassigned to Fort Devens in Ayer, Massachusetts.

During free time I visited most of the great old golf courses in New England and worked to improve my play. These journeys further strengthened my growing appreciation for the style of the early golf courses where golf was introduced to America – primarily in the Northeastern United States. Fortunately, the members of many of the fine old traditional golf clubs had treasured and preserved the character of their original courses, which provided a continuing education in “traditional golf architecture.” These great classic courses are the most important classrooms in our nation for anyone seriously intent upon understanding golf architecture. How unfortunate it is today that so few men with the future of golf in their hands have pursued these studies. It was my good fortune to visit and play such courses as Longmeadow, Essex County, Worcester, and Myopia Hunt Club, in Massachusetts; the Yale Golf Course, and Fishers Island off the coast of New London, Connecticut; Wannamoisett, Rhode Island Country Club, and Newport Golf Club, Rhode Island; Shinnecock Hills, The National Golf Links, and Garden City on Long Island; Ridgewood, Baltusrol, Essex Fells, Pine Valley, and Somerset Hills in New Jersey, and Glens Falls in New York. The influence of Donald Ross, Seth Raynor, Herbert Leeds, Devereaux Emmet, Charles H. Banks, and A.W. Tillinghast has had a profound effect on my perception of golf architecture. The understanding and appreciation of the simple beauty and purpose of the work of these men is always in my mind.

As my playing ability improved, I competed in the Massachusetts State Open, the New Jersey State Open, the Metropolitan Open, and was invited to play in an Annual Tournament "The Jacques Cup" at The Country Club in Brookline, Massachusetts.

In 1966, upon my discharge from service, I decided to seek an opportunity in golf architecture. A wonderful new golf course had recently been completed at the Concord Hotel in Lake Kiamesha, New York by Joe Finger, a golf architect from Houston, Texas. After visiting and playing this course, my goal was to meet Joe and secure the opportunity to begin efforts towards becoming a golf architect. I wrote Joe a letter explaining that I had grown up in the construction industry, had artistic ability, and played a good game of golf.

"I was seeking a chance to begin learning to be a golf architect. I was willing to start at the bottom and work very hard."

Shortly thereafter, when Joe was in New York City, he invited me for an interview. We discussed various areas where I might fit into his firm and I asked to be handed all the responsibility he felt I might be capable of managing. Joe believed in my abilities, and placed me in charge of the construction of the Glen Oaks Club, a new 27-hole golf course in Old Westbury, Long Island. This was a wonderful opportunity and a significant challenge. The new golf course was constructed to a quality that met all of Joe's expectations and opened to great praise from members and their guests. Today, over forty years later, this very prestigious country club has a golf course, which is regarded as a masterpiece. I worked with Joe Finger for six years, journeying from one golf course project to another to oversee construction. I had a chance to visit and study great courses across the country, and my experience building courses from Mexico to New England strengthened my technical background. Each year Joe placed more confidence in my design abilities. I was permitted to develop field drawings, which would modify the original design and improve the final course.

Based on my experience with Joe Finger, I consider him to have been one of the most thorough and technically knowledgeable professionals in the field of golf course design. Joe was not a student of the traditions of golf and had never journeyed to Scotland or Ireland. In every sense he was an American designer, yet few contemporary golf course architects have been his equal at developing the routing plans which best "fit" a site. In my 33 years of experience, no one has better understood the demand for structural perfection during construction of a golf course. He was insistent upon the use of extreme caution during construction to ensure: the golf course would drain correctly and quickly, the putting areas would mature and perform properly, and all other structural systems would endure (irrigation, subsurface drainage, lake lining, etc.). During the years with Joe Finger some of the golf courses we developed were: Cedar Ridge Country Club in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Colonial Country Club in Memphis, Tennessee; Pleasant Valley Country Club in Little Rock, Arkansas; nine holes for the Atlanta Athletic Club in Atlanta, Georgia; the Bayou Golf Club in Texas City, Texas; Kingwood Country Club in Kingwood, Texas and we remodeled courses such as: River Oaks Country Club in Houston, Texas; Atlanta Country Club; Grossinger's Golf Club in New York; and Montammy Country Club in Alpine, New Jersey.

During these six years, I lived a "gypsy's" life, traveling around the country from golf course to golf course. I had the good fortune to learn golf architecture and experience golf course construction "in the field." Historically, any man who has had a substantial impact on the profession of golf architecture has learned this craft on the job site, shaping the earth. A man attempting the design of a golf course without having had this experience is incapable of producing a great result.

In 1972, I wrote to Desmond Muirhead in Newport Beach, California expressing a desire to join his land planning and golf course design firm. This was at a time when he was in association with Jack Nicklaus. The design for Muirfield Village Golf Club in Dublin, Ohio had been completed and the golf course was under construction. Desmond offered me a position directing the golf course design and construction division of his company. I was responsible for meeting with clients, creating the conceptual plan, supervising the production of working drawings, and overseeing the construction work. He was surrounded with some brilliantly talented land planners and artists, and the opportunity to become part of this team was another important and fortunate step in my career.

During the time with Desmond, I designed the "new course" at New St. Andrews Golf Club in Ontawara City, Japan. In a stroke of great fortune, the design duplication and construction of "the Old Course" at St. Andrews, Scotland at this same golf club in Japan, was also my responsibility. As a part of this task, I made my first trip to Scotland in 1974. I spent many weeks studying "the Old Course" and walking the links with the old men who had played the course since early in the century. They told me wonderful stories about the original course and described the gentle changes made over the ages. When I had time, I traveled to visit other early links courses such as Royal Dornoch, Muirfield, North Berwick, Prestwick, Western Gailles, Royal County Down, Royal Portrush and Lahinch.

This time spent researching "the Old Course" and visiting the links where golf was born provided me a unique and inspired vision of golf architecture.

Some of Desmond Muirhead's best golf architectural work was produced immediately prior to, and during the four years I was with his firm; however, while working with him, it became quite clear; he was not a man who was inspired by the traditional roots of golf. Desmond was not a golfer, and he was not influenced by the early masters of golf architecture. Nevertheless, my experience working with several very talented and creative members of his firm expanded my ability to visualize design work from a broader view. This perspective has proven to be of extreme value in my personal efforts.

During the time I worked with Desmond Muirhead, some of the golf courses we developed were: the Ironwood Golf Club and the Springs Club in Rancho Mirage, California; reconstruction of the Presidio Country Club in San Francisco, California; New St. Andrews in Ontawara City, Japan; Bent Tree Country Club in Dallas, Texas; McCormick Ranch, Scottsdale, Arizona; and designs for such prospects as Keystone Ski Area in Dillon, Colorado; and St. Clair Village in St. Clair, Michigan.

By late 1975, the national economic difficulties caused by gas shortages, were slowly draining the momentum from Desmond's efforts. Developers became very reluctant to undertake new risks, and the golf course design profession suffered severely. Just as A.W. Tillinghast had lost interest in golf architecture as the depression years wore down his spirit, Desmond's interest was refocused on a new art gallery he was opening and also in doing some extensive traveling. Gradually, the team he had assembled drifted apart.

I returned to Houston where I again joined Joe Finger with encouragement from him regarding my eventual acquisition of his firm. We worked together for two years on such designs as Riverhill Country Club in Kerrville, Texas and several courses in Mexico: Bosques del Lago, Mexico City; Hacienda de San Gaspar, Cuernavaca; and Hacienda de Tequisquiapan, Tequisquiapan.

In 1979, Bob Von Hagge, a golf architect also from the Houston area, contacted me. He was interested in my joining his design firm which he had formed in association with Bruce Devlin, the Australian tour player. Rather than stay with Joe Finger, I decided to join Bob to work with his various clients developing the conceptual designs, and providing guidance during the final design development.

Although Bob did not participate significantly during the planning of the golf courses, he was very active in the construction efforts and showed considerable imagination during field development of the plans. In the five years I was a member of his group, Von Hagge and Devlin, some of the courses we developed were:

Shawnee Country Club, Shawnee, Oklahoma  
East Lake Woodlands G.C., Tampa, Florida  
The Doral Country Club, Miami, Florida  
Boynton Beach Municipal Golf Course, Boynton Beach, Florida

Walden on Lake Houston, Houston, Texas  
Northgate Country Club, Houston, Texas  
Northshore Country Club, Corpus Christi, Texas  
Falcon Point, Katy, Texas  
Shamanah Golf Club, Boise, Idaho  
The Woodlands East Golf Course, Woodlands, Texas  
Hunter's Run, Boynton Beach, Florida  
Tan-Tar-A Resort Golf Course, Osage Beach, Missouri  
Rancho del Lago, Tucson, Arizona  
Glen Eagles Country Club, Plano, Texas

For sixteen years, since 1967, I had studied golf architecture and been associated with three capable architects who demonstrated a variety of styles and influences in their work. I had traveled constantly studying the greatest golf courses in the world in an effort to discover the secrets of the world's early master architects and had built the beginnings of a photographic slide library (now exceeding sixteen thousand slides) of most of the great classical golf courses in Scotland, Ireland, England, and the United States.

It takes many years to understand the variation in "methods" applied by golf architects to challenge golfers. Of greater difficulty is to discover the clues which describe the architect's philosophy of design. Does the architect place a particular emphasis on one area of design to challenge the golfer? What sort of putting surface character does he favor? Is his bunkering severe, or is it a very soft and forgiving sort? Does he see and understand the fine line between penal design and strategic design?

In November 1983, I opened my own practice with the design of Wedgewood Country Club in Conroe, Texas. Since then, I have been fortunate and delighted to have received steady commissions for new work and for the redesign of, or restoration of, existing golf courses.

At every opportunity I have continued to travel abroad in Scotland, Ireland, and England and throughout the United States to examine the early great works of the master golf architects. This effort has had a major impact on my philosophical approach towards golf course design. I am determined to work in a style which echoes the traditional understated work of such men as Donald J. Ross, C.B. Macdonald, H.S. Colt, and other men who grew up on and embraced the nature of the early links courses.

Today, we are experiencing an era when many golf architects have crossed the line away from strategic golf course architecture and are creating a very penal style of work.

Many young men who have established young firms, have been trained only with an understanding of the "American perception of golf," by men who themselves have never traveled to Scotland, Ireland, or England – never studied the early classic courses in America.

In an effort to create golf courses which these architects feel will better challenge the best golfers, most golf courses opening today severely penalize the less capable player and fail to stand the test of championship play. Many of these new courses embarrass and humiliate the player of modest skill. This is unfortunate, and faulty.

It is of extreme importance that golf architects recognize a golf course must be designed in a manner which will provide each player with an alternative and safe route of play on every golf hole. Framing each side of a golf hole with a continuous border of water, sand, and/or trees, provides no relief for the player who is not a straight hitter. The fallacy in this penal style of design is that the best players strike the ball with accuracy and are therefore rarely penalized. The average player who cannot always play to the center of a fairway is continually demoralized. There are better ways to create challenges for the better player and retain a sense of joy for a golfer of less skill. There are better ways to defend "par."

Mountains, oceans, brooks and lakes are beautiful bonuses in the creation of a great golf course; however, these are not required elements. Golf courses such as the classic William Flynn course at Shinnecock Hills Golf Club in Southampton, Long Island or the wonderful Ross course, (Pinehurst No. 2), in Pinehurst, North Carolina illustrate a magnificent simplicity of design without these added elements of nature. There are many other wonderful golf courses in our country and throughout Great Britain which exemplify methods of creating great golf courses on ordinary pieces of land.

The smallest town or community can proudly boast of a masterpiece golf course, if they are selective in the man they choose to be their golf course architect.

A golf course architect must carefully examine a piece of property and strive to develop the most efficient and least destructive way to "fit" a golf course onto the land. We should be inspired to design an honest sturdy test of the game of golf along historic guidelines. The golf course should play like a chessboard, offering the player a variety of moves as he plays from point to point. It should challenge him to examine his game and to stretch to develop a better variety of strokes.

This is a very important decade in the history of golf architecture. Increased pressure for the protection of our natural environment may have a beneficial effect on the design and management of golf courses. Golf traditionally has been played over grounds of very natural condition with some emphasis placed on the maintenance of tees, the greens, and the fair playing area. In more recent history, intensive maintenance has produced a new standard of turf quality and a very different style of golf. By embracing a different standard in America, we have established a new version of golf, which is not the Royal and Ancient game. We have embraced soft, lush turf covering all portions of the golf course, robbing the golf architect of a most crucial ingredient of the game: the effects of the ground on the bounce or run of the ball. With maintenance limitations established by restricted use of water and chemicals, this bounce and the kick of the land would be restored, along with a return of some element of "luck". These characteristics are so crucial to golf, and they are universally praised by players of the game who travel to our early classic courses.

As I continue to visit golf courses and study golf architecture, I am very enthusiastic about the contribution I have begun to make. At this time in my career, a major emphasis of my efforts involves the careful and accurate restoration of several wonderful classic courses by Donald Ross, Seth Raynor, A.W. Tillinghast, Willie Park, Jr., and William Flynn. It is unlikely that any other golf architectural firm in the world is as active as we are in this work.

I am very proud of our work and our reputation; and I feel extraordinarily fortunate to have so many wonderful opportunities to learn much more.

I am determined to continue to avoid current fashion or trend and will always strive to create classical work of enduring value.

Ron Prichard  
Golf Architect