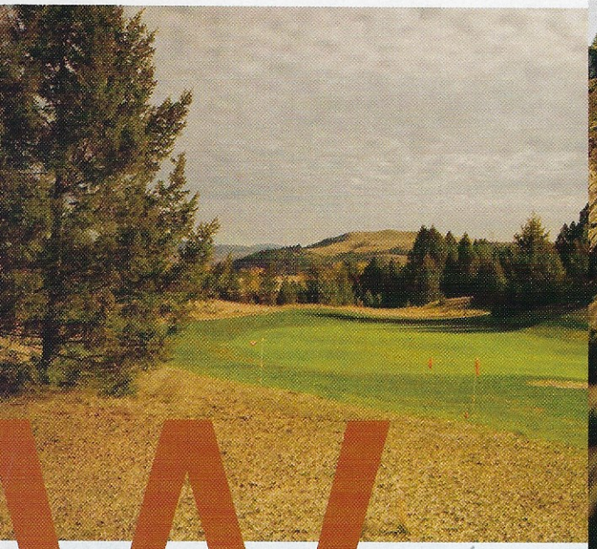
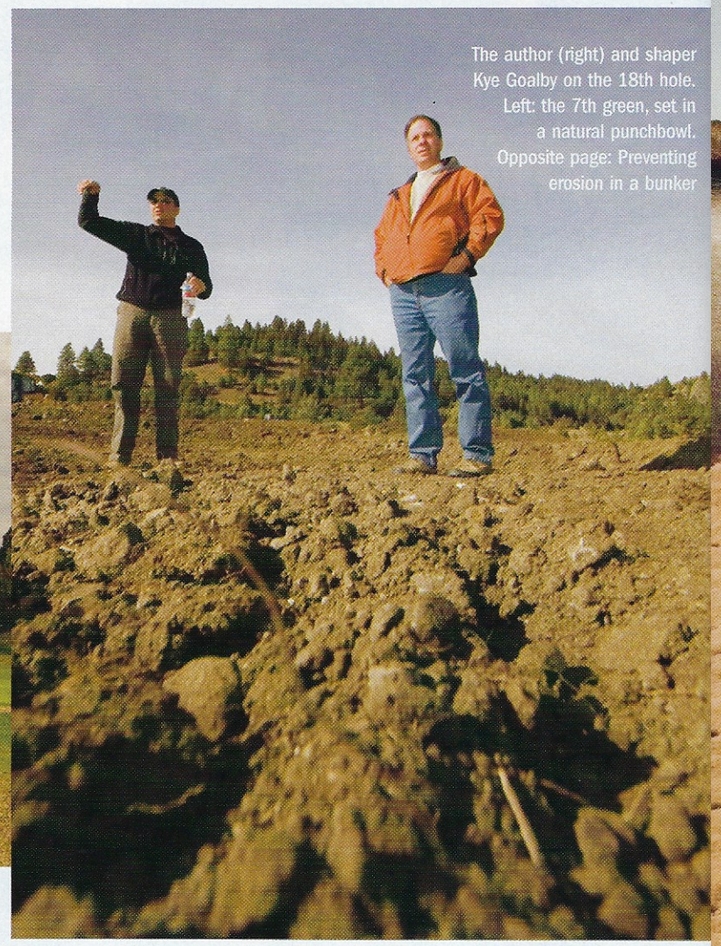
44 decisions ON A FRIDAY

DURING A SITE VISIT TO ROCK CREEK CLUB, TOM DOAK PROVIDES INSIGHTS INTO THE HEART AND MIND OF A COURSE ARCHITECT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHIP SIMONS

The author rests at the 4th hole. Opposite: Surveying the work from the 6th tee.





The author (right) and shaper Kye Goalby on the 18th hole. Left: the 7th green, set in a natural punchbowl. Opposite page: Preventing erosion in a bunker



When I talk to people about my job, it seems that they have no idea what I really do when I'm on site. Most people ask questions about golf architecture as though our most important decisions are how long to make each hole from the back tee, and where to place the bunkers.

So when I visited Montana's Rock Creek Cattle Club for six days in May 2006, I wrote down every decision I considered on the first day. Rock Creek has been under construction since October 2005. It's a spectacular piece of property, and we had thousands of acres to choose from in laying out the course, so it's not that great an achievement to come up with a good routing that didn't require much earthmoving. Still, millions of rocks had to be screened out of the soil so golfers wouldn't break their wrists on opening day.

GOLFERS OBSESS OVER LENGTH, BUT I DON'T WORRY AT ALL. IN FACT, HALF OUR DECISIONS ARE ABOUT THINGS AVERAGE PLAYERS NEVER BRING UP.

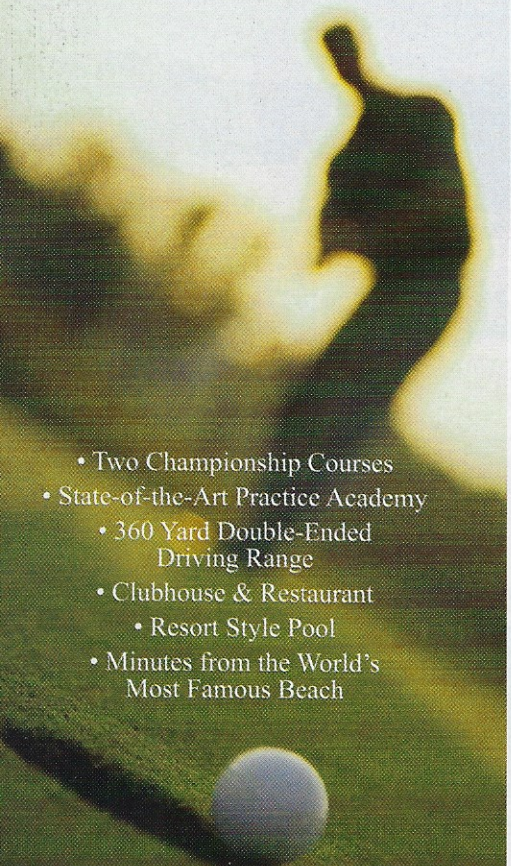
In the weeks before my visit, my lead design associate for the job, Eric Iverson, and three shapers have been working on finishing the 2nd through 7th holes and "roughing in" No. 1 and holes 8-13, so I could make adjustments on this trip.

I arrive in Missoula at 1 a.m. after a thunderstorm in Denver delayed my flight. I have been on the road for 10 days and am tired, but excited to come back, because Rock Creek will be one of the very best courses we've done.

In the morning, one of our interns, Jonathan Reisetter, picks me up at the hotel and drives me out to the site in Deer Lodge, an hour and 15 minutes away. Along the way he provides an update—which greens have been shaped, what he has been working on himself, and what he has learned from the job so far. On the way, we buy sandwiches for the crew so they won't waste time driving out to lunch.

We meet Eric, Chris Hunt and Kye Goalby, plus the superintendent, Isaac Farabaugh, in the middle of the 1st fairway, eat on the hood of the car and visit a bit before starting the work.

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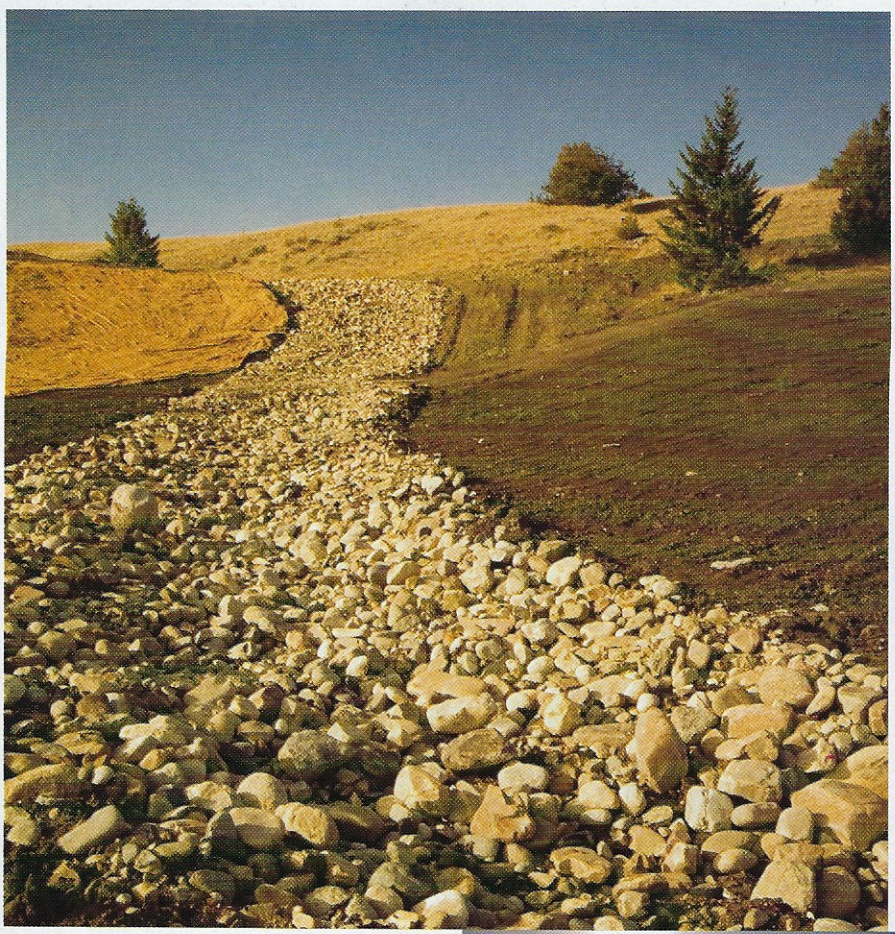
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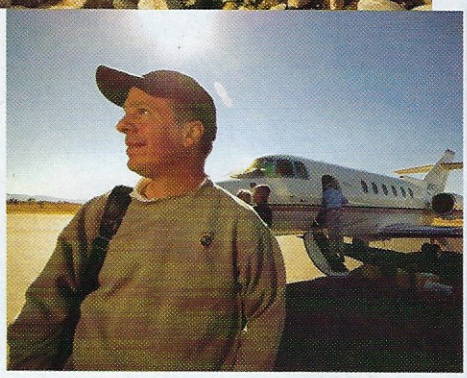
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Above: Rocks form the foundation for a cart path. Right: the architect heads off for another site, thanks to a jet provided by his client, Bill Foley.



We'll look at all 18 holes today—although I have several more days on site, I want to see everything so I will have as much time as possible to deliberate on the toughest decisions.

After the routing, which took several months to complete because we had so much land to choose from, the green shaping and contouring are, in my opinion, the most important components of a great course. On any given visit, there are four to six greens actively being built; some already have been approved, while we haven't gotten to others.

Today, I find three places where I want to extend the green a few feet to accommodate another hole location, two where the shaper needs to soften a contour for playability, one where I shift the position of the green about 20 feet, and another where we lower the elevation of the green about a foot so the chipping areas to the sides of the green are a bit softer.

Bunkers are becoming an overrated aspect of a course, because people seem to judge them more on looks rather than on how they influence play; but they are nonetheless a critical element of any design. I shift two bunkers to bring them closer to the line of play, change the shape of two for aesthetic reasons, add two separate bunkers to ones that already have been built, and remove another and replace it with a chipping area.

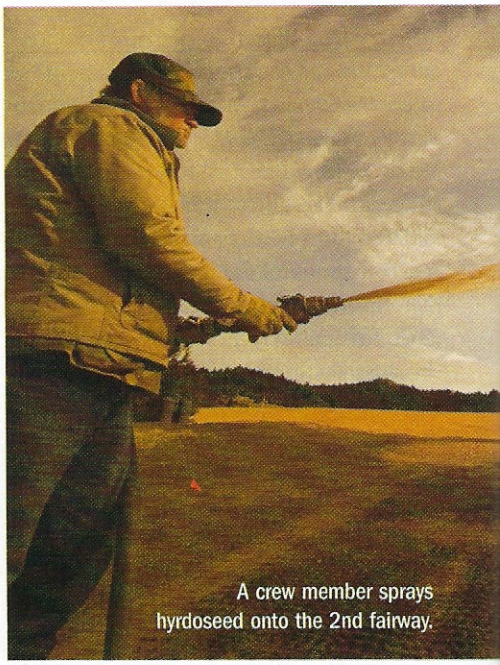
Golfers tend to obsess about the length of individual holes, but I don't worry about it at all. There is only one hole on this trip where I move a tee because of distance—the par-3 8th, which I want to make sure plays differently from the other par 3s. I do move three *(continued on page 102)*

(continued from page 68)

tees to change the angle of play (or to get them out of the sight line from the back tees), alter the shape of another tee for aesthetics, and change the elevation of three others because of visibility issues or to tie them in better with existing grades.

In fact, visibility is the detail I play with most. Do we want to remove the top of the hill in the landing area for the 2nd hole so you might see the top of the flag from the tee? (Not this time.) Do we want to cut a small knob in front of the 11th fairway so players on the forward tee can see the fairway? (Instead, we decide to move that tee so we can keep the knob.)

Nearly half the decisions we make are about things the average golfer never brings up. We may soften contours in the fairway for playability, or so they can be more easily mowed. We recontour a fairway so that it will surface drain better and won't become soggy. We change the extent of the turf on a couple of holes, widening the grass area to make the hole more playable or concealing the point where the grass meets native vegetation, which helps the course fit more seamlessly into the landscape.



A crew member sprays hyrdoseed onto the 2nd fairway.

We remove trees that will grow up to block the view of a bunker, or block a nice view behind a green. (You'll never miss the big Douglas fir on No. 10, because you never knew it was there.) We move a cart path to obscure it from view. We change the sequence of construction to ensure that the irrigation pipes won't get crushed during the topsoiling operation.

And we spend time with a crew of local laborers who have never built a golf course, until they understand how polished the surface needs to be prior to seeding. No matter how many golf courses you've built, a lot of the work falls to inexperienced laborers, and it's important to keep them interested in what they're doing.

I suspect most other architects cover the same subjects on their own site visits, though my own focus may be somewhat different because of the strengths of my associates on site, several of whom have enough experience to design the course themselves.

Mostly, I'm glad that I have a few more days of "quality time" to think about the tougher decisions and to think creatively on the next group of holes we're going to shape, instead of having to hop on a plane tomorrow and get to another site.



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