Lessons from my Mentors

By Tom Doak

Back when I started learning about golf architecture, the profession wasn't nearly as visible as it was today, and there weren't many other students my age. As a result, the people with an interest in the subject went out of their way to help me. It's still hard for me to believe I had this much help before I was 22.

When I was in design school at Cornell, the curriculum was Landscape Architecture; mostly, it was up to me to figure out how to apply it to golf course design. Probably the best lesson I had was from my faculty advisor, **Tom Johnson**, who taught me that sometimes it was easier to make a good design solution by thinking in negative space. Most designers imagine a golf hole is all rough, and only put the fairway where they want the golfer to go; I imagine a golf hole is all fairway, and just put bunkers and rough where they will make it more interesting.

I owe whatever I have achieved in the business to **Pete and Alice Dye**. The opportunity they gave me to participate in the construction of great golf courses was my graduate school in golf design, and the most important thing I learned was that outstanding courses were the product of hard work and a talented crew, and not just good ideas. That first summer I worked at Long Cove, Pete was reminiscing about building Harbour Town, and he told me that up until then his main influence had been Robert Trent Jones. Mr. Jones was building Palmetto Dunes just down the road, and the more Pete looked at it, the more he realized that golf needed something different. I still admire Pete's work, but I'm trying to do something different, too.

I took to heart **P.B. Dye**'s advice to learn how to run a bulldozer. It taught me to think in three dimensions -- so today I can figure out what sort of design can be built easily with the material available at any given green site, and then explain to the shapers how to build what I want.

At almost the same time I went to work for the Dyes, I got to know **Ben Crenshaw**, who was already estalishing himself as a fan of classic architecture. Today, I'm a great admirer of his design work, too. Of all the design topics we've talked about, the one that has stuck in my memory was his advice about giving people room to play. Ben grew up on the windy plains of Texas, and believes devoutly that courses should be designed to remain playable no matter how the wind is blowing; if you do that, he said, you'll also give the bogey golfer all the room he needs to get around without quitting the game. In the windy environment of the British Isles, Ben's lesson made perfect sense.

Much of what I know about course maintenance came from the links manager of St. Andrews, **Walter Woods**. On my first day in Scotland, he took me out to look at the mixture of fescue and bentgrass and poa annua which made up the second green of The Old Course, and I told Walter that the average American would probably complain that it wasn't uniform. He replied that a good player would see the difference, and allow for it. In a nutshell, that's the Scots attitude toward any obstacle on a golf course.

Wherever I've traveled, I've been fortunate to meet people who truly love the game of golf, and who taught me to respect the nature of the game above all else.