

# Local Boy Makes Good

So why is a Michigan-based golf course designer writing a column for *The Met Golfer*? Because I'm really a local boy. Born on the east side of Manhattan, I got my first taste of hanging around heavy equipment in the early 1960's when my mom would take me in the stroller down to watch a big construction project going on in the neighborhood – the library addition to the United Nations Building.

When I was three, we moved out to the suburbs of Stamford, CT, and my odds of getting into the golf business dropped precipitously because my parents, both raised on farms in Missouri during the Depression, were not people who liked to hang out at the country club. My dad played infrequently, at conventions with the people he did business with on the phone all year; my mom had learned to play golf at the old A.W. Tillinghast Country Club of Ithaca when she worked in the ag extension office at Cornell, and she really liked the outdoors element of the game, but she hadn't played in years.

The great thing about golf architecture is that **no two days are ever the same** (other than the ones I spend on a plane).

When I was nine, my odds got much better: the city of Stamford opened a new public course, Sterling Farms, on an old dairy farm less than a mile up the road from our house. It was designed by the New England architect Geoff Cornish for the princely fee of a thousand dollars; instead of having to finance massive debt payments, the city had the resources to run an affordable junior golf program. Every afternoon at 3:00, local kids could play for a $1 green fee. If only more cities still treated golf as public recreation instead of a potential profit center, you wouldn't have to read all those stories about the game's decline. Design-wise, Sterling Farms wasn't that inspiring, but it did have some local charm, most prominently the small farm cemetery nesting in the corner of the short par-4 16th.

As I got a bit older – post Little League – a big part of golf's allure for me was that it didn't require finding other people to play with, the way baseball does. I could just go up to the course and get paired with whoever was waiting, kid or grown-up. And by then I was already interested in golf course design, as crazy as it sounds. After Sterling Farms, one of the very first courses I saw was Harbour Town in South Carolina on a family vacation. The golf writer Charles Price was living there when Pete Dye built the course, and when it was finished he wrote up a little guidebook that had diagrams of the holes and a couple of sentences explaining the strategy. (It was a simpler version of today's yardage books – no numbers required, since only the pros played by yardages in 1971.) It served as a perfect primer on golf course architecture that a ten-year-old could understand. "Second hole: the only fairway bunker is on the left side, but you need to drive close to it if you want to get past a big oak tree up the right side, to go for the green in two."

(Amazingly, a lot of the golf course architects I know got interested when they were 10 or 12. When I worked for the Dye family, one night their son P.B. was going through a calendar of Dye golf holes, identifying who had designed which hole. When he got to the 17th at Harbour Town, he said it was his, and I guffawed. But he told me his dad was working on another hole, and he told P.B. to stand there and direct the pan operators where to drop off the dirt to build the green. Harbour Town was built in 1968, when P.B. was 13.)

By the time I got my driver's license, I'd memorized "The World Atlas of Golf," and my parents indulged my odd passion for golf courses with family vacations to Pinehurst and Pebble Beach. It's hard to explain what an unusual interest this was in the 1970s; before Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer got involved in course design, not even golfers paid much attention to the field. I didn't have the foggiest idea how to pursue it when I got out of high school, but I wrote letters to everyone in the golf business to ask their advice, or for permission to come and see the best courses. Mr. Cornish was one of the people who responded to my letters; he recommended landscape architecture as the best course of study, and I identified Cornell as the best place to get such a degree. It probably helped that Cornell was where my dad got his Ph.D. and met my mom. They figured at least I'd have opportunities there. (Those letters also led to a part-time writing job at *GOLF Magazine*; my first article was published when I was 19.)

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Once I started working for Mr. Dye I became a nomad, living wherever the next construction job took me: Hilton Head, Palm Desert, Phoenix, Denver. When I signed up my first job on my own, in Traverse City, Michigan, I moved there and wound up staying; it was twenty years after I bought a home there that I got my first job within driving distance. I didn't think of moving back to NYC because the cost of living was so high, and I figured that if I wanted to build new courses, New York was really the last place that would need any! For sure, when I was running around Baltusrol watching Jack Nicklaus win the Open in 1980, I never imagined I'd work with him one day at Sebonack.

But I did know a lot of pros and superintendents in the area from my college wandering-around days, and my last job for Mr. Dye was the renovation of Piping Rock, which eventually led to my signing on as a consultant to several local clubs. The men's club at Garden City was the first to hire me, when I was only 28 years old. Since then my firm has done work at Piping Rock, The Creek, Inwood, and North Shore on Long Island; Somerset Hills and Hollywood in New Jersey; and most recently Woodway and Round Hill in Connecticut.

The great thing about golf architecture is that no two days are ever the same (other than the ones I spend on a plane). Most of my columns will have a local angle, but you never know where we might go: this month I'll be trying to sort out the routing of a new course in California, consulting on the bunkers at an old classic, and stopping through Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Guam to see some courses for the next volume of my "Confidential Guide to Golf Courses." I'll be somewhere in golf, and that's always a good place to be. ■

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